

Head strong: The importance of mental wellbeing

By the [NVFC](#)

Most people are aware of the physical demands that first response activities place on firefighters and other first responders. But it is important to also realize the impact that fighting fires and responding to emergencies has on the mental wellbeing of emergency personnel. Firefighters and EMS providers face the risk of many behavioral health concerns such as anxiety, depression, burnout, and post-traumatic stress disorder, among others.

Taking care of your mental health is as important as managing your physical health. It is critical that the emergency service community recognize the importance of mental wellbeing and create a culture within the department that makes behavioral health a priority. Use this day during National Firefighter Health Week to open the dialogue within your department about behavioral health issues and focus on what you can do to foster positive behavioral health practices all year long.

What you can do today

- Remind department members to seek help if they feel overwhelmed, stressed, or depressed. Create and distribute a listing of available resources and support systems within the department and the community.
- Many universities or local mental health centers host annual screening days for depression and substance abuse. Encourage your department to take advantage of these offers.
- Encourage everyone in your department to be aware of the other members. Is one member working long hours, under a lot of stress, or drinking more heavily than usual? Be accountable for each other and don't be afraid to ask that person if you can help.
- Encourage play! Coordinate events that are just for fun. Have a friendly game of touch football, play board or card games in between calls, plan a heart-healthy cooking class — anything that helps build camaraderie while also reducing stress.
- Ask a local mental health professional or service provider to donate an hour to speak to department members. They can explain that mental health is just as important as physical health, and that it is okay to talk about it. They can also speak about how mental health is related to physical health, including heart disease and stroke.
- Encourage members to exercise every day, even if it is just going for a walk outside. Exercise produces endorphins which improve mood.
- Contact Wills for Heroes, a nonprofit organization that offers free estate planning services to first responders. Knowing that your loved ones are protected creates peace of mind.
- If you are feeling stressed, sad, or depressed, talk to a trusted friend, family member, colleague, support group, or counselor. Talking about what is bothering you can help relieve the stress and make you feel better.
- Find activities that help you relieve stress. Perhaps you feel better after exercising or meditating. Some people relax by listening to soothing music, taking deep breaths, or going for a walk. Find a productive activity that helps you unwind after a stressful day or incident.
- Make sure you get a good night's sleep. Lack of sleep can lead to increased stress or a more negative mood. If you are not getting a good night's sleep, try going to bed earlier tonight and see how you feel in the morning.