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A Preparedness Guide for Wildland Firefighters and Their Families

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A Preparedness Guide for Wildland Firefighters and Their Families provides honest information, resources, and conversation starters to give you, the wildland firefighter, tools that will be helpful in preparing yourself and your support network for the realities of your career.

This publication does not set any standards or mandates; rather, it is intended to provide you with helpful information to bridge the gap between wellness and managing the unexpected. This publication helps firefighters and support networks such as family members, significant others, and friends prepare for and respond to planned and unplanned situations in the world of wildland firefighting. Some sections of this guide are written for the firefighter, while other sections are intended to be shared directly with support networks. The content, designed to help make informed decisions throughout a firefighting career, will cover:

- Hazards and risks associated with wildland firefighting.
- Topics and ideas for necessary discussions with family and friends about your wildland firefighter job.
- Resources for peer support, individual counsel, planning, and response to death and serious injury.
- Organizations that support wildland firefighters and their families.

Preparing yourself and your support network for this exciting and, at times, dangerous work can be both challenging and rewarding. You will need to engage in honest discussions and make difficult decisions. This task will be rewarding in that it will provide an opportunity to help everyone better understand the work that you do.

The National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) provides national leadership to enable interoperable wildland fire operations among federal, state, tribal, territorial, and local partners. NWCG operations standards are interagency by design; they are developed with the intent of universal adoption by the member agencies. However, the decision to adopt and utilize them is made independently by the individual member agencies and communicated through their respective directives systems.

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Part 1: What to Expect – A Practical Guide

The decision to become a wildland firefighter is the first step toward a rewarding profession. This Guide is designed to help the wildland firefighter and their support networks navigate, prepare, and adapt to the expectations of the fire season and beyond.

This career can provide tremendous rewards to men and women of character, courage, and commitment, who readily accept managed risk to protect lives, communities, and natural resources. The drive that wildland firefighters possess is unrivaled by most professions.

Generally, wildland firefighters will:

- Work outside of normal hours with erratic schedules and may be away from home for 14 or more days.
- Be in top physical and mental shape by committing to extra hours of training, both mentally and physically, for the duties of the job.
- Establish tight bonds with fellow crewmembers and other wildland personnel, often relying on them for peer support.
- Work in remote areas outside of cell phone service unable to readily answer phone calls or text messages.
- Risk their lives in high hazardous environments.
- Be expected to respond to a fire dispatch within a moment's notice, leaving work or family events.
- Belong to one of the most elite firefighting organizations in the world.

Being aware of these challenges and planning accordingly can minimize stress for the wildland firefighter and family members.

The Wildland Fire Community

“It’s a great honor to be a part of something larger than yourself. The support system behind a wildland firefighter is not often highlighted, and it takes a great deal of commitment, support, and sacrifice.

There are many unforeseeable challenges but knowing I’m not alone and that others are working through similar challenges makes it easier. I didn’t anticipate the supportive community of wildland firefighters and I’m genuinely proud to be a part of it.”

— Megan, spouse of a wildland firefighter



Wildland Firefighter Preparedness and Planning

Land management agencies, and others, have actively managed wildland fire for more than 100 years. The job of a wildland firefighter is to provide critical resources and expertise to protect at-risk communities and valuable natural resources. Dedicated men and women from all walks of life and all abilities make up this workforce.

Incident management has evolved with time. Emergency response is no longer limited to wildland fires. Interagency employees are also dispatched to help with all-risk incidents such as hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, rockslides, and other emergencies. Incident Management Teams (IMTs) played important roles in the 9/11 responses in New York and Washington, D.C. Wildland firefighters responded to Hurricane Katrina and other significant hurricane events and supported COVID-19 vaccine and testing centers. These growing responsibilities expose personnel to a wide range of experiences and hazards beyond the wildland fire environment and can increase the length and stress of the fire season. Fire seasons can extend throughout the year depending on a firefighter’s location or position.

Wildland fire positions include:

- Hand crews.
- Helitack or rappel crews.
- Hotshot crews.
- Engine crews.
- Equipment operators.
- Smokejumpers.
- Dispatchers.
- Fire prevention specialists.

Related positions include:

- Prescribed fire specialists.
- Fire ecologists.
- Fire behavior analysts.
- Other scientific and planning positions.

Many employees in non-fire positions support emergency incidents as a collateral-duty; they receive specialized classroom and on-the-job training for these additional qualifications.

These are tough jobs often performed in primitive, backcountry conditions. In addition to specific requirements for each position, it is essential that wildland firefighters be in top physical condition for this demanding work.

The *NWCG Glossary of Wildland Fire*, PMS 205, <https://www.nwcg.gov/glossary/a-z>, is a helpful resource for understanding the specialized terms commonly used in wildland fire.

A Glimpse of the Wildland Firefighting Job

These videos are examples of the many that exist that can help families understand the job of wildland firefighting. In addition to websites, many agencies also have their own YouTube channels, Flickr sites, and other social media sites where more examples can be found. The National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) website, <https://www.nifc.gov/>, also has a wealth of information.

