

BREATHING ROOM FOR THE FIREFIGHTER FAMILY

By Anne Gagliano

Deputy Chief Jonathan Jones of the Clarendon County (SC) Fire Department asked my husband Mike and I to develop classes for the 109th South Carolina State Fire-Rescue Conference held in June of this year. He wanted them to be about “breathing room” for firefighters both on and off the fireground. Mike tackled the fireground, and I addressed family life. The purpose of my class was to give firefighter families tips on how to keep from living too close to the edge with the ever-present danger of going over. To “go over” is to face collapse, breakdown, or complete and utter implosion of your marriage and family. The goal is to back away from the edge so as to give your family “breathing room” or an emergency reserve of strength for the predictable surprises of life that always come. Like an overstuffed closet that can’t hold one more item, we must “clean out the closet” to make space, or else it will all come crashing down on our heads someday as life keeps heaping more and more on us. With breathing room, your family can survive the extra stresses and strains that threaten to destroy. Without it, the unprepared overly stressed-out family may not.

Families are disintegrating at an unprecedented rate in this country. The average divorce rate is now around 50 percent. For the firefighter, the statistics are even more staggering; on a show dedicated to firefighter marriage, Dr. Phil stated that firefighter marriages have a 75- to 90-percent chance of failure. I have spoken across the country on this topic for several years now, and everywhere I go I too hear the same message: This profession is extremely tough on marriages. At a recent chaplains’ conference, I was told that marital and family problems are the *number one reason* firefighters ask for chaplains’ help (this is true of police as well). Sadly, too many firefighter families are going over the edge.

Firefighting: So how do we as firefighter families give ourselves breathing room? It begins by understanding the uniqueness of firefighting as a profession. This is not a desk job. Firefighters are routinely exposed to the *two most impactful experiences known to the human psyche: danger and trauma*. These experiences have consequences, often extreme ones. When the human body is faced with danger, it undergoes immediate, dramatic *physical* changes for the purposes of survival, and this is accomplished primarily through huge surges of adrenaline. It is exhilarating, and it gives you superhuman strength. This is the fun part and the primary reason firefighters love what they do. But the consequence of adrenaline is *backlash (or utter fatigue)*; the greater the danger, the greater the backlash, plain and simple. The more your body has to fight to survive, the harder it has to work to recover when it’s all over, and this recovery is what should be happening at home.

When exposed to trauma, which simply means witnessing something horrific, the human *psyche* is impacted or, in other words, your mind goes through emotional changes. Trauma is heartbreaking but, ironically, the most typical response isn’t sorrow or sadness but *anger*. Anger is a functioning emotion; it helps the firefighter to keep going. Sorrow is debilitating and can render one incapacitated. Though sad, a firefighter may appear to be angry, and this can cause damage at home. Know the job, know the

consequences, and the firefighter family can begin to back away from the edge—breathing room.

3 Ways for the *Firefighter* to Back Away from the Edge:

#1: Do not overcommit. This is number one because it is the primary reason firefighters are going over the edge—too much commitment off-duty. Firefighters, you are given *time off* for a reason—not for a second job, and not for eight million extra activities including sports, committees, massive projects, and the Type A’s drive to ever achieve. This time is for you *to recover from the impact of firefighting physically and mentally*. If you continually overfill your time off, you are dangerously close to having no reserves for any extra stress in your life.

Backlash is the *physical* result of adrenaline; your body has to shut down for a while to restore the sources of glucose that were used during exertion and to repair any damage that was done, such as muscle strain. If ignored, over time backlash can so drain the body as to leave it extremely vulnerable to serious injury and or illness, such as cancer. Every time that bell rings, your body is filled with adrenaline as it prepares for battle. Whether the call leads to a fire or not, the adrenaline is still there, using up your resources. Adrenaline needs to be burned off either through firefighting or through some type of exercise later; otherwise, it remains in your system to wreak havoc.

Circadian rhythm disruption is the cost of doing business for the firefighter. “Circa” is Latin for “around” and “dian” is Latin for “day”; circadian rhythm is the term used to describe the body’s 24-hour sleep pattern. The rhythm helps your body know when to be wakeful (the morning) and when to be sleepy (the night). For the firefighter, this rhythm is disrupted every shift. Science has proven that it takes two minimum (four optimum) nights of unbroken sleep to reset this internal clock after just *one night* of disruption. Without restoration, sleep deprived persons can literally go insane, as is often seen on the battlefields of war. Soldiers are deprived of normal sleep for about a year’s worth of service; firefighters must be deprived for an entire career! That is why they must have nights off—to keep from going insane. Sleep is also the best way to recover from emotional trauma. Firefighter, give yourself breathing room by using your time off appropriately, which is to allow for rest and exercise. To do this, your budget may have to be adapted to live on less income, or you may have to say no to a project or two.

