

STILL SHOWING UP

What Clinicians Should Understand About Firefighters

There are seasons in a firefighter's life when no matter how hard they work, they still feel like it is not enough. This experience is far more common than most will ever say out loud. The pressure often comes not from others but from within. A quiet heaviness in the chest. A feeling of falling short. A belief that slowing down or needing support means they are failing. Firefighters learn early to keep moving. To show up even when they are exhausted or hurting. To set aside their own needs because someone else is always counting on them. The habit of showing up becomes identity. It becomes survival. And it becomes the reason many firefighters enter therapy later than they should.

For clinicians, understanding this culture is essential.

Firefighters live in an environment built on trust, humor, grit, and unspoken emotion. The firehouse is family. It is structure. It is belonging. It is the place where they can be challenged and cared for in the same breath. But it is also a place where vulnerability often stays hidden under layers of composure. Silence can be a shield. Humor can be armor. Being the strong one becomes instinct.

When a firefighter walks into a therapy office, they bring that culture with them. They bring years of calls, exposure to trauma, identity tied to performance, and a belief that they should be able to handle anything because they always have. Many have experienced personal losses that shook them. Many have weathered internal battles that went unseen. And almost all have spent seasons feeling alone while surrounded by people who rely on them.

Clinicians who work with firefighters must approach them with a blend of authenticity, steadiness, and respect for the world they come from. Firefighters do not respond well to pity or overly soft approaches. They respond to truth. They respond to direct questions. They respond to professionals who understand that strength and struggle often live in the same person at the same time.

Connection is the foundation of effective treatment. Firefighters open up when they sense that their clinician genuinely understands their culture and is not intimidated by their stories. They open up when someone sits with them in silence without rushing to fill it. They open up when they feel seen as humans rather than the costume they adorn at work.

It is also important for clinicians to know that healing for firefighters does not follow a straight line. Some may seek multiple layers of support, including counseling, peer programs, Stellate Ganglion Bloc, ketamine therapy, or structured time away from the firehouse. Many only trust these tools when they know others in the profession have

benefitted from them. Trust is earned slowly in this community, but once it is earned it is anchored.

Culture shifts happen one conversation at a time. One honest check in. One moment of truth shared without fear. Many firehouses today are learning that openness is not weakness. It is survival. Crews are creating environments where members can admit when they are not okay. This is how the culture changes. From the inside out.

Clinicians are part of that change. Your presence, your understanding, and your willingness to meet firefighters exactly where they are has a profound impact. You are often the first place where they allow themselves to put the weight down. You help them see that awareness is strength, not shame. And you remind them that feeling deeply does not make them less capable. It makes them human.

Firefighters notice when someone shows up consistently. They notice when someone listens without judgment. They notice when a clinician understands the unique intersection of resilience, pain, humor, and fatigue that defines so much of their world.

Your work matters. More than you know.

Because sometimes the most meaningful shift a firefighter makes in therapy is realizing that showing up for themselves is just as important as showing up for their crew, their community, and their family.

That realization alone can keep them standing, keep them moving forward, and remind them why they are Still Showing Up.

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