Heart of a Firefighter

<https://youtu.be/QxJFIfkOOLY>



Women in Fire

<https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/all-women-fire-crew-prepares-for-season-at-grand-teton-national-park.htm>



Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

Most employers provide PPE, which consists of specialized backpacks, fire-resistant Nomex clothing, hardhats, fire shelters, gloves, and other essential safety items. A stipend may be provided by the employing agency to purchase the required lug soled, eight-inch-minimum-height leather boots.

All personnel are required to carry a fire shelter when working on the fireline. The fire shelter is an aluminized cloth tent that offers protection in a wildfire entrapment situation by reflecting radiant heat, slowing heat transfer, and providing a volume of breathable air. Firefighters train extensively in fire entrapment avoidance, so fire shelters are used in the very rare occurrence of a fire entrapment where firefighters feel the shelter is needed for protection from heat, smoke, and/or ember showers.

Availability

Wildland firefighters should have a means of contact to receive dispatch calls or text messages about upcoming assignments and respond quickly to receive important dispatch information. These calls can come at any time of the day or night or during a family dinner, movie, soccer game, even while camping, hunting, or traveling. The wildland firefighter will need to stop whatever activity they are engaged in to plan accordingly.

Preplanning when on call helps all involved and needs to be a consideration. For example, taking two cars to family outings in the event a firefighter must leave to respond to a fire. Having gear readily available saves precious time and reduces additional travel time. Planning to be in cell service areas during high fire danger also needs to be a consideration. Equally important are conversations with employers about unavailability when on leave.

Duty stations and wildland fire assignments are often in remote locations where cell phone service is limited. The wildland firefighter may not be able to answer calls or texts for prolonged periods of time. It is usually against crew rules to use cell phones on the fireline or during work hours except in the case of emergencies since safety of the wildland firefighter and those nearby depends on focus and professionalism.

Perspectives from Real Families

“My son has followed in my footsteps as a wildland firefighter. The job is dangerous, but I know how well we train our firefighters. Knowing that he loves being a firefighter helps me deal with some of those ‘mom emotions’ that sometimes pop up when he goes on a fire assignment.”

— Terri, mother of a wildland firefighter

“My kid said to me last week, ‘Dad you know what sucks about you being a smokejumper? 1) You're gone all the time. 2) You could die.’ I said, I am the one responsible for making sure we don't die and, I know buddy, but if YOU grow up and find a job that you love then you'll have to make some sacrifices too. You're the most important thing in the world to me, but this is a calculated sacrifice, and I won't do it forever.”

— Kurt, father, husband, and smokejumper

“It's a tough job to be the family of a firefighter. Only those who understand the demands can accept it and make a family life work. If your loved one loves fire as much as you know they love you, you've got to be proud and respect the demands, even if you want to be selfish!”

— Trinity, wife of a wildland firefighter

The Personal Gear Bag

Also known as the Red Bag, or PG Bag, this contains all the personal gear an employee will need for extended assignments away from home, including items that can make life more comfortable while sleeping on the ground.

Essentials should include:

- Underwear.
- Socks.
- Extra t-shirts.
- Extra Nomex pants and shirts.
- Personal hygiene items.
- Sleeping bag.
- Sleeping mat.
- Tent.
- Headlamp.
- Batteries.
- Snacks.



Everything must fit into a single issued bag that may have a weight limit of 45 pounds. Wildland firefighters often wash clothes, replenish supplies, and organize gear while off duty. It is also important to have a 30-day supply of any medications needed and spare glasses/contacts available in line gear. Preparation is essential to maintain a sense of readiness and comfort.

Physical Demands and Training

This is a physically demanding job. Firefighters must train in the off-season to meet fitness standards and perform the challenging duties of the position.

Physical training consists of a variety of activities including:

- Hiking.
- Running.
- Pull-ups.
- Push-ups.
- Strength training.

The Work Capacity Test (WCT) is used to measure fitness levels and must be passed annually as a condition of hire. The test involves walking three miles in 45 minutes while carrying a 45-pound pack. For seasonal firefighters, the test usually occurs on the first day of work. Many agencies require employees to pass a medical examination with a doctor before they can take the WCT.

Fire modules generally become available for assignments after a few weeks of core classroom and on-the-job training. Wildland firefighters work in hazardous environments. Their days can include long and arduous hikes with fire packs, chainsaws, tools, and equipment that together can weigh as much as 100 pounds. Physical requirements also include digging miles of fireline; moving brush, trees, rocks; and using chainsaws to cut trees. Conditions can be dusty, hot, and smoky. The work site is usually remote with no cell phone service and only radio or face-to-face communication. An initial attack, or first response to a new fire start, can continue for 24 hours. Extended assignments on large fires generally involve long hours of physical work and can be much more demanding than the WCT.

Schedules, Planning and Understanding

It is common for firefighters to be dispatched for an assignment when they are not with family. This can happen when they are at work, at their home station, or out in the field doing project work. They may be out of cell range or may not have time to call during the initial response to notify their support network of the dispatch.