There are two more ways for the firefighter to back away from the edge and ways for the firefighter family to do so as well. Look for these in my next column.

There are so many things in life that we simply *cannot* control: the economy, the weather, aging parents, busted pipes. Each and every day we never know what we’re going to get—what unexpected stressors lie in wait ready to strike. That’s life. For the firefighter who lives in a high-octane world going full-tilt boogie 24/7, these extra stressors threaten to push him over the edge, taking his loved ones with him. That’s why we **must** as firefighter families look at ways to *back away from the edge*, because

statistics show we are highly at risk. There are things we *can* control, things we *can do* to give us a little extra breathing room. We looked at one of those ways in Part 1. Now let's look at a few more.

3 Ways for the *firefighter* to Back Away from the Edge:

#2. Beware of harshness. Firefighting is tough business that requires incredible amounts of strength; courage; and, let's face it, some pretty thick skin. Adrenaline supplies an extra amount of *aggression*, which is needed when facing danger. That aggression is essential when handling heavy equipment, when breaking down doors, and when having to work with other firefighters under duress. Politeness doesn't work as a means of communicating when lives are on the line—direct, abrupt terseness does. No one takes offense at this; it's all accepted in the heat of battle. Does abrupt, terse communication work on the fireground? Absolutely! Does it work at home? Absolutely not!

Trauma has its own repercussions as well. Anger is easier to work with than sorrow. So is humor. In fact, humor is the healthiest way to cope with horror, as it is not only harmless but is actually healing. Laughter is the best medicine for a wounded heart. Firefighters share a certain dark humor in the midst of trauma, which is known as "gallows humor." Laughing at a tragic scene may seem inappropriate to the outsider; it is strictly an inside joke. Harsh jesting works in the firehouse and is a healthy coping mechanism. *Outside* the firehouse, it is simply harsh.

Aggression from adrenaline, anger or dark humor from trauma, combined with a third ingredient—sleep deprivation—are almost *guaranteed* to create harshness. Everyone gets grouchy when tired; this is normal. In fact, all of these behaviors are quite ordinary when dealing with extraordinary circumstances. Firefighter couples need to be aware of these realities and have coping strategies in place to protect intimacy, which is so easily shattered by harshness.

It is best to create your own plan, but here are some suggestions that my husband Mike and I use in our relationship. Refer back to Rule #1: Do not overcommit. The exhausted firefighter must have time to rest; this will help restore good humor. The amped-up firefighter must also allow time for exercise to burn off adrenaline that may be prompting overly aggressive responses in simple conversation. Adrenaline equals aggression—that's a simple fact of nature, so get rid of it ASAP.

We have a few planned responses when Mike's getting a little too harsh for me in conversation; I am, after all, a tender-hearted female and like to be treated as such. I simply say something like, "Hey, I'm not a firefighter," which means, "Don't speak to me like that." He knows instantly that he has accidentally slipped into "firefighter mode" and apologizes; it's not intentional. Sometimes he reverts back to his "other life"; I know he doesn't mean any harm and I forgive; he knows I can't help my sensitive nature and he must shift gears or risk offending me.

In handling trauma, firefighters must realize that it often causes anger. We spouses will pick up on this moodiness and can misinterpret it as something personal. We are not mind readers. Firefighters are chivalrous by nature; it is part of why they do what they do. Chivalry desires to protect, especially to protect a loved one. But in trying to protect your spouse from the ugly realities of your work, you often do the opposite--cause harm. I have told Mike it is better for me to “know” than to “not know” when he has witnessed something horrible. His irritability is very apparent though he believes he’s hiding it well. If he doesn’t tell me *why*, then I can begin to take it personally; I’m only human too. I don’t need to know all the gory details; I just need to know how he feels so as to not be offended by his behavior. And in knowing, I can offer comfort and support. We’re in this together, for better or worse.

Undealt-with harshness can push a firefighter family dangerously close to the edge. Simple communication can relieve the pressure, restore intimacy, and give your family breathing room.

