

# Under Stress & Overwhelmed

It's our job to swoop in & save the day, but bearing witness to life's deepest sorrows has a price.

BY TIM DIETZ, MA, LPC



We work hard to seem perfect, but our immaculate exteriors sometimes belie internal struggles.

**M**y journey from working on the line in the fire service to becoming a clinician specializing in emergency-responder stress gives me a unique perspective on our industry's mental-health crisis. Feeling overwhelmed is never a sign of weakness or defeat, yet there is a stigma attached to seeking support when we need it. This needs to change.

If you've read anything I have published or have seen one of my presentations, you know most of what I discuss comes from real-life experience. Through the

years, I've identified several key factors that contribute to stress-related behavioral-health issues and our resistance to getting help. Below, I outline six lessons I've learned along the way, and I offer simple ways to avoid the pitfalls that most frequently derail us.

## Lesson 1—Our Beliefs = High Standards

Although we are all different, we share specific personality traits that lured us to high-stress fire-service careers. These traits include the ability to solve

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problems, the presence to remain calm when the crap is hitting the fan, and a tendency to experience something horrible and convince ourselves it wasn't that bad before we push it aside move on to the next alarm. We also need to be in control, and we want to be perfect. Each of these traits is essential to our success. We set high expectations, and so do our customers. If you respond to someone's house during an emergency, they want you to be perfect and in control as you calmly solve their problem. And so, we train hard on all possible scenarios to ensure we can make a positive impact on people's lives. Unfortunately, operating under the assumption that we should be flawless in all ways sets us up for defeat.

### **Lesson 2—Not Meeting High Standards Creates Stress**

Eventually, despite a perfect performance, we encounter situations where we can't meet our high standards. Or we respond to a call that hits close to home, affecting us in ways we don't anticipate. Here are a few examples using the aforementioned personality traits/beliefs:

Imagine a 3 a.m., three-story apartment fire with trapped families on the upper floors. A bread-and-butter call for many of us, but this evening, the parking lot is so full of private vehicles that apparatus cannot get close to the buildings/hydrants/FDCs. Civilians yell at you to rescue the victims and put out the fire. Unfortunately, unpermitted renovations have compromised fire stops in the attic, allowing the blaze to burn unchecked.

Fire fills the interior stairwells, but ladder trucks can't access the structure to rescue those trapped on the upper floors. In a nightmare scenario, people begin dropping their children from their balconies. Firefighters scramble with ground ladders in a compelling effort to save lives. These crews have trained extensively on rescuing people from upper floors and extinguishing multi-story fires, but none of that training can counter these unforeseen circumstances. So much for being in control and perfect.

It's not only these significant unforeseen events that violate our beliefs and impact us. It's the kid calls, the domestic violence incidents, the missed IVs or tubes. It's the faulty fire hydrant when we need water now, going the wrong way on a street when there is no time to waste, being stuck in traffic, or getting

into an accident on a Code 3 response. Among the worst: grieving parents on the scene, begging you to do something you can't possibly do. Any of these situations can challenge the belief that we can control things and perform flawlessly.

We are human, not machines, and it's our humanity that makes us good at what we do. Still, some events weigh especially heavy on us. For example, if you've got kids at home, you will experience a kid call differently than those without kids. And if you've lost a loved one in a motor-vehicle crash, those incidents will probably uncover some bad feelings and memories.

### **Lesson 3—Compounded Traumas Exacerbate PTSD**

While post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can manifest after a single horrific incident, in my experience, it most commonly occurs due to an accumulation of experiences. For example, if an overwhelming emergency call leaves you feeling powerless or distressed, consider when you might have experienced these feelings previously. A similar event could be feeding or giving energy to the current situation. It doesn't mean you're broken, weak or chose the wrong career; it means you are a human with many stressful experiences.

Our temperament and beliefs convince us bad things don't bother us. In reality, we are masters of shoving this stuff down, so we don't have to think about it; maybe we have another call, perhaps we learned that showing emotion is a sign of weakness. But when we bury our feelings and fail to process difficult events, they stay with us. The more events we carry, the greater the chance stress will accumulate. (As a side note, some of the feelings and traumas we suppress happened when we were kids. See Lesson 5.)

### **Lesson 4—Maladaptive Coping Makes Matters Worse**

We all know how to take care our ourselves. Staying active, eating properly and seeking social support are essential for physical and mental wellness. But in my experience, when a typically in-control firefighter loses control of something, they become hyper-focused on everything they can't control. All of the should-do's become used-to's: "I used to work out, hike, camp, golf, ride a bike, fish, hang out with family/friends. ..." Neglecting self-care can cause difficulty sleeping, irri-

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tability, trouble concentrating and making decisions, and avoiding people/places that spur our feelings of turmoil. To deal with this, we might try:

- Using alcohol or other drugs to cope. There is a difference between use and abuse. Drinking to cope is abuse.
- Isolation/withdrawing. It's tempting to push away people close to us because we don't want them to see us struggling, or we don't want to talk about our issues. Although common, this approach is not helpful because it leads to more profound isolation.
- Risky Behavior. Driving too fast or going too far into a burning structure triggers an adrenaline rush and temporarily takes your mind of any problems. You may also be thinking, "Who cares if the building collapses? The family will get life insurance, and I'll die honorably." Well, your family cares, and so do the firefighters backing you up on the hoseline!

Our brains are wired for connection. When we disconnect from healthy things, our brain seeks out other types of connections, some of which may be unhealthy.

### Lesson 5—The Stigma of Professional Care

We must drop the notion that seeking professional help is a sign of weakness or that we are unfit for emergency-response careers. Seeking support means one thing: We are human. And in many cases, we are humans with devastating trauma histories.

The trick is finding a good fit, i.e., a clinician who understands emergency responders and is culturally competent. I've heard horror stories about clinicians who don't understand our job or how to treat us. The first clinician I saw midway through my career told me to quit! So I did—I quit seeing them! PTSD is a treatable injury. Compassionate, experienced therapists exist, although finding them might take time and patience. Many organizations I work with have peer teams that can suggest culturally competent clinicians specializing in trauma; it's even better if they were once a first responder.

An adept clinician will ask, "Was there ever a time when you felt this way before?" The answer helps them connect to other events that may be feeding your reaction to a current situation.

One of the biggest lessons I've learned as a clinician is that many first responders endured adverse childhood experiences. They are often drawn to this occupation because they are comfortable in chaos. In my role as a therapist, I always ask, "Where did you learn this?" Childhood trauma feeds current events. A skilled clinician can help you process past experiences and put them to rest.

### Lesson 6—Take Care of Yourself

You know these tools. Exercise, eat right and talk to people when things bother you—even if you don't feel like it! Sometimes we have to fake it till we make it. The job is exhausting, and at times it feels better to channel surf from your recliner rather than engage with your family or hop on a bicycle. Engage anyway. Your family needs you (as much as you need them), and that bicycle ride keeps you physically and mentally healthy.

We need to shed the belief that we are superhuman and that life's challenges don't bother us. A predictable human response to traumatic events is not a sign of frailty; it doesn't mean we are broken. It's time to shift our collective mindset and view mental healthcare as an investment in our overall wellness. If you feel overwhelmed, speak to someone who knows how we tick and understands what we do (and see) for a living. The right professional can help you process current and past traumatic events. If you're not ready for anyone else to know you are seeking therapy, that's ok! No one needs to know.

This profession requires us to train hard, take care of ourselves and be nice. I encourage you to show yourself the same compassion you show others. Be nice to yourself. Give yourself the help you need to navigate the range of feelings you experience on the job. **BS**



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