Loved ones should understand that this is common. Because managing the unknown is difficult, managing expectations for communication is helpful.

“Friends of mine have stated how they couldn’t be away from their families as much as I have to be for my job, because they love their family too much and couldn’t put them through being gone. Funny thing is that I don’t feel I love my family any less, just that I also have a sense duty to my family and honor within myself to uphold. Maybe it’s a blessing or a curse, but I’ve got skills and experiences that must be passed on to the next generation of firefighters for their safety and the progression of the organization. When I see the people that I’m responsible for, I see their families as well. I know that I have a duty to do my very best to bring them home to their families and will only return ‘whole’ to my own family if I’ve done everything I can for my crew.”

— Dave, crew supervisor, husband, father, son, uncle, brother

Discussions about schedules and family plans are important early on. As mentioned in other sections, it is sometimes difficult to maintain plans when the profession carries so many unknowns. Weddings, birthdays, reunions, BBQs, parties, vacations, and other holidays are sometimes missed due to the obligations the firefighter has to their crew and position. Planned events like concerts are often missed, sometimes at the last minute.

These disruptions are most common during the peak of fire season but can happen anytime the firefighter is in employment status. With a little bit of open communication early in the season, the firefighter, and supervisors can sometimes negotiate family obligations. Amidst these demands, it is also important to note that time off to disengage is healthy. These conversations with your loved ones are important.

A Day in the Life of a Wildland Firefighter on Assignment

Although every assignment is different, the timeline below provides a glimpse of what a wildland firefighter’s day might look like on an extended fire assignment. Days are generally very long with little free time. Since drive times and hiking distances can vary significantly, some crews are spiked in remote locations, meaning that they work and sleep closer to the fire area. When fire operations dictate, personnel may be assigned to night shifts, where working at night and sleeping during the day is expected. This scenario shares what a typical day on assignment might include.

This example includes activities during both paid and non-paid time. Also, incidents operate on a 24-hour clock. Subtract 12 for p.m. time. For example, 2030 [read as twenty –thirty] is 8:30 p.m.

0530

Wake up in tent. Pack and load gear.

0600

Breakfast in fire camp.



0630

Start of shift. Fire operational briefing. Gather up water, lunches, and supplies for the day.

0700

Drive to the fireline to begin the day’s assigned work.

0800

Begin the assigned tasks at the fire.

1300

Eat lunch – usually a fire-issued sack lunch or military style Meal Ready to Eat (MRE).



1900

Hike off the fireline and refurbish gear.

2000

Drive back to fire camp.

2130

Prepare gear for the next day. Eat dinner, make personal phone calls or texts (if cell phone service is available), shower (if possible), go to bed.





Part 2: Hazards of the Job and Resources for Help

It is a great honor to provide firefighters as well as their support networks with what we hope will be a helpful resource guide at all stages of this wonderful and challenging profession.

The wildland firefighter core values of Duty, Respect, and Integrity will be evident in your commitment, hard work, and character. You are the heart of wildland firefighting.

Wildland firefighting is an inherently dangerous occupation. Sound risk management principles are used to mitigate hazards, but not all dangers can be eliminated entirely. You will be exposed to risk in this position. Even though safety is our number one priority, history has proven that injuries will occur. Some will be serious, and some firefighters may not make it home.

Our intent is not to scare you, but to ensure that you understand the risks associated with this job so that you and your family can prepare for the possibility of serious injury or death.

Hazard Types

Both physical and mental hazards exist in the wildland fire environment. Either can cause physical harm or death. While physical hazards are easier to identify, mental stressors can build over time, leading to psychological and physical health problems. Your awareness can help identify hazards, recognize injury, and expedite healing.

Physical Hazards

Wildland firefighters are exposed to a variety of hazards while on incidents, performing project work, physical training, or while traveling. Supporting all-hazard emergency response, such as hurricanes, exposes firefighters to ever-increasing types of environments and hazards.



Common hazards include:

- Slips, trips, and falls.
- Burns, including sunburns.
- Heat related illness.
- Smoke inhalation.
- Noise exposure.
- Scrapes and cuts from tools and equipment such as chainsaws.
- Impact injuries from falling trees, rocks, or other objects.
- Plant irritants such as thorns or poison oak.
- Snake, animal, and insect bites.
- Vehicle, airplane, or helicopter crashes.
- Viruses such as COVID-19 or camp-crud.
- Electrocutation from lightning or downed power lines.
- Hazardous materials.

Despite constant efforts to manage risk, wildland firefighters continue to pay the ultimate price. In 2021, there were 23 wildland firefighter line of duty deaths. Fatalities have occurred in all geographic areas and in almost every state. The most common causes of death continue to be:

- Medical emergencies.
- Vehicle accidents.
- Impact accidents, generally involving hazard trees.
- Aviation accidents.
- Fire entrapments or burnovers.