#3. Keep your first family *first*. Firefighting is a team effort. Because of this, very tight bonds are formed. This is a good thing, a very good thing. Comradery builds strength, strength enhances effectiveness, and effectiveness creates a symmetry that saves lives. The closer the team, the better the results.

Firefighters are like-minded. They have a lot in common. Most are either athletic or outdoorsy or both. They play sports together. They hunt and fish together. They enjoy each other’s company.

Firefighters live together at the firehouse; they know each other’s habits, peculiarities, and weaknesses and take great pleasure in exploiting these. They prepare meals and fight over who does the dishes. They watch the same shows. And they even know who snores. Just like family.

Because of shared experiences in battle, firefighters often turn to each other for support. This too is a good thing; an experienced vet can help talk a probie off the ledge after a particularly traumatic run. Wisdom and experience provide excellent counseling

But this incredible comradery can become harmful to the firefighter family if it starts to dominate, to intrude, to replace. Firefighters can overcommit time off by spending *too much time with their second family*. In pursuit of fun, in pursuit of stress relief, and often in pursuit of a shared humor that isn’t working at home, the firefighter can begin to neglect his first family. This neglect leads to jealousy and jealousy leads to resentment. Resentment pushes the firefighter family ever closer to the edge.

An effective remedy for keeping both “families” intact is to bring them *together*. I sleep better at night for having gotten to know Mike’s incredible co-workers. I have no doubt that they would risk all to save him if he ever got into trouble at a fire. And because Mike *tells* me about his crew and shares with me all their incredible antics, I love them as much as he does. Blend the two families as best you can. Bring your wife and kids to

the station often. Have firefighter family Christmas parties or camping trips. Invite them to fire conferences to see how cool they are. One of my favorite days at FDIC is Saturday, when many of the family members come to look at the exhibits. In particular, I love watching the families of our awesome volunteer firefighters enjoying the show. During this year's conference, Mike caught a great moment with our buddy, Chief Bobby Halton, who also just happens to be the boss. The young daughter of one of the firefighter couples gave Bobby a New Testament. It was touching and amazing. Bobby was moved to tears and reciprocated the loving gesture by giving *her* his FDIC instructor coin, of which there is only one made with the number 1. The photo of this special moment accompanies this article. Even at the biggest fire show in the world, family is featured and valued and cherished.

There has to be balance between your two families. You *can* have both; you *want* both. But it can only be achieved by remembering this: Your spouse and your children *must always come first*. They should *never* be made to feel "second." Show them that they are your number one priority by using your time wisely and by choosing your words carefully. This will give you, the firefighter, breathing room.

In my next column, I will address 3 ways for the firefighter *spouse* to back away from the edge

Firefighters are incredible people; they represent the very best of humanity. Those willing to ride to the sound of the guns and risk all to save others—it just doesn't get any better than that. Sadly, however, those that represent our better natures are divorcing at the highest rates. Statistics show that *married* firefighters have much lower rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) than unmarried firefighters. Family is essential to their well-being and ability to serve, yet firefighter families are going over the edge. In parts 1 and 2 of this series, I've looked at ways for the firefighter to leave some breathing room in his marriage. Now, I will address ways for the firefighter *spouse* to do so as well. Having been a firefighter's wife for 29 years, I have a few ideas on this subject.

3 Ways for the *Firefighter's Spouse* to Back Away from the Edge

1) Adaptability. It takes a very special kind of person to become a firefighter. In Seattle, we have a saying: "It's harder to get into the Seattle Fire Department than it is to get into Harvard." This saying is actually statistically accurate as measured by the applicant to admission/hire ratio. But, also statistically speaking, I would humbly submit that it's just as challenging to become a successful firefighter *spouse*. It has been my experience and my observation that to survive being married to a firefighter, to have a little breathing room so as not to go over the edge, I've had to become extremely adaptable. In other words, I must be ready for anything—24/7.

I am, by nature, a controlling, orderly person who likes to have things “just so.” I like to plan, to have my schedule predetermined and set. But very quickly into my marriage, I learned control was something I could never achieve; it was either let go of control or let go of my firefighter. I chose to let go of control, and I have had no regrets.

His job is the absolute embodiment of chaos; he never knows from day to day what he’s going to encounter. Working in a big city—dealing with the most intense of human experiences—he has to adapt to survive. And because we are one flesh, I must do the same.

