

# Caring for Yourself and Your Colleagues in the Fire Service



*As a retired Fire Chief once said, "To be in this business, everybody thinks you have to have thick skin and be tough. The main thing I always tell people is, you have to have compassion."*

**Firefighter suicide** shakes the very core of the fire service, and its impact can be emotionally and mentally impacting, even debilitating, for those who are left behind to grieve.

There are many myths and misconceptions surrounding suicide that must be addressed and debunked. These include:

- Suicide is a sign of weakness.
- People who commit suicide have no "guts."
- The family of the deceased should be ashamed or embarrassed.
- Someone who committed suicide took the "easy way out."
- The person should have asked for help.
- The person was/is looking for attention.

Suicide seems to contradict the very essence of what it takes to be a firefighter: courage, resilience, self-sacrifice, confidence, and the ability to handle the most difficult of situations; but these myths and misconceptions contribute to the ignorance surrounding behavioral and mental health issues and a stigma that can result in the unwillingness of those suffering to ask for help. There is nothing 'easy' or 'weak' about deciding to commit suicide. Oftentimes someone's cries for help go unnoticed or are ignored, or the stigma kept them silent.

Across Canada and the US, fire services are coming to see that they need to cultivate an environment of compassion and understanding. Those suffering from behavioral and mental health issues should be able to seek help without the fear of being ridiculed or ostracized, and members should be able to identify the warning signs and symptoms and take necessary action.

## **The Impact of Suicide**

Those in the fire service have two families. One is at the station, where emotions range from excitement, frustration, anger, sadness, depression, content, and pride with those who share the same values. This is a family that any firefighter would risk his or her life for at the fire scene. The other family is the one at home. Firefighters often need to balance the commitment to their fire service

family with their personal family and show the same dedication and respect to loved ones as on the job. This seems like a simple task, but most firefighters would agree it is a difficult balancing act. For career firefighters who live close to a third of their life away from home, and volunteer and paid-on-call firefighters who are required to drop everything they are doing when the pager goes off, missing or leaving family events can take its toll.

When a firefighter takes his or her life, the impact ripples through these two families. There are several surveys of the general public that show that each suicide has a deeply emotional impact on an average of six people. But how many people are significantly affected when a firefighter takes their life? Likely many, many more.

Suicide leaves many questions for the families, friends, and fellow firefighters. Besides wondering “why,” survivors are sometimes left with the guilt of questioning what they missed that could have helped their loved one. A completed suicide cannot be tied back to just one event or factor, but is usually the culmination of a variety of social, mental, emotional and physiological/biochemical factors over time.

### **Grief is a Normal Response**

Grief is not a sign of weakness. It is, rather, a healthy and fitting response to a loss; a tribute to one who has died. Running away from grief postpones sorrow; clinging to grief prolongs pain. Neither approach leads to healing. Recognition of the appropriateness and value of grief is the first step in accepting the reality of the loss.

Although each of us is different, for the most part we follow a pattern of grieving and proceed through stages. Feelings and symptoms of grief can last weeks, months or even years depending on the relationship and it’s meaning to us. The brief period given to attend the funeral usually only touches on the beginning stages of grief.

***Feelings of grief often include: shock, denial, anger, guilt, anxiety, sleep difficulties, exhaustion, overwhelming sadness and concentration difficulties.***

Frequently, a person feels several of these emotions at the same time, perhaps in different degrees. Eventually, each phase is completed and the person moves ahead. The extent, depth, and duration of the process will also depend on how close the person was to the deceased, the circumstances of the death and their own personal situation. When a co-worker dies, you may feel guilty or angry at the person, at life, or at the ‘system’ that failed them. It may cause you to question aspects of your own life. These are normal emotions.

## The Problem

Too often first responders keep things bottled up. It is entrenched within the fire service culture not to show personal weakness. Firefighters will call a Mayday when they are in trouble in a building but are often silent when they are suffering internally. There is a perception that asking for help will make one appear weak. This is a perception that needs to be changed. If a firefighter can ask for help on the fireground, he or she should feel comfortable asking for help at the firehouse.