Firefighters may be asked to provide information to an investigation team if they witness a serious injury or fatality, or if they were nearby when one occurred. Although it may be understandably frustrating following exposure to trauma, the information provided can be invaluable to understanding what happened and in preventing future accidents. Sometimes multiple reviews or investigations happen concurrently but separately, such as an accident investigation (e.g., by law enforcement or a regulatory agency such as the National Transportation Safety Board [NTSB]), and a learning review.

Each agency may have their own process. Understanding agency practices for investigations, learning reviews, and responses to serious injuries and line of duty deaths will be helpful. Many agencies have websites and online policy guides available.

Line of Duty Death or Injury

As difficult as this task may be, it is exceptionally important for the wildland firefighter to have a conversation about the potential for injury, or even death, with family members, and loved ones. Approach the conversation with openness and trust rather than worry or fear. Planning for the worst-case scenario is difficult, but it is very important to discuss these real-life possibilities. Make sure you know what forms are required for designating benefits and that you have updated them. It is always a good idea to review them at the start of each season so you know they are current. The Designation of Beneficiary Resources section towards the end of this guide provides more information and guidance on forms, processes, and other critical information. The following topics will be of particular importance to share with a spouse or partner.

Financial Planning

Discuss the need for a life insurance policy for dependents, and how to obtain information on beneficiary documents. Communicating with your family/loved ones and planning for delays in payments from the government is important.

Planning the Funeral

Consider special wishes surrounding a funeral or memorial service. Is the Honor Guard requested at the service? Do you wish to have an agency presence at the service?

Preparing for Serious Injury

Discuss how the family's lifestyle, finances, and mental health can be impacted if the wildland firefighter is critically injured. Research the Office of Workers Compensation Program and agency-specific policy regarding compensation and disability. If needed, who does the wildland firefighter want as an agency, family, or hospital liaison?

Talking to Children

Discuss with children the fear that surrounds their parent being hurt or killed in the line of duty. Think of words and phrases that will resonate with them and provide an accurate but age-appropriate picture of the dangers and risks of wildland firefighting.

Designate a Family Spokesperson

In times of stress, it can be helpful to designate someone to speak on behalf of the family. Consider selecting an individual to represent the family in this capacity. Make sure this individual knows contact information for your supervisor and other critical points of contact within your organization.



The Tough Conversation

“I’ve worked in fire and safety for most of my career. My kids were raised knowing that summer vacations wouldn’t include Dad. I know well that while we try to mitigate risks, there is no zero-risk option in firefighting. I prepared my wife for the possibility that I wouldn’t come home from a fire assignment, but I think I downplayed the risks to my children, not wanting to worry them. Now, my son is a full-time firefighter, and he has a young child. I wonder, has he had the difficult conversations with my daughter-in-law? Are they prepared?”

— Steve, agency employee, and father of a wildland firefighter

Tools and Tips

- Be open and honest about the hazards and risks associated with this profession to those members of your family that you feel are appropriate to include. This should include spouses, partners, and possibly children, as well as other family members and friends you think may need to fill support roles. Have these conversations with those who would handle your wishes and affairs.
- Review your paperwork with those who will need access to this information. Ensure that all financial documents are current. Trained personnel from human resources departments can provide necessary documents and help answer your questions about life insurance, health insurance, and designation of beneficiaries.
- The employer may appoint a liaison to help an injured employee and family members navigate through hospital and agency paperwork. This individual is a trained agency employee who, upon notification of an injured firefighter, travels to the hospital where the firefighter is being transported. The liaison assists to facilitate communication between the employee, the agency, and medical staff.
- Specific agency policy addressing death and serious injury establishes official guidance so that managers know what to do if an employee is injured or killed. Familiarize yourself and your loved ones with your agency’s practices.
- Documenting your wishes in case of serious injury or death can be a tremendous help to your loved ones. Be sure to check with your agency’s policy and forms. There are also free online tools for creating wills, living wills, and documenting last wishes.
 - A living will should clearly state your desires if your family and loved ones must make critical decisions regarding your medical care. There are several websites that offer easy tools for creating and finalizing your living will. Take the time to choose one that works for you and to discuss the options and process with the people in your life who might have to make these decisions.
 - Employee Emergency Contact Form and last wishes: <https://www.firehero.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/EmpEmerContactInfo.pdf>

Additional Information on Wildland Firefighter Fatalities.

Annual incident statistics and lesson summaries can be found at the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center’s (LLC) website: <https://www.wildfirelessons.net/viewdocument/annual-incident-review-summaries>.

Specific incident reports can be searched at the LLC’s Incident Review Database: <https://www.wildfirelessons.net/irdb>.

Historical Fire Fatality, Entrapments and Accident Summaries (Safety Gram): <https://www.nwcg.gov/committees/risk-management-committee>.



Mental Health Impacts and Management

Stress can have a profound impact on wildland firefighters and their families, but you can take steps to identify, understand, and manage it.

You do not need to be directly involved in a highly publicized traumatic event to experience a stress injury. Stress can occur from knowledge of a traumatic event, exposure to a traumatic event, or multiple traumatic experiences that compound over several years. Cumulative fatigue can also result in trauma as can the stress of being disconnected from your personal life for extended periods of time. Symptoms can develop suddenly or subtly over a long period.

