



Stress Management For Fire Departments

As the Comp Alliance recognizes the safety of our fire department staff, our final safety tip for National Fire Prevention Week 2024 focuses on the importance of firefighter mental health. This is a vitally important topic for fire service members, recognizing the hazardous environment of their work and the potentially harmful effects on their mental health. We'll also cover some tips for improving firefighter wellbeing.

Traditional occupational safety and health risk management programs primarily concentrate on ensuring that work is safe, and firefighters are protected from hazards that arise from the work such as responding to emergencies, changing environments, dangerous equipment, and unsafe lifting. Firefighters also need to understand the effects that stress in the workplace can have on their mental health. The work of a firefighter includes many unforeseen hazards, creating unpredictable outcomes and resulting in acute and chronic stress on the body. These stressors may cause anxiety, depression, fatigue, burnout, digestive problems, headaches, memory lapses, concentration impairment, and possibly substance abuse.

To promote firefighter mental health, consider these resources and share the applicable information with your department staff at all levels:

- **Municipal Employee Assistance Programs:** Such programs are important and should be promoted by fire departments. Every firefighter is different; not everyone will respond to emergency calls if they can't sleep or are stressed. Multiple options should be made available to firefighters through their agency. Also, consider peer support groups or officer-led programs where discussions on trauma-related stress can be held in confidence, with trusted coworkers taking the lead.
- **Supervisor Training:** Training Officers who can recognize adverse stress reactions and signs of chronic stress can identify trauma or stress-related challenges in their subordinates. Administrators should follow up to provide troubled workers with resources and support, including a change in shift assignment, time off to resolve an acute stressor, sleep concerns, or more formal support such as professional counseling.



- **Stress-Related Meetings:** Positive firefighter management includes routine discussions with firefighter staff on the importance of mental health. Talking about stress management during employee reviews, meetings, and briefings, provides an opportunity for the trained supervisor to encourage an honest discussion of any stress employees may be experiencing. Such a discussion opens the door for an employee who struggles to reach out for support. It also allows supervisors to identify a potential problem before adverse stress reactions affect the firefighter's safety.
- **Create Motivation Programs:** Develop ideas where firefighters are encouraged and motivated to attend stress-reducing programs while off-duty. This can include yoga, exercise events, and sporting activities, which can build comradery. Utilize family and spousal support organizations where families can come together to provide insight into the stressors first responders and their spouses commonly experience. Offering counseling to spouses following a traumatic event can also be effective. When firefighter families cope well with stress, it is more likely that the firefighter will remain focused while on duty.
- **Stress-Reduction Exercises:** Promote stress reduction at work and home through these practices:
 - Healthy diet
 - Adequate sleep
 - Routine exercise
 - Mindfulness (rest, stretching, reading, puzzles, meditation)