

Build *Strong* Firefighter Unions

4 tips to help your marriage or partnership go the distance.

By Tim Dietz, MA, LPC



It might come as a surprise to some people, but recent research suggests that firefighters are no more at risk for divorce than the general population¹. (Actually, male firefighters are at a lower risk for divorce than the general population, but female firefighters have a slightly higher divorce rate.) So why does it seem divorce is more prevalent among our ranks? Because firefighters live and work with one another and tend to share when things are not going well at home. (Complaining about something is a firefighter's way of controlling stuff they can't control.) All it takes is one struggling marriage, and word gets out that all firefighters have difficulty maintaining close relationships (television, telephone, tell-a-firefighter). Our resiliency to stress (which we need for our jobs) also comes into play when there is conflict at home because it helps us (and our spouses) endure issues in a relationship.

Firefighters are, in general, kind, supportive people who go out of their way to help others, but that doesn't mean we are easy to live with. The traits that make us great emergency responders can bring challenges to even the strongest relationships. In many ways, we are wired differently. If we can identify (and own) those differences, we can offset any negative impact they might have in our personal lives.

A disclaimer: I am not an expert on firefighter relationships specifically. I am, however, an expert on my own relationship of 40+ years and how 30 years in the fire service occasionally challenged that union. I am also quite knowledgeable on firefighter personality and motivation and the treatment of stress-related injuries in first responders.

Throughout my career, I have had the opportunity to speak with many people who are in long-term relationships with emergency responders. When offering classes that help firefighters and their significant others maintain successful relationships, I hear a lot of feedback regarding the challenges of living with first responders. Our spouses tend to have similar frustrations:

- We're gone for 24 to 48 hours at a time.
- We're always tired.
- When we get home after your shift, we need "me" time.
- They feel like a single parent.
- Bad things only seem to happen around the house when we are at work.
- We're irritable.
- We're emotionally distant.
- We don't talk.
- We compartmentalize the different parts of our lives.
- We seem to enjoy work and our coworkers more than being at home.

In some ways, we can connect each of these grievances to the traits that make us stellar emergency responders. These traits can seem attractive when we are courting, but they might not seem as appealing after we settle into a relationship. So what makes a great firefighter, and how can the characteristics that make us good at our jobs also make us somewhat complicated partners?

We are fantastic problem solvers—At work, solving problems at emergency scenes is highly motivating and rewarding. Most of us joined the fire service because we want to make things better, and we like the way it feels when we can help. Our ability to solve problems extends beyond the emergency scene. Many of us in leadership positions manage other challenges ranging from staffing issues to training. This can leave us feeling burnt out by the time we get home, and in some cases, underwhelmed by life's more mundane problems that await us. It can be tough to get motivated to fix a leaky faucet, unsqueak the squeaky floorboard or take the car in for service. Under stress (including disagreements), firefighters want to rush in and quickly solve any problems that arise, meaning they have less patience with talking things through with a partner and reaching an agreed-upon solution. We are wired to fix things quickly, and we forget our spouses might want or need time to mull things over.

We are great decision-makers—At work, it can be second nature to make decisions, particularly life or death decisions. We tend to be good at our craft, take dire situations seriously, and train often to promote positive outcomes.

At home, we might consider everyday decisions unimportant, and there can be a tendency to want our spouses to handle these choices. From their perspective, we can seem disinterested in family life.

We are good at controlling out-of-control situations—On the job, we train hard to achieve predictable outcomes: You put water on the fire, it goes out. You defibrillate a patient, you change the heart rhythm. If you're an officer or lead paramedic, and you ask for something to get done, it (usually) gets done in a predictable manner.

Your partner and children might not do things the way you would like. If you ask them to do something, they might not accomplish the task in as timely a manner as you wish, which can make us impatient and can trigger conflict.

We are strong communicators—Quick, clear and accurate communication is key to emergency-scene success, especially in chaotic situations. Station expectations, such as cleaning, cooking, training, etc., rely upon firefighters communicating with each other clearly (and hopefully, with respect).

We might not be as communicative as our significant others would like. Or, we might use the same tone of voice and direction that we use at work, which comes across as impersonal to our loved ones. Some of us find it easier to talk to people within our firefighter culture than it is to speak to civilians, which can leave our family members feeling left out and isolated from who we are in our work life.

We perform tasks/jobs perfectly or near perfectly—Consider this quote from the book, “Emergency Services Stress: Guidelines for Preserving the Health and Careers of Emergency Services Personnel,” by Grady P. Bray and Jeff Mitchell²:

“Emergency personnel are more interested in details than are other people in most other professions. We pride ourselves on a perfect job, frequently set personal standards that are extremely high, and become quite frustrated when we encounter a failure. This attention to detail helps us do a better job, but it also sets us up for the stress associated with a failure to achieve unusually high expectations.” This plays not only into the work environment, but in your relationship as well.”

At work, we take our role and responsibilities seriously. We train hard to be as near perfect as possible because in some cases, lives depend on it.