The American Addiction Center states that the constant exposure that firefighters and first responders have “to trauma, life-threatening situations, and the physical strain of working long hours on little to no sleep can negatively impact overall mental health, increasing the vulnerability, and risk of substance abuse and addiction among firefighters and first responders. Furthermore, down time that occurs during the off-season or at retirement can uncover or exacerbate alcohol, drug, and mental health disorders that may have been masked or submerged during active duty.”

<https://americanaddictioncenters.org/firefighters-first-responders>

Learning to recognize the signs and helping those in your personal life to recognize the signs of trauma is helpful to creating a support network for you. Take some time to watch the RT-130, Wildland Fire Safety Training Annual Refresher Module Wildland Fire Mental Health, <https://www.nwcg.gov/publications/training-courses/rt-130/medical/me709>, and engage in conversations with your loved ones, crews, and supervisors about how to care for your mental health.

Additionally, spend time becoming familiar with the NWCG Mental Health Subcommittee (MHSC) website, <https://www.nwcg.gov/committees/mental-health-subcommittee>, and share this widely with those in your personal life.

Human Performance

Several efforts have been initiated to help employees manage stress. New programs focusing on human performance are being developed to promote employee health, safety, and resilience. Human performance initiatives support the vision of becoming a true learning organization. Guided by the principles of resilience, adaptation, and integration, this initiative helps us:

- Understand the limitations of human performance.
- Capture and promote best practices.
- Integrate knowledge into our operations.
- Identify training and support needs.
- Increase comprehensive wellness.
- Transform the existing culture.
- Develop a highly skilled, diverse, and compassionate workforce.

To learn more, visit:

Rocky Mountain Research Station, Human Performance & Innovation and Organizational Learning:
<https://www.fs.fed.us/rmrs/groups/human-performance-innovation-and-organizational-learning>

Department of Defense's Human Performance Resource Center: <https://www.hprc-online.org/>

Stressors

In wildland firefighting and Emergency Medical Services, trauma is not the only harmful exposure. Stress injuries can arise from four possibilities:¹

- Wear and Tear – Fatigue and the accumulation of prolonged stress combined with insufficient sleep, rest, and restoration; this includes sources outside of work.
 - Example: This is my tenth day working on this fire and we're working 16-hour shifts. There's a guy on my crew who keeps giving me a hard time, and it's really starting to get to me. Plus, I can't stop thinking about how my dog at home is on her last leg and could pass away any day now. I'm just starting to get worn down.
- Inner Conflict – A conflict between a person's moral/ethical beliefs and their current experiences, including actions that differ from one's internal, self-imposed morals, or values.
 - Example: I can't stop thinking about my kids and how this job keeps me away from home for such long periods of time. I never thought I'd miss a birthday!
- Life Threat – Traumatic, life-threatening situations that provoke terror or helplessness. This includes near-misses and close calls.
 - Example: I can't stop replaying that day in my head. I have nightmares about it. We were down in Florida for hurricane relief efforts when we were notified that another hurricane was going to make landfall. The winds were over 100 miles per hour, the roof blew off, and trees were flying in the air. I was so terrified and thought that was the end.
- Loss – Grief due to the loss of close comrades, leaders, family members, or other individuals.
 - Example: Our whole unit is mourning the loss of Rachel. She was such a hard worker and fun person to work alongside. Rachel worked on our engine and loved her job. I can't believe she's no longer with us.

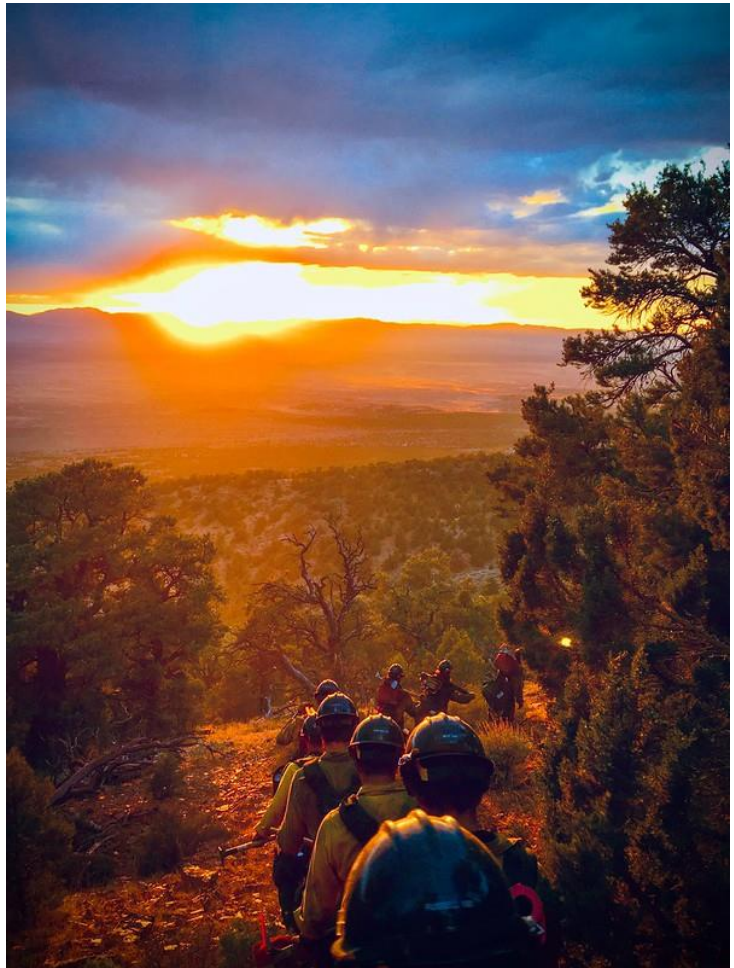
¹Nash, W. P. (2011). US Marine Corps and Navy combat and operational Stress Continuum Model: A tool for leaders. *Combat and Operational Behavioral Health*, 111