Our family plans sometimes must change on a dime; therefore, nothing should ever be set in stone. I suggest that you pick a few sacred cows (i.e., certain holidays) and fight for them, but allow everything else to be negotiable. Because of his high-octane life, my life has become the same as well, and I have found this to be a surprisingly good thing. “Roll with the flow” is ever so much more exciting than “same old, same old.” If a firefighter spouse can “adapt” her schedule easily, she will breathe easier than one who cannot. Being rigid and inflexible is almost certain to drive the firefighter spouse over the edge.

2) Re-entry time. “Re-entry time” isn’t something I learned from a book but from hands-on experience as a firefighter’s wife. Re-entry time is a handy tool for marriage in general, but it is *especially* helpful to the firefighter marriage because of the unique schedule and nature of the job. Re-entry time is simply allowing the returning spouse some “time” to enter the home without hassle or massive conversation. This can apply to either spouse of any profession, but for the returning firefighter, it is an extra special gift that will give your marriage lots of breathing room.

Harkening back to my nature, I like to talk—a lot; most women do. Studies show that men speak about 7,000 to 9,000 words a day; women—21,000. That’s almost three times as much! As a young wife, when my firefighter would return after 24 hours (or more), I would show my delight at seeing him by greeting him with a recounting of all that had happened in his absence—good or bad. He felt no desire to reciprocate the information, and I used to get offended by this. He was usually quiet and a little distant or even irritable. I assumed this meant he was not as glad to see me as I was him, and many fights ensued. But, over time, I came to understand that this was not the case, and I “adapted” by giving him what he needed most from me after a long shift—not conversation, but re-entry time.

Sleep deprivation, backlash, and trauma sometimes combined to make my firefighter rather tired and often completely drained. It was and is to this day a gift for both he and I to just “let him be” for a while. We’ve avoided many fights and, much to my delight, he is very grateful for the time to shift gears that later in the day he reciprocates by giving me what I need—long conversations with lots of details. We don’t always get it right; sometimes I still fail to give him his space, and sometimes he fails to give me enough attention, but that’s the nature of marriage. We do, however, keep re-entry time in our marital tool box; it has proven to be a good one.

3) Encouragement. I am fortunate that my husband's nature is quite positive. He is a high-energy, upbeat kind-of-guy with lots of passion and enthusiasm for life. I've been all across the country, even to Australia, and everywhere I go I have found this to be true of almost every firefighter I've met. They are typically confident, capable, and caring; that's almost a job requirement. They give and serve and rescue with incredible courage and with an almost cavalier, devil-may-care attitude. Amazing and fearless—I love 'em!

But I also know what a toll this job can take on a firefighter because I live with one. Yes, his nature is positive, and yes he is inherently brave, but he does, on occasion, battle depression. Depression just means “gets a little down” and it can happen to even the strongest of people. And it is no wonder. Firefighters see some pretty grisly things; they clean up societies' messes all the time. They keep chaos from ruining us all, and they do so for not the highest of wages. They give and give and give and ask very little in return.

This is where the gift of encouragement comes in; it is one that will help keep the firefighter marriage from going over the edge. Encouragement simply means “to give courage to,” and who needs it more than a firefighter? They need it more but ask for it less. Studies show that a human being can endure incredible amounts of trauma and stress if they have just *one* person in his or her life with whom to share. That is why married firefighters avoid PTSD more than unmarried ones do—because of spousal support.

Firefighter spouse—don't ever underestimate your worth; you are vital! My firefighter loves it when I “tell him the good stuff” or cheer him up. It doesn't take much effort, and it doesn't cost a thing, but it is *invaluable* to a firefighter's health. In lifting him, I also lift myself; his nature is restored, and he gives and gives back again. The result is *lots* of breathing room for the extra stresses in life!

In my next column, I'll address the kids; they, too, need some breathing room!

We were once a youthful couple with the odds of lasting stacked greatly against us. We married very young, started out poor, and had kids right away. In addition to these typical reasons marriage fail, we went into professions with the highest divorce rates: military, law enforcement, firefighting, and emergency medicine. But here we are 29 years later and, against all odds, we're still going strong. We know we can still fail, and we'll never claim to have all the answers; but we have a few. Some of those answers can be found in this series. When we've gotten too close to the edge, we've done all that's been listed in the past three columns as a firefighter and a firefighter spouse. But not to be overlooked are the children, as they can be the *ultimate* casualty of a failed firefighter marriage. And they, too, need a little breathing room.

