

OPERATIONS BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

ADDICTION

BEHAVIORAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

Behavioral health problems involve negative changes in our behavior, thoughts and emotions, often accompanying increased psychological stress. These issues can range from mild symptoms to debilitating mental health disorders, such as anxiety, depression, eating disorders, or addiction. They can have a significant impact on our lives, so it is important to understand the different types of behavioral health problems in order to get the best treatment possible. Below are some of the most common problems affecting fire fighters.

Substance Use Disorder

Substance use disorder is a mental health disorder that can have lifelong effects on an individual's physical, emotional, spiritual, social and mental well-being. It is characterized by an uncontrollable urge to use drugs or alcohol despite the negative consequences and can develop into addiction. These disorders involve the misuse, abuse, and dependency on drugs or alcohol, which can lead to a variety of physical, psychological and social problems. Because addiction is a progressive disease, if left untreated, a person will continue to deteriorate. Substance use disorders can range from mild to severe and can be caused by a variety of factors such as genetics, environment, lifestyle choices and external stressors. It is important to understand the signs of substance use disorder to identify them early and seek appropriate treatment.

According to the American Psychiatric Association, a substance use disorder involves patterns of symptoms caused by using a substance that an individual continues taking despite its negative effects. Based on decades of research, there are 11 criteria that can arise from substance misuse. These criteria fall under four basic categories: impaired control, physical dependence, social problems and risky use:

- Using more of a substance than intended or using it for longer than you're meant to.
- Trying to cut down or stop using the substance but being unable to.
- Experiencing intense cravings or urges to use the substance.
- Needing more of the substance to get the desired effect— also called tolerance.
- Developing withdrawal symptoms when not using the substance.
- Spending more time getting and using drugs and recovering from substance use.
- Neglecting responsibilities at home, work or school because of substance use.
- Continuing to use even when it causes relationship problems.
- Giving up important or desirable social and recreational activities due to substance use.
- Using substances in risky settings that put you in danger.
- Continuing to use despite the substance causing problems to your physical and mental health.

Like other illnesses, substance use disorder worsens over time. The criteria above allow clinicians to determine how severe a substance use disorder has become depending on how many symptoms are present. For example:

- One symptom could indicate an individual is at risk.
- Two or three criteria point to a mild substance use disorder.
- Four or five criteria show someone has a moderate substance use disorder.
- Six or more criteria indicate a severe substance use disorder, which signals an addiction to that substance.

Knowing how severe a substance use disorder is can help physicians and addiction specialists determine the best course of treatment for the individual.

- 42% reported binge drinking in the past month.
- 7% of the fire fighters screened positive for current PTSD.
- 16% screened positive for current depression.
- 39% with likely PTSD or depression reported never having seen a mental health professional.

Source: Washington Firefighter Survey 2018
Safety and Health Assessment and Research for Prevention (SHARP) Program
Washington State Department of Labor and Industries