After the Season Ends

What happens when the fire season ends?

It has been a long season; you and your crew have been gone on fire assignments with consistency for the better part of the last five or more months. Prior to that, you were together for a month or more, training, working, and spending eight to twelve hours together, five to seven days a week. Now here it is, September 30, the last day of the fiscal year, and you are being laid off from your seasonal job or furloughed. What happens now?

For many of us, our crew becomes our peer support, a second family to us, and our go-to when the job puts demands on us that those outside of fire may not be able to comprehend. As the season ends, we may find ourselves faced with losing those connections, trying to fit back into lives with families we haven't seen in the better part of five months or suddenly without any certainty of how to fill our time. It is important to understand that this transition period can be difficult for some of us.



The adrenaline and rush of our jobs comes to a screeching halt at the end of a season and while some welcome the rest and time off, others struggle with the isolation they suddenly feel.

Please know that you are not alone. Plan ahead and identify members of your crew that you can stay connected with through the off-season. There is no shame in needing professional support. If you feel that you need the services of an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), contact them prior to your last day, this will allow you to take advantage of those services even once your season has ended. Make plans to fill your time during the off-season. It is critical to get rest and rehabilitation after a long season so that your body and mind can refresh before the next seasons begins.

Learn to recognize the signs of depression and how to ask for help if you find yourself experiencing any of them after your season ends. One life lost to suicide is one too many. We need to remove the stigma of asking for help when our mental health is compromised.

The Department of Veterans Affairs has identified the following signs to watch for if you find yourself feeling depressed or suicidal:

- Appearing sad or depressed most of the time.
- Hopelessness; feeling like there's no way out.
- Anxiety, agitation, sleeplessness, or mood swings.
- Feeling as if there is no reason to live.
- Feeling excessive guilt, shame, or sense of failure.
- Rage or anger.
- Engaging in risky activities without thinking.
- Losing interest in hobbies, work, or school.
- Increasing alcohol or drug misuse.
- Neglecting personal welfare or a deteriorating physical appearance.
- Withdrawing from family and friends.
- Showing violent behavior, like punching a hole in the wall or getting into fights.
- Giving away prized possessions.
- Getting affairs in order, tying up loose ends, or writing a will.

The following signs require immediate attention:

- Thinking about hurting or killing yourself.
- Looking for ways to kill yourself.
- Talking about death, dying, or suicide.
- Self-destructive behavior such as drug and alcohol abuse, self-harm, etc.

You can take a quiz to help identify if you are heading into a difficult place mentally and might need some help at the following link: <https://screening.mhanational.org/screening-tools/>.

Suicide in the Fire Service

Suicide awareness is on the rise among wildland firefighters. The intense physical and psychological demands combined with the stressors inherent to this occupation can result in psychological issues. There used to be a stigma attached to asking for help, but first responders now acknowledge that mental health is just as important as physical well-being. It is not an admission of weakness to ask for help. You are not alone.

If you or someone you know needs immediate assistance, please call 9-1-1. You can call the National Suicide Line if you are in a crisis and need support and help at 1-800-273-8255.

The Wildland Fire LLC (<https://www.wildfirelessons.net/home>) dedicated two issues of Two More Chains to suicide awareness, which initiated an open discussion within the wildland firefighter community.