3 Ways for the Firefighter's *Children* to Back Away from the Edge

1. Don't Overschedule the Kids. This is number one because it is probably the most common mistake modern-day parents make. Why do we do this—enroll our kids in every sport and every possible activity that comes down the pike? Fear. We do it out of fear--fear that our children will be left out, left behind, and cheated out of finding their one "special talent" that may someday launch them into superstardom. So we race here, there, and everywhere till the kids are ragged and we parents are frantic, running at a hectic pace that threatens to push the whole family over the edge.

Remember, firefighter family: You're already statistically facing implosion because of the stresses of this profession (75 to 90 percent failure rate). We must take greater pains to prevent this than the average family, and one of the best ways to do so is not fill every free minute with activity. My husband Mike and I are now on the other side of raising kids; our boys are grown. In hindsight, we did something right when we realized we were overcommitting our children; we backed away. We began *eliminating* obligations. Our tendency was to "push," as we are achievement-oriented people, but then we deliberately started *not* to, and we're so glad we did.

This may sound a bit extreme, and perhaps it is, but during their elementary years, our children were voted "Most Likely to Miss School." In fact, they were not only awarded this title, they *inspired* its creation! It is a dubious honor but one we chuckle at now. Were we negligent, irresponsible parents? Perhaps, but we did it because of Mike's crazy schedule; he rarely had free weekends to spend with our kids. When they first started school, we found that entire weeks would go by without one single free day for us all to be together. So we improvised; we started "skipping school" to plan fun family days. Our children *earned* this privilege by being exceptional students. Family outings were so prized as to be an incentive for them to be ahead so that they could have some "breathing room" for days off. Our kids may not have turned out to be superstars, but they are emotionally secure, and we're a close-knit family. They went on to college *with scholarships* and both graduated. Trust me; being a *tight* family is much more beneficial than being a *busy* one.

2. Beware of the Child-Dominant Home. This follows closely on the heels of overscheduling the kids as the two go hand-in-hand. If the children's schedule is too hectic, couples can find themselves literally revolving around it, passing as ships in the night as they hand off the kids. Life is lived in a car as a single parent. You have a home; stay in it once in a while. Relax. Feed the kids dinner at the table, not in the back seat. Spend some time together as a couple. In your efforts to be the perfect parents, you can neglect the greatest gift you can give them: a healthy marriage.

In the child-dominant home, every resource ends up funneling to them. These resources can include every spare minute and every spare *dime*. This is a mistake. In trying to give your kids "everything," you can rob them of what matters most—a mom and dad who are still in love.

Be a united front; the best parents are undivided. Couples are more easily divided if they're never *together*. This takes time, time away from the children on occasion. Let the kids know that your marriage always comes first; don't let them pit you against one another. This isn't selfish—they *will thank you for it* in the long run, as ours have done on numerous occasions.

Save some energy for your marriage. If at the end of the day you are so spent as to not desire intimacy, you're doing too much. If at the end of the day you have no time for dates, you're not choosing your time wisely. And if at the end of the day you have zero dollars for dates or you're working massive overtime to buy the latest and the greatest toys, remember this: Your kids don't need every new gadget. They don't need designer purses or clothes. They need you.

3. Let Kids Be Kids. If we're scheduling every minute with structured, adult-led activities and if we're putting them ahead of our spouse, we're forgetting one important aspect of childhood: Kids just want to be kids. They need a little breathing room—from us.

The Atlantic magazine ran an interesting article on this topic in the May 2014 issue entitled "The Overprotected Kid," by Hanna Rosin. In it she made several points with which I happen to agree; one is that we're keeping our kids from learning necessary lessons out of unnecessary fear.

The best way for kids to learn how to handle themselves among their peers is through *unsupervised* play. They work things out, they learn teamwork, and they test boundaries that give them skills for survival. If everything they do is monitored and corrected by adults, this all can be lost, keeping them somewhat helpless forever.

In Mike's and my efforts to not overschedule our kids and to not let them dominate our relationship, we did this instead: Ours became "the hangout" house. We shuttled kids to our home on a regular basis and let them *just play*. They *entertained themselves* without our constant involvement. There were occasional interventions (like the time they were about to tie cement blocks to their feet to see how deep they would sink into the lake), but for the most part they did as they pleased. Sometimes less is more; a little less *adult* time and a little more *kid* time will give the firefighter child breathing room—and room to grow.



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