

# Is Your Autopilot Ready for Takeoff?

**Training creates the mental agility we need when encountering fight-or-flight situations.**

BY TIM DIETZ, MA, LPC

**Y**ou need to train as if your life (or someone else's) depends on it, because it might. I'm sure you have heard this before, but I want to re-examine the importance of training from the behavioral-health aspect. What makes fire-service personnel good at their jobs is their drive to be in control and to perform at perfect or near-perfect levels. If we are not on our game, people can die. In addition, we can suffer profound stress and other mental-health consequences when something bad happens and we are not prepared or trained to manage the situation. Of course, it isn't realistic to expect to be in control and to be perfect all the time, but we can increase our chances of positive outcomes if we take training seriously.

Consider the following scenario:

*It's October and time for the department's annual multi-company night drill. Eight fire companies are assigned to the training center this evening. The EMS chief has developed a new multi-patient protocol (triage/treatment/transportation) that will be rolled out this same night. Crews will hear an hour of lecture on the new protocols and equipment before moving to the training ground to practice with the assistance of many moulaged civilians and DOA mannequins.*

*Fire companies begin to show up for the training, and the final company arrives a bit late. As the crew enters the training auditorium, the lieutenant, walking in front, immediately voices their displeasure over having to be there. Not only is there a baseball playoff game on TV, but this is a "BS EMS Drill." The crew, following its leader, has adopted the same attitude. They sit through the lecture, visibly irritated.*

*When the presentation is over, they are issued new triage equipment and are told to replace the old triage gear on their apparatus. They are then assigned their roles—via lottery—for the multi-patient drill. On the training ground, they do not take their roles seriously; they bitch, they moan, they stack mannequins on backboards and throw them into the treatment area. "Let's finish this BS so we can watch the game."*

*When the training exercise is complete, there is a quick overview of the drill (again, they are not paying attention), then they are released to their first due. On the freeway as they drive back to the station, a vehicle crosses the median strip and drives head-on into oncoming traffic. Suddenly, this crew has multiple critically injured patients on its hands. Thank God they just completed an exercise teaching them how to manage such a situation, right? When the battalion chief arrives, he finds the company officer locked up with civilians, yelling at the crew to do something. The lieutenant (and crew) appear unfamiliar with how to handle the incident, the new protocol and the new*

equipment—they can't even remember where it was placed on the apparatus.

*Now we have a crew, wired to be in control and perfect or near-perfect, that is overwhelmed. (And hence, you have a behavioral-health expert writing an article on the importance of training.)*

**I**t has been shown that stress can make the region of the brain that regulates emotion (the survival brain) work overtime, thereby hindering the ability of the prefrontal cortex (the cognitive brain) to engage in critical thinking. This means that in stressful situations, such as arriving at a mass-casualty incident, we make decisions based on previous experience and training (using autopilot) rather than cognitive evaluation. This fight-or-flight reaction is basically the brain's way to ensure our survival. We quit thinking and respond, which allows for quicker action. The fight-or-flight response, in short<sup>1</sup>:

- The brain reacts to an emergency situation, and based on previous experience or training, it communicates to the rest of the body that action is needed.
- The sympathetic nervous system activates the fight-or-flight response (also called an acute stress response). It happens fast, before we consciously make a decision on how to act, unless we've had a similar experience or have trained for a same or similar situation; we go on autopilot in response to the emergency.

The goal of training is to make the firefighter/officer response a reflex when given a set of circumstances. We know when making decisions under stress, people tend to repeat previous choices—typically learned from real-life experiences and training.

We've talked about this in previous articles: Let's say your crew is training on throwing ground ladders, and you know how to throw a ground ladder, so you don't take the training seriously. That evening, you are dispatched to a three-story apartment complex with people on the third-floor balcony getting ready to drop their kids to the ground because the interior stairwells are blocked by fire. And consider this: This apartment isn't like a concrete drill tower surround by asphalt. The terrain isn't flat; it's soft and uneven. There are shrubs and other landscaping, parked cars and overhead wires. It is dark outside, people are screaming, there are lights shining in your face, and when you look up to set the ladder against the building, you get rain or water spray in your face, and crap, someone just dropped their kid from a window because they can't wait for you any longer. This is a bad, stressful day that could have been made better had you taken ladder training seriously.

Training is the backbone of a fire department. It produces a well-prepared force and, through repetition, increases the speed of an operation and enhances proper execution while reducing injuries. A firefighter who arrives at an emergency unprepared can confront life-and-death situations and will face extreme stress to perform their duties<sup>2</sup>.

Benefits of training from a behavioral-health perspective:

- It makes you more adaptable and intuitive, i.e., develops a better autopilot response.
- It helps you differentiate between what you can and cannot control (some folks are dead before we arrive).
- Continual practice is critical to growth and development.
- Continual practice creates confidence and competence; confidence and competence create calm. (There seems to be a correlation between feelings of competency and control and lower cortisol levels. This may best be achieved via job-related training<sup>3</sup>)
- Training helps us to know we always do the best we can, preventing the "could have, would have, should have" loop. Knowing we have done our best helps diminish feelings of regret, i.e., "I should have done something differently."

- Training in hindsight (lessons learned) helps us keep getting better.

Take training seriously and strive to constantly get better at your craft. It's important to the communities we serve, but also our own mental health and well-being.

### References

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