Suicide in the Wildland Fire Service:

<https://www.wildfirelessons.net/HigherLogic/System/DownloadDocumentFile.ashx?DocumentFileKey=a55c181e-fb3a-f374-8efa-e2d5cfe1fa12&forceDialog=0>

Special Subject Matter Experts' Insights and Information:

<https://www.wildfirelessons.net/HigherLogic/System/DownloadDocumentFile.ashx?DocumentFileKey=bc257c49-e09a-592e-785c-28967671cc3f&forceDialog=0>

Behavioral Health Resources

This is not an all-inclusive list of resources available to firefighters and their families. Thanks to the rise in mental health awareness, both in society, and among first responders, many avenues of help are available. If you work directly for a federal agency, the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is always an option but here are some alternative resources as well:

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI): <https://www.nami.org/>

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255, <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>

Directory of Behavioral Health Professionals (all specialize in first responders):
<https://www.nvfc.org/phfd/>

NWCG Mental Health Subcommittee: <https://www.nwcg.gov/committees/mental-health-subcommittee>

National Wildland Fire Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) website – Information on CISM, peer support, and other resources: <https://gacc.nifc.gov/cism/index.html>

American Addiction Centers – Firefighters and First Responders. Information about effects of first responder careers, including a peer support call line: 888-731-FIRE (3473):
<https://americanaddictioncenters.org/firefighters-first-responders/>

National Fallen Firefighter's Foundation Initiative 13 – Peer support, training, and resources for firefighters about behavioral health and suicide: <https://www.firstrespondercenter.org/behavioral-health/>

Wildland Firefighter Foundation – Support for wildland firefighters and their families, including suicide intervention phone numbers: <https://wffoundation.org/>

International Association of Firefighters Treatment Center (for members):
<https://www.iaffrecoverycenter.com/>

National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder – Sponsored by Veterans Affairs. In-depth information on trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) for everyone; resources for direct help for military veterans: <https://www.ptsd.va.gov/>

Veterans Crisis Line: 1-800-273-8255

Everyone Goes Home – In the Wildland: Joint Initiative of National Fallen Firefighter Foundation and the Wildland Firefighter Foundation: <https://www.everyonegoeshome.com/2018/09/14/wildland/>

Stress First Aid

The following is an excerpt from the peer support class Stress First Aid (SFA). This is a self-care, peer support model developed for those in high-risk occupations such as wildland firefighting, military, fire and rescue, and law enforcement. It highlights seven actions to help identify and address stress reactions in yourself and others.

SFA offers an abundance of educational tools that are useful to individuals or groups. The National Advanced Fire and Resource Institute (NAFRI) offers an SFA train the trainer course. Participants become certified to instruct SFA curriculum in 15-minute, 90-minute, or 4-hour formats.

You are encouraged to learn more about SFA. Familiarize yourself with related tools and be proactive at integrating this awareness into your work group(s).

The Stress Continuum

The Stress Continuum Model is a visual tool to assess stress responses. Stress responses vary in severity and type. There is no normal response to stress, and stress responses are not signs of mental illness. Every person reacts to stressful stimuli, but individual responses depend on how well a person is prepared to confront the stressor, along with their individual interpretation of the stressor. A person's stress response can rapidly change from Green to Yellow to Orange to Red and back again.

SFA falls in the middle of the care spectrum somewhere between training, stress management, prevention, and clinical treatments from healthcare providers. It offers a set of procedures to help manage stress reactions when someone is moving from Yellow to Orange or even Red. Mitigation actions can and should be applied by anyone, anywhere.

READY	REACTING	INJURED	ILL
<p>Definition: Active coping and mastery. Optimal functioning wellness.</p> <p>Features: Well trained and prepared. Fit and focused. In control. Behaving ethically. Having fun.</p>	<p>Definition: Mild, transient distress that goes away. Loss of optimal functioning. Low risk for illness.</p> <p>Features: Irritable, angry. Anxious or depressed. Physically too pumped up or tired. Poor focus and/or sleep. Not having fun.</p>	<p>Definition: More severe, persistent distress, and loss of function. Leaves a scar. Higher risk of illness.</p> <p>Causes: Life threat; loss; inner conflict; wear and tear.</p> <p>Features: Panic or rage. Loss of control of body or mind. Can't sleep. Recurrent nightmares or bad memories. Persistent shame, guilt, or blame. Loss of moral values and beliefs.</p>	<p>Definition: Persistent and disabling distress and loss of function. Clinical mental disorders. Unhealed stress injuries.</p> <p>Types: PTSD, depression, substance abuse, anxiety</p> <p>Features: Symptoms and disability persist over many weeks. Symptoms and disability get worse over time.</p>

Nash, W. P. (2011). US Marine Corps and Navy combat and operational Stress Continuum Model: A tool for leaders. *Combat and Operational Behavioral Health*, 107-119.

The Seven Cs of Stress First Aid (SFA)

SFA moves people towards wellness by preserving well-being, preventing further harm, and promoting recovery. The Seven Cs can be used to help yourself or your peers.

SFA is not a one-time or one-event intervention, but a way to focus on people and behaviors to provide long-term support. It is not a replacement for medical or behavioral health interventions.

The actions in this diagram may appear to be sequential, but Check and Coordinate are continuous. The others are only used as needed.

It is important to look out for each other, but you can also Check yourself. Look for departures from your norms, like fatigue, lack of focus, being short tempered, withdrawing, or not doing the things you normally enjoy.

Check, the foundation of SFA, is critical because:

- Those impacted by stress may be the last to recognize it.
- Stigma can be an obstacle to asking for help.
- Stress zones and personal needs change over time.
- Risks from stress injuries may last a long time.



