

Dear brothers and sisters,

I want to talk about something we don't always talk about—at least not out loud. Mental stress. The kind that doesn't show up on a medical chart, but the kind we carry home after the gear is off and the sirens are silent.

I've been thinking a lot about us lately—about the calls we run, the things we see, and the weight we carry back to the station and home with us. We're trained to be calm in chaos, to push through exhaustion, to handle what most people never have to see. That pride is real. But so is the cost.

When our loved one asks, how is our day? How do we respond? How can we explain what we went through, the adrenaline, the highs of saving someone to the lows of losing someone? How do we process that – and how do we interact with our family and share, without closing ourselves off and becoming detached?

If we are not careful, we change and not know it. It happens over time. The stress of the job accumulates. Stress manifests in many ways. We withdraw. We become angry. We may self-medicate to numb the pain, that we do not acknowledge exists. Sometimes, we are smiling through a shift, while barely hanging on inside. Too many of us have learned to white-knuckle it alone. Sometimes that means we become desensitized and lose compassion... and become mechanical.

We don't talk enough about how close this job can push us to the edge. Suicide, burnout, secondary trauma, and depression are not abstract issues in the fire service—it's taken people we know, people who were solid, dependable, and respected. That should tell us something: needing help doesn't mean you're weak. It means you're human.

The first step is for us to simply acknowledge: do I feel right? Do I feel the way *I want to feel?*

If you're struggling, please know this—your life matters more than any call, any shift, any reputation. Talking to someone isn't failing the team; disappearing would be. Reach out to a brother, a sister, a trusted officer, a counselor, or a peer support resource. You don't have to explain everything. You just have to start the conversation.

And for the rest of us: check on each other. Really check. Ask the second question. Notice who's quieter than usual, who's always volunteering for overtime, who jokes about not caring anymore. We're great at running into burning buildings for each other—let's be just as willing to sit with each other when things get heavy. That is what being there for each other really means.

We're in this job together. No one should have to carry it alone.

Stay safe,  
An anonymous firefighter