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CRACKYL

M A G A Z I N E

THE SILVER
LINING WITH
TOXIC BOSSES

COULD
YOU
RESCUE
YOU?

THESE BUGS
ARE OUT TO GET YOU

FRANK LEEB

ON PURPOSE

HOW TO FAKE
WELLNESS
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ISSUE **No20**

WINTER 2026



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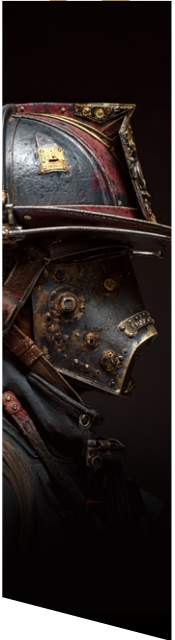


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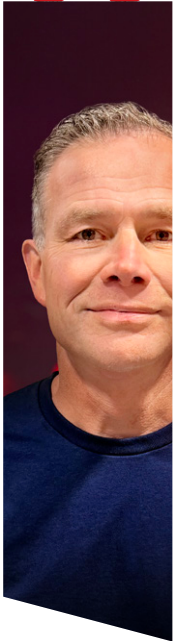
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Leadership has long been one of the most discussed topics in the fire service. We're surrounded by perspectives, playbooks, and promises about what "good leadership" looks like. And every firefighter has their own experiences that shape what resonates with them. Some approaches hit home. Others don't. But one thing remains undeniable: leadership isn't fixed — it's a moving target that demands ongoing attention, honesty, and growth.

In this winter issue, we focus on leadership where it truly lives — in the decisions we make, the habits we reinforce, and the example we set long before any rank is bestowed. Leadership starts internally. If we want healthier crews and stronger departments, it begins with a willingness to examine our own impact. The culture doesn't make the firefighter; the firefighter makes the culture. Every shift, every interaction, every moment shapes the environment we all work inside.

Featuring Chief Frank Leeb on the cover reinforces that message. Frank embodies a leadership style grounded in credibility, humility, and service. His influence across the fire service displays a simple truth: leadership is measured by the culture you strengthen, not the position you hold.

As we embrace 2026, and as the days slowly begin to stretch longer again, winter offers a natural pause — a chance to recalibrate, assess how we're showing up, and make sure we're contributing to solutions, not adding to the problems we hope someone else will fix. For CRACKYL, that means continuing to support the whole firefighter behind the gear — identity, performance, longevity, and the leadership required to sustain it all.

Here's to making it count.

Kory Pearn
PUBLISHER / EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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SCAN TO LEARN MORE



The myths & risks of being 'unaffected'

By Dr. Tracy Stevens Hejmanowski, Licensed Clinical Psychologist

IT'S INTERESTING HOW IT USED TO BE THAT THE DIRTIER YOU GOT ON THE JOB, THE MORE IMPRESSIVE YOUR WORK ETHIC AND REPUTATION.

Grit has meant both a stony material and a stony-faced attitude – impervious to