At home, we “work” with family members who are not finely trained machines. They might have other ways to complete a task. Because lives are rarely at stake at home, things might not need to be perfect for everyone at home to be happy. We can end up feeling frustrated, and sometimes it’s difficult to hide that frustration.

We don’t allow emotions to impede job performance—On the job, we are completely engaged, true masters of pushing feelings aside to focus on the task at hand and not the human tragedy we see before us. It’s a survival mechanism that tends to work well—until it doesn’t.

At home, there are bumps, bruises, cuts, scrapes, smashed fingers and bloody noses, and our significant others and family members want their hero firefighters to empathize with them and fix the boo-boos. If we don’t (either because we don’t want to do our work at home or because these minor injuries seem inconsequential compared to what we see on the job), we might seem insensitive and uncaring.

We are (in general) physically fit & active—At work, we are energetic adrenalin junkies. We work out, we work hard, and we play hard. At home, particularly after a busy or stressful shift at work, we tend to “recharge” in the recliner. If your partner was attracted to the active person you were when they first met you, they might become disappointed if you seem to have become more sedentary due to the physical demands of your job. Conversely, some firefighters maintain their high-energy activity level off-duty, biking, skiing, playing soccer, golfing, etc. with their friends, leaving the family back home.

We are thrill-seekers—At work, we face hazardous environments, hostile people and rapidly changing conditions. A lot of us chose the fire service because of the adrenalin rush we get when working in these challenging circumstances.

It is difficult to replicate that level of excitement after our shift. If we manage to do so, our partner isn’t always happy about our choices. Rock climbing, sky diving and similar activities are thrilling but come with associated risks our partners might not be willing to accept.

4 Ways to Maintain a Healthy Relationship

Supporting strong relationships takes work and requires more than the quick-fix-and-move-on approach we use at work. Moving forward in a positive direction requires an open mind, a good sense of humor, curiosity, patience, and an attitude of forgiveness and appreciation toward your partner and yourself. A solid first step is to accept that some things take time to resolve. Below are some key points to keep in mind:

- 1. Self-Care.** Don't kid yourself: Your job follows you home and affects your mate and your children. Self-care is vital to maintaining healthy relationships. Firefighters must learn how to take care of themselves because of the stressful nature of the work. We all know the benefits of exercise, eating a healthy diet, and avoiding alcohol or other drugs as a way to cope. Getting enough sleep, creating a healthy balance between work and family, and seeking outlets to discuss things that are bothering you are also important. Do fun, physically active stuff with loved ones, make healthy meals together, and resist the urge to stay silent about challenging shifts. Embrace your loved ones. They want to be there for you and are waiting for you to open up and reach out. Self-care (enhancing resiliency) should be important for both in the relationship. Texas A&M research¹ suggests that "couples who are high in resiliency use their relationship to cope with on-the-job stress and have lower stress levels, even in the face of negative life events, and they may have correspondingly low divorce rates."
- 2. Communicate.** Many first responders find it awkward to share their thoughts and feelings with those closest to them. I had difficulty talking about work when I was home, so much so that my wife once told me I had cut her out of a third of my life. She was right. I had to learn to share with her, and we set up some work-talk parameters. It was okay for me to say, "I don't want to discuss that right now. Let me process things, and I will talk about it later." It wasn't much, but at least I was saying something. If the story was traumatic, I would let her know I had gone on a tough call. If shared too many details, she could say, "stop." Don't fail to ask about your partner's day. Show some interest in what has gone on in their lives while you were at work. Both parties should resist the urge to jump in and solve a problem by giving advice (firefighters tend to do this) or to criticize unless asked. The most essential part of communication is listening to your loved one and acknowledging that you hear them.
- 3. Make time for each other.** My wife and I figured out that there always needs to be something on the calendar to look forward to as a couple. Line up your calendars and choose something you would both love to do, then schedule it. Agree on a date, and make it a priority. If you get an offer to cover a shift, make your decision carefully. What does it tell your mate if you accept overtime over their companionship?
- 4. Understand your Family of Origin (FOO).** It tends to work like this: Under stress, we default to what our role models would have done under the same or similar circumstances—for better or worse. If your parents went through a difficult divorce when you were still living at home, they might not have modeled a healthy relationship for you. If one of your parents was quick to snap at the other, was distant at home, avoided difficult discussions and/or rarely showed affection, you also may struggle in those areas until you learn better ways to interact with your partner. FOO issues are so prevalent in relationships that most competent therapists become adept at helping you connect the dots between your early upbringing and a struggling relationship. They can then offer useful tools to re-engage healthily at home.



As In All Things: Be Nice

Want to retire with your current partner? Remember to be kind. In most cases, our significant others take care of the household while we are at work. They've dealt with sick kids, athletic events and school plays, power outages and annoying relatives. Acknowledge them; tell them how much you appreciate their efforts so you can keep working the best gig in the world without losing what's most important at home. **BS**

References

1. Texas A&M University. "Male firefighters not at increased risk of divorce, research shows." ScienceDaily. 20 December 2016. www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2016/12/161220094747
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