## When to Get Help

Get help if you have trouble coping with the loss of your co-worker or if you find that your work is suffering. A lag in your performance or a sudden or gradual change in your mood could be a signal that this loss is affecting you more profoundly than you thought. Also remember that the effects of a loss or death of a friend, family member or colleague may re-emerge several weeks or months after their death as the immediate events, funeral, and follow-up support subsides and life is supposed to 'get back to normal. It is in this period that people may begin to isolate, feel the longer term implications of the loss, and experience a new level of grieving. It is important to reach out for support and to share these feelings with others. Ask your MFAP, EAP, or HR Department for referrals to mental health professionals.



## Self-Care

1. Keep reasonably occupied. Having some structure to your day and some distraction will give you a break from constantly thinking about the event.
2. Reach out to your support systems, including your friends, family members, doctor, counsellor, place of worship, etc. Talking it out helps.
3. Take care of yourself. Eat well, stay physically active, and avoid alcohol and recreational drugs that can amplify emotions and moods. Allow yourself time to heal.
5. Be prepared for triggers at work that will remind of the co-worker who died.

## Watching out for each other

Suicide can be prevented, and most suicidal people desperately want to live. They are often just unable to see alternatives to their problems. This is why a change in fire service culture is imperative; firefighters need to feel comfortable asking for help, not only at the scene but also in their personal lives without being seen as weak. Firefighters are faced with emotional needs that are very unique, and many are struggling from work-related stress. When symptoms occur, a firefighter needs a support system in place that is readily accessible from someone who is qualified and truly understands his or her circumstances. For someone on your team, you may be able to be an initial source support.

## Watch for signs of immediate risk for suicide

There are some behaviors that may mean a person is at immediate risk for suicide. These three should prompt immediate action:

- Talking about wanting to die or to kill oneself
- Looking for a way to kill oneself, such as searching online or obtaining a gun
- Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live

Other behaviors may also indicate a serious risk, especially if the behavior is new; has increased; and/or seems related to a painful event, loss, or change. They are:

- Talking about feeling trapped or in unbearable pain
- Talking about being a burden to others
- Increasing the use of alcohol or drugs
- Acting anxious or agitated; behaving recklessly
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Withdrawing or feeling isolated
- Showing rage or talking about seeking revenge
- Displaying extreme mood swings

Those who hear these statements need to take action to provide assistance.

- Feelings of helplessness - “I can’t do it”
- Feelings of hopelessness - “I won’t get better”
- Feelings of worthlessness - “I don’t deserve,” “The world will be better off without me,” “No one will miss me”

90 percent of all suicide victims had other psychological issues they were dealing with at the time.

These include:

- Depression/stress
- Alcohol/substance abuse
- Schizophrenia-psychotic-hallucinations, delusions
- Bi-polar, anxiety disorders
- Mood disorders
- Phobias

Each of these impacts a person’s sense of wellbeing and can alter their view of themselves, their lives, and their future.



## **Reach out to someone who may be at risk**

To help co-workers who may be at risk for suicide, you can take the steps below, depending on what feels most comfortable to you:

- Talk with your MFAP or HR Department or call the city's EFAP (FSEAP) about your concerns.
- Reach out to the person:
  - Ask how he or she is doing.
  - Listen without judging.
  - Mention changes you have noticed in your co-worker's behavior and say that you are concerned about his or her emotional well-being.
  - Suggest that he or she talk with someone in the MFAP, the HR Department, or another mental health professional. Offer to help arrange an appointment and go with the person.
- Continue to stay in contact with the person and pay attention to how he or she is doing.

## **Resources:**

- ✓ **Your EFAP Program: FSEAP 1-800-667-0993, 24/7/365 crisis support and counselling referrals**
- ✓ **BC Suicide Prevention Line: 1-800-SUICIDE (784-2433)**

**\*This resource sheet was prepared by FSEAP with content drawn from the Report "Suicide in the Fire & Emergency Services" prepared by the US Volunteer Fire Council for the US Fire Administration and the US Federal Emergency Management Agency, as well as FSEAP resources on grief, and the pamphlet "The Role of Co-Workers in Preventing Suicide in the Workplace" from the Suicide Prevention Resource Center.**