

OPERATIONS BEHAVIORAL HEALTH



Anxiety, Depression and PTSD

Even though being anxious occasionally is normal, it can affect your functioning at work or at home if it becomes severe. In the long run, this can lead to lasting physical and psychological damage. Fire fighters are often put in highly stressful situations, making them susceptible to anxiety disorders such as generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), social anxiety disorder and panic disorder. Handling such intense levels of stress on a regular basis can be very difficult for these individuals, so it is important to take measures to support their well-being.

Anxiety disorders can become debilitating, affecting individuals in multiple ways. They are marked by excessive fear, nervousness and unease that can interfere with a fire fighter's daily life. Being in the station, putting on gear and responding to alarms may feel different than it has in the past. Feelings of hesitation and becoming emotional in situations are common. Even mundane activities can become very trying when dealing with anxiety.

Generalized anxiety disorder is defined as:

- A pattern of excessive and uncontrollable worry about a range of issues, lasting for at least six months, which causes major distress or impairment in the person's daily functioning
- Worry is associated with at least three of the following symptoms occurring more days than not:
 - Restlessness or feeling on edge
 - Being easily fatigued
 - Difficulty concentrating or feeling like mind is "blank"
 - Irritability
 - Muscle tension
 - Difficulty falling asleep, difficulty staying asleep or having restless sleep

Generalized anxiety is sometimes accompanied by other symptoms as well, including gastrointestinal distress, headaches or avoidance behaviors.

Anxiety, when left unchecked, is like a never-ending loop. It's important to take the necessary steps to stop it before it spirals out of control. Prolonged and ongoing anxiety levels can be dangerous—they can contribute to a higher risk of infection, heart problems, depression and even addiction.

With any disorder, the management and treatment may be different for each person, and often trial and error are needed to identify what works best. Fire fighters can start by contacting a peer support member. Because they have worked with other fire fighters and have specific training, the peer support member can talk about successes in management and treatment and may offer a referral to a mental health professional.

Below are some ways to help manage anxiety; however fire fighters should seek the guidance of mental health professionals. It's important to identify the people, places, things or situations that may trigger one's anxiety and have a plan for coping with them.

Maintain a healthy lifestyle

- Keep active
- Practice breathing techniques
- Practice progressive muscle relaxation
- Meditate
- Eat well
- Reduce alcohol and nicotine use
- Spend time outdoors in nature
- Spend time with family and friends
- Reduce stress
- Participate in activities you enjoy
- Be kind to yourself—challenge your self-talk





Depression is a mood disorder and affects many people during their lives. According to SAMHSA, the occupational stress fire fighters experience puts them at increased risk of suffering from depression, when compared with the general population. It's important to be aware of this and to make sure that fire fighters have adequate support. There are multiple forms of depression, and it can affect people in different ways. Symptoms may differ from person to person, so it's essential to recognize the signs and seek out a mental health professional.

Struggling with depression can have a negative effect on a fire fighter's personal and professional lives. Early treatment of depression is critical to prevent it from getting worse. Delaying treatment could lead to further disruptions in your life, so fire fighters should seek help at the earliest opportunity. Clinical depression is distinguished from general sadness by the duration of depressed mood and/or the loss of interest or pleasure in daily life. Signs of a major depressive episode must remain two weeks and include at least five of the symptoms listed below. Symptoms must cause major distress or impairment in the person's daily functioning and represent a change from previous level of functioning:

- Depressed mood most of the day, nearly every day; includes feeling sad, hopeless or empty

- Loss of interest or pleasure in most or all activities
- Weight loss (when not dieting) or weight gain
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Appearing restless or slowed down, as observable by others
- Fatigue or loss of energy nearly every day
- Feelings of worthlessness or inappropriate guilt
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Recurring thoughts of death or suicide, with or without a plan

Clinical depression is a serious mental health issue that can change the lives of anyone it affects and those close to them. Loved ones, such as spouses, children and family members, often can be significantly impacted by the struggles of someone they're close to. It is not unusual to suffer with them. Fire fighters who struggle with depression not only can have their job performance affected but also put the lives of others in danger. Untreated depression can lead to substance use or making other harmful coping choices.

Depression is unlikely to go away on its own. If a fire fighter has identified the signs of depression in their life, they need to seek the help of a mental health professional to obtain an accurate diagnosis and develop a treatment plan.