Seven Cs of Stress First Aid (SFA)

1. Check.
Assess, observe, and learn.
2. Coordinate.
Get help; refer as needed.
3. Cover
Get to safety ASAP.
4. Calm
Relax, slow down, and refocus.
5. Connect
Get support from others.
6. Competence
Restore effectiveness.
7. Confidence
Restore self-esteem and hope.

Westphal, Richard. (2018) Combat and Operational Stress First Aid: Responder Training Manual 2011 Forest Service, USDA & Gist, Richard & Watson, Patricia & Westphal, Richard & Nash, William. (2018). Stress First Aid for Wildland Firefighters, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343499983_Stress_First_Aid_for_Wildland_Firefighters.

“One of the key points of check is knowing your people, and spending a lot of time with them, both professionally, and personally. Then you can recognize those subtle changes. What I’ve done is to start a conversation about anything except what I think might be bugging them, and then I actively listen. And once again I’m talking the floodgates open, and it goes well.”

— Check example from a firefighter.

Additional Resources

Below are resources in addition to those listed throughout the document. This is not a comprehensive list. An organization's inclusion or omission does not constitute endorsement by the National Wildfire Coordinating Group and its members.

Safety, Physical, and Behavioral Health Resources

Information about federal agency Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) can be found at:

<https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/worklife/employee-assistance-programs/>

Everyone Goes Home – National Fallen Firefighter Foundation, 16 Life Safety Initiatives and resources:

<https://www.everyonegoeshome.com/resources/resources-directory/>

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-8255): <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>

Serious Injury and Line of Duty Death Response and Accident Reviews

National Fallen Firefighter Foundation, Taking Care of Our Own: A Fire Chief's Guide to Preparing for a Line of Duty Death. Includes information and resources for agencies and survivors:

<https://www.firehero.org/resources/department-resources/programs/taking-care-of-our-own/>

National Association of State Foresters, Guiding Principles – Serious Accident and Near Miss Incident Reviews: <https://www.stateforesters.org/newsroom/guiding-principles-serious-accident-and-near-miss-incident-reviews/>

National Association of State Foresters, Wildland Fire News (risk reports and near-miss reviews):

<https://www.stateforesters.org/newsroom/>

Facilitated Learning Analysis Implementation Guide:

<https://www.wildfirelessons.net/viewdocument/facilitated-learning-analysis-and-l>

Critical Response Protocol: <https://www.wildfirelessons.net/home>

Planning Resources

Federal Employee Group Life Insurance (FEGLI): <https://www.opm.gov/healthcare-insurance/life-insurance/>

WAPEA – Long-Term Care Insurance, Group Term Life Insurance, and Financial Service Benefits for Federal Civilian Employees: <https://www.waepa.org/>

Office of Personnel Management (OPM) Insurance FAQs, including designation of beneficiaries (for federal employees): <https://www.opm.gov/healthcare-insurance/insurance-faqs/>

Designation of Beneficiary Information

(This information from OPM is geared towards federal agency employees but may contain useful considerations for anyone.)

Are your designations of beneficiaries' current? When was the last time you checked your designations of beneficiary? Most employees and annuitants don't realize that they have several designations to keep current. If you don't have a designation on file, then the funds will be distributed according to the order of precedence. That may be OK with you, but maybe it isn't. Worse yet is an out-of-date designation giving the money to someone that you no longer wish to give it to.

Order of Precedence

If there is no designated beneficiary living, any unpaid compensation which becomes payable after the death of an employee will be payable to the first person or persons listed below who are alive on the date title to the payment arises. Although this list provided by OPM is the common legal order, be sure to check with your individual benefits and policies to verify default order of precedence and procedures for designating beneficiaries.

1. To the widow or widower.
2. If neither of the above, to the child, or children in equal shares, with the share of any deceased child distributed among the descendants of that child.
3. If none of the above, to the parents in equal shares or the entire amount to the surviving parent.
4. If there are none of the above, to the duly appointed legal representative of the estate of the deceased employee, or if there be none, to the person or persons determined to be entitled thereto under the laws of the domicile of the deceased employee.

Designation Forms

Federal Employee's Group Life Insurance Program (FEGLI):

https://www.opm.gov/forms/pdf_fill/sf2823.pdf

Thrift Savings Plan (TSP): <https://www.tsp.gov/forms/deathBenefits.html>

Unpaid Compensation: https://www.opm.gov/forms/pdf_fill/sf-1152.pdf

Civil Service Retirement Program (CSRS): https://www.opm.gov/forms/pdf_fill/sf-2808.pdf

Federal Employee's Retirement System (FERS): <https://www.gsa.gov/cdnstatic/SF3102-12.pdf?forceDownload=1>

Public Safety Officers' Benefits (PSOB): <https://www.firehero.org/resources/family-resources/benefits/psob-beneficiary-form/>

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Previous editions: first.

While they may still contain current or useful information, previous editions are obsolete. The user of this information is responsible for confirming that they have the most up-to-date version. NWCG is the sole source for the publication.

This publication is available electronically at <https://www.nwcg.gov/publications/600>.

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