

## Firefighters Mental Wellness: Taking a Look at the Realities of the Profession and Striving for Work-Life Balance

I've seen a shift in the Fire Service culture over the past 15 years...As a Firefighter, Peer Support Team member, and a licensed counselor, many firefighters have reached out to me for help. I've seen a common theme amongst them and I'm definitely not immune to the problem myself. It's the issue of work-life balance. This is easily a universal issue for many who work and have families. However, an in depth look at the job of a firefighter and the toll the long shifts and fluctuation of hyperarousal can take add a new depth to the issue.

I had a friend reach out the other week. He said, "I need some help". My friend, looking to find the right way to express himself, says to me "my wife says I'm an asshole". I smirk, only because his statement is so similar to the countless other firefighters I've helped along the years. My reply is always the same, "I get it friend, that's kinda what happens to a lot of us". I mean it when I say that, normalizing the experience for the individual coming to me for help. We build up a type of callous resilience to the world in order to survive and thrive in our careers. We see so many on their worst day that if we don't build up that professional guard to wall off some of those emotions, our shifts would get real tough real fast. It's about creating emotional distance to survive.

Another factor of the job that exacerbates the effects of stress over time, is the schedule. Most firefighters work for at least 24 hours in a row. Then they are off for two days and then back to the firehouse for another 24 hour shift. After 24 hours of having one's parasympathetic nervous system taxed from calls we go on and being prepared for the calls that might occur, that first day off becomes a rest and recover day. The second day off, after the recovery day, we can start to assimilate back into home life a little easier. Then, that evening we prepare for the next day's shift. Hydrate, laundry, pack up, get good rest, and mentally prepare for what that shift might bring. This type of schedule leaves little left for building closeness with those at home; husbands and wives, sons and daughters. Repeat this pattern for 25 years. Our families learn to *embrace*, or maybe *tolerate*, this version of life. Perhaps they see it as the sacrifice they make so that we can serve the community. Needless to say, they are along with us on the ride as we struggle to balance this type of life. It is not easy for the firefighter or their family and definitely can have an impact on their relationships and life at home.

A short time ago I had a conversation with a few firefighters on shift around the dinner table about the struggle of giving everything we can to our job. Even when we are not at the station, we spend our two days off recovering from the last shift and preparing to give 100 percent of ourselves the next shift to our job and our Fire family. The job receives all of our attention, focus and energy, whether we are on shift or not. And in turn, our family at home receives the tired, cranky, overworked, hardened version of ourselves. At the dinner table the question proposed was, should our priorities be reversed, or at least balanced, and should we be striving more to give that 100 percent effort to our loved ones at home.

As Firefighters, we work very hard and sacrifice a large amount of time to ensure financial stability for our family. However, some firefighters are starting to see that we might fall short when it comes to the emotional needs at home. Many have reached out to me to start to “fix themselves” because they “don’t want to be such a grump” to their family. I think many take notice that the transition from the person we are at the fire house, that makes us successful firefighters, is often not the version needed at home. The high expectations of the person we need and need others around us to be at the firehouse; routined, controlled, prepared, and vigilant at all times, does not translate well at home. Those same expectations when walking in the door at home can cause hostility and conflict. I see this time and time again in my office, as a counselor working with first responders and their spouses.

In the end, there isn’t an easy solution, and it’s not fair to weigh our responsibilities to either of our families (our fire family or family at home) in such black and white terms. Where one family is getting all and the other none. It comes down to balance. It’s important to challenge our work life balance skills. It is crucial that we reevaluate the expectations we have for ourselves, our Families, and our Fire family. It is necessary to have and stick to a solid plan of self-care and reach out for help when we need it. It’s beneficial to have realistic expectations. Lastly, when coming home, it’s important that as we exit the firehouse, we step out of work mode. We take off the hats of the fixer and safety monitor, we temporarily turn off the “dark humor” mindset and learn to relax and enjoy the time we have with our families so that they in turn can enjoy us.

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*Brian French is a Arizona Board Licensed Associate Counselor specializing in couples counseling. He has been a Phoenix Firefighter for over 14 years. He also serves in Phoenix Fire’s Member Services supporting the department’s Peer Support Organization, being instrumental in connecting First Responders to the resources they need.*