

## OPERATIONS BEHAVIORAL HEALTH



### Peer Support

The stresses faced by fire service members throughout the course of their careers—incidents involving children, violence, inherent dangers of firefighting and other potentially traumatic events—can have a cumulative impact on mental health and well-being. Peer support programs have been demonstrated to be an effective method for providing support to occupational groups, including fire fighters.

Trained peer supporters are trained members of the fire service who seek out and talk with other peers about behavioral health concerns and connect members with helpful services. Peer supporters are educated on common behavioral health problems that impact fire fighters and receive special training to operate with a peer support team.

Trained peer supporters are equipped to:

- Approach a fire fighter who is displaying signs of a behavioral health problem
- Establish trust and confidentiality
- Use active listening skills to provide support
- Determine whether a crisis is developing
- Refer the person to available resources
- Educate others about behavioral health

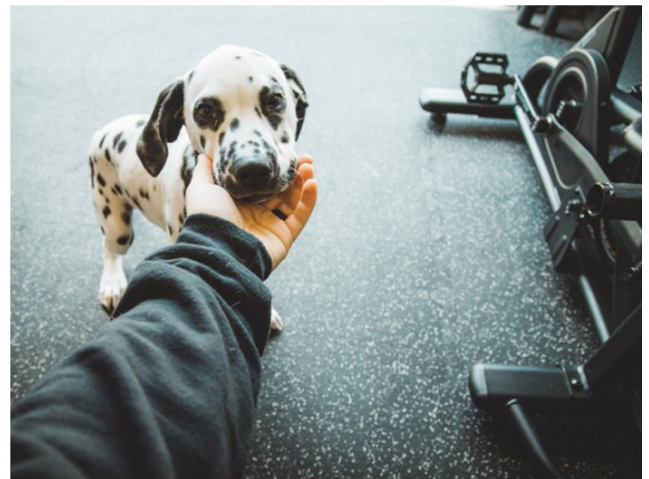
For more information about the IAFF Peer Support Training program, visit [iaff.org/peer-support/](http://iaff.org/peer-support/).

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### Self-Care

Serving your community as a fire fighter/paramedic is both a stressful and rewarding job. It places great strain on your physical health, mental health and relationships. To thrive today, tomorrow and well into retirement, prioritize these strategies for self-care now:

- **Find a daily diversion for stress.** Find something enjoyable that helps you unplug and do it daily. Twenty minutes of your favorite hobby, music, sports or playing with your dog can go a long way. Both purposeful and mindless activities have a role to play in creating a mental buffer against the impact of cumulative stress.
- **Stay connected.** The role of your support system in coping with personal and occupational stress cannot be overstated. While isolating may seem more comfortable in times of severe stress, good relationships with your crew, family and friends are essential to your longevity in the highly stressful occupation you have chosen. Don't wait until you are in crisis to develop supportive relationships.
- **Get moving.** Exercise not only releases feel-good endorphins (chemicals in the brain), but has been shown to reduce rumination, improve confidence and strengthen socialization. Do not assume that because you are a fire fighter you are exempt from a daily exercise routine. Start simple and consider using an accountability partner. Ensure proper food and fluid intake. A balanced diet and adequate hydration are essential to your daily functioning, mood and cognition. Start each day with a healthy breakfast, eat plenty of vegetables and whole grains, and be sure to drink enough water throughout the day by carrying a bottle with you.
- **Balance busy time with downtime.** While many fire fighters work two jobs, do charity work or have other civic engagements, too much activity can become an effective but unhealthy strategy to avoid feeling anything. Try to schedule at least one day a week of mostly downtime, where you can rest, process and recuperate.
- **Assume personal responsibility.** Regardless of your specific circumstances, only you can take charge of your well-being and self-care. Decades of research on trauma survivors has identified this quality—the willingness to assume personal responsibility for one's well-being—as a key predictor of resilience in the aftermath of severe trauma and adversity.



## Spokane Valley Shop Talk Is Saving Lives

The first ever Spokane Valley 876 Shop Talk was held in the fall of 2021. It stemmed from Spokane Valley Fire Department Captain Jeff Fraser talking with mental health therapist Stephanie Thoet about behavioral health concerns he needed help with. He knew others in the department were struggling too, so he suggested they put together a group in which fire fighters could talk openly about their feelings and issues. Thoet, whose background is in working with first responders, agreed to facilitate.

There was no funding, so when Fraser suggested the group meet in a shop on his property, Shop Talk was born. That first meeting, 17 fire fighters showed up. The ground rules of Shop Talk are simple. There's no rank at Shop Talk, and what's discussed

at Shop Talk stays there. Attendees can feel safe being vulnerable with their feelings and even shedding tears.

Captain Sean Nokes says that's one of the biggest benefits of the group. "It's important to have a place where we can talk about the issues we share so everyone knows they're not going through it by themselves. There's someone to open up to who understands."

Thoet focuses on teaching signs of PTSD and suicide risk for the fire fighters to watch for in themselves—and how to watch out for each other. She also teaches that it's OK to have feelings. "So many first responders think they either have to feel pain all the time, or never feel it. I teach a third option: We can feel it for a bit, process it, then watch it move on."

Nokes, for one, is happy to see that and other lessons being taught in the group, especially for newer recruits.

"It's nice to see the younger guys getting the help they should be getting right from the get-go," he says. He adds that the Shop Talk experience makes it easier to open up with fellow fire fighters outside of the group too.

Each meeting, Thoet comes prepared with information on topics such as building resiliency or setting boundaries. But if the check-in at the beginning of the meeting steers the group on a different course, that's fine too, she says. She sees the most change happening from what they learn from one another. "More than once, people at Shop Talk have admitted to the entire group that it has saved their life,"

she says. "It's such a privilege that I get to work with this population because I know the stakes."

Shop Talk is now fully funded by the union and has expanded to four weekly meetings: two in Spokane Valley and two hosted by the Cheney Police Department and Cheney Fire Department. There also is a new Shop Talk meeting in Richland, Wash., and first responders' spouses—of which Thoet is one—have their own Shop Talk twice a month.

So far, about half of the members of Spokane Valley 876 have attended Shop Talk, but Thoet knows that others in the station are benefiting too. "Even though they haven't come themselves, by proxy they're getting exposure to the cultural shift that's happening."

- **Challenge negative thinking.** We each have a daily internal dialogue or "self-talk" that unconsciously impacts our mood, functioning, social interaction and behavior. Especially during difficult times, we tend to think in overly negative, simplistic and dysfunctional ways. While learning to "just think positive" may be unrealistic, you can learn to catch unhelpful thoughts and replace them with more balanced, rational ideas.

- **Know when to ask for help.** Feeling persistently agitated, hopeless or apathetic toward daily life is not a "normal" part of working hard or getting older. These experiences may be symptoms of a treatable behavioral health problem that requires attention. Know the warning signs and when it's time to ask a peer, loved one or healthcare provider for help.

(Adapted from "Taking Care of You," IAFF 2018)

For more details and suggestions on vetting clinicians, please see the IAFF guide *Finding the Right Clinician*.

## VETTING CLINICIANS

For fire fighters and paramedics experiencing post-traumatic stress, depression, anxiety or addiction, finding the right individual mental health clinician is an essential component of recovery. When seeking a clinician, fire fighters should ask these critical questions:

- Do you have experience working with fire fighters or other emergency responders, including EMS, police or military populations? Tell me about it.
- What evidence-based practices do you use to treat post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety and co-occurring substance abuse? Do you assign homework?
- How many sessions does it typically take for you to complete your initial assessment? Do you offer appointments within 24 hours or access to an on-call clinician?
- If an individual has a psychiatric emergency and needs inpatient care, what facility or hospital do you refer to?
- Do you work closely with a prescriber for individuals who need medication?
- Would you be willing to participate in experiential training to gain a better understanding of the daily experiences of the fire service professional?