



## **Staying Emotionally Healthy in the Fire Service: What You and Your Family Should Know**

Prepared for the September 2015 Recruit Class

## The Shifting Self Image of a Firefighter

Random person: “So what do you do for work?”

You: “I am a firefighter.”

Random person: “I could never do that . . . to see what you must see.”

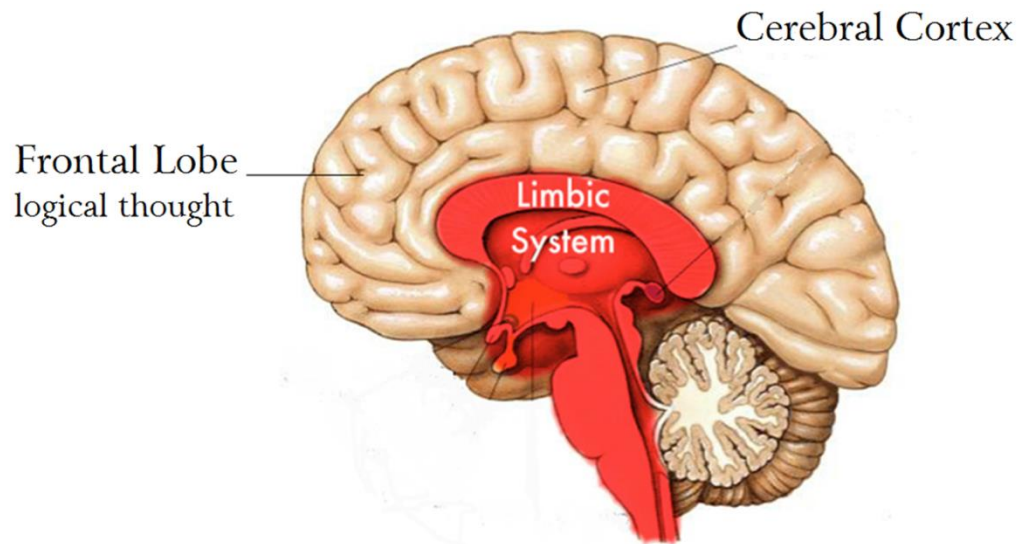
Like most fire fighters, you will brush this comment aside and move along with your evening. But this conversation is an important reminder that in order to deal with the duties of professional firefighting, at some point in career, your mind will be forced to alter the way you interpret a traumatic experience. As with the formation of a callous on your hand, your mind has to blister first in order to thicken and harden.

This psychological process means that the analytical aspect of your mind – “getting the job done” - will have to suppress nearly all of your natural emotional responses while at work. This shift, through training and experience, will change the way your brain organizes information to the point that what was once considered traumatic becomes a normal part of your daily reality.

There is a unique subculture in a paramilitary workplace that extends into the lived emotional reality of first responders. Fire fighters work under a command structure in which personal decision-making is restricted by industry protocols and department guidelines. This paradigm of training creates dependable, logic-based behaviour that dominates personal thoughts and actions in the face of extremely stressful situations.

Protocols serve to reassure fire fighters that they did everything they could during a potentially traumatic situation. However, many fire fighters struggle the most when they physically leave work, yet remain emotionally handcuffed to the memory of a troubling call. In order to understand the power of a traumatic memory, fire fighters may benefit from exploring how their workplace duties and subcultures impact their everyday functioning.

## How our Brains Construct an Emotional Barrier



Our limbic system consists of brain structures that largely govern emotions, behaviours and long-term memory. During a potentially traumatic encounter, fire fighters are trained to remain calm so that emotional and behavioural patterns follow predictable paths, reflecting industry best practices. This consistency requires first responders to place personal feelings, beliefs and sensations on hold as the analytical mind overrides the emotional challenges of the circumstances.

In order to achieve a calm state, the limbic system is suppressed to cope with the demands of a situation that would either paralyze or cause most humans to flee the given situation. The traditional fight, flight or freeze reaction to stress and anxiety – responses that have been integral to human evolution – are simply not behavioural options for first responders attending emergency situations.

Over time, fire fighters attending calls of a traumatic nature, typically develop a strong dissociative barrier between risk and action. This allows fire fighters to run into a burning building or quell the bleeding of a young child when civilians are often paralyzed with fear. In these moments, the needs of civilians supersede the physical and emotional harm that fire fighters may experience. While such actions may be well suited for risk-taking personality types, it also shows the power that a well-trained analytical mind can have in overriding the natural emotional and behavioural reactions to a dangerous situation.

Without a variety of sustained and integrated positive lifestyle factors to release the effects of witnessed traumas, the analytical mind of a fire fighter can build up like a dam and create barriers that interrupt the natural flow and range of emotions. A restricted emotional energy leaves the struggling individual to experience a fast flowing, albeit limited range of thoughts and feelings. These buoyant thoughts and feelings have a tendency to fuel a hyper-aroused state of mind that can produce raw, unprocessed emotional reactions that challenge an otherwise healthy mind.

### **When should you Seek Help of a Mental Health Professional?**

- Difficulty sleeping including frequent nightmares and night terrors
- Unwanted thoughts and feelings that affect concentration
- Flashbacks and powerful, troubling imagery
- Chronic fatigue and loss of interest in usually enjoyable activities
- Irritability towards others including co-workers, strangers and loved ones
- Addictions including alcohol, drugs and body enhancement supplements
- Self-isolating behaviours, including a lack of interest in social connectedness
- Frequent feelings of hopelessness, shame and/or guilt
- Compulsion to work excessively at the expense of important relationships

### **How can you Access Support?**

- Most people begin to access support by visiting their family doctor
- The Surrey Fire Service has three streams of mental health support: Extended Health Plan through Manulife, Family Services Employee Assistance Program (call 24/7), Members Family Assistance Program
- Peer support members through our internal MFAP team (list in each hall)
- In crisis, call the BC Crisis Line, 9-1-1 or visit the Emergency Room

### **Important Numbers**

**BC Crisis Line, anywhere in BC: 1-800-SUICIDE (1-800-784-2433)**

**FSEAP - 24/7 access to a Mental Health Professional (1-800-667-0993)**

**Manulife Extended Health Plan membership access (1-800-268-6195)**

## Investing in your Mental Health



One of the advantages that we have as firefighters is the opportunity to achieve adequate work-life balance. Shift-work rotations combined with holidays throughout the year enable members to have sufficient time off to engage in healthy self-care activities. These opportunities allow firefighters to experience both physical and emotional recovery from work-related duties – but only if we as individuals are open to actively engage in practices that help us recover and heal. While hobbies and personal interests should not be viewed as an alternative to accessing mental-health services, engaging in regular, self-care activities can lead to many of the same outcomes as effective talk therapy.

**Mental Health Tip:** During difficult times, more resistance you have to engaging in a healthy activity, the more you should push yourself to do it. Limbic memory steals a lot of healthy energy and taking an active approach to quell its powerful impact is one of the few ways to accelerate recovery from work-related stress.



## Techniques to Building Emotional Resiliency

Immersing in healthy activities fosters a state of mindfulness – where the individual’s full attention is in the present without conscious awareness or judgement. This state of mind is a universal stress-recovery practice that reduces the dissociative barrier between the analytical and emotional mind.

During mindfulness-based activities, emotional pain is allowed to aerate spontaneously and naturally. We simply feel better after spending time in nature, finishing a hobby-based project or helping others. Keeping up with a variety of mindfulness-based activities is especially important for firefighters who are resistant to accessing professional mental-health services.

### Common Activities that Cultivate Mindfulness for Fire Fighters:

- *Breathing Exercises* - cardiovascular activities including sports and hiking
- *Creativity* - wood working and restoration activities
- *Healing Imagery* - music, photography and cooking
- *Compassion* – volunteering and helping others
- *Connectedness* – spending time with loved ones and friends
- *Nature Engagement* - camping, fishing and hunting
- *Physical Healing* - massage therapy and yoga
- *Spirituality* - religious practices and setting time aside to experience silence

Engaging in mindful self-care measures along with talk therapy allows firefighters to not only digest the effects of work-related trauma, but also reclaim a healthy emotional life. A life filled with positive relationships, an improved outlook and ultimately greater life expectancy are goals that everyone should strive for and deserves.

Moving forward, the test for all of us is to find ways to actively engage in healthy activities during the most challenging points in our interconnected career and lives. While this process will involve a level of vulnerability that may be unfamiliar to most, the emotional traumas faced by firefighters across Canada warrant the need to embrace and expand on additional ways to recover and heal from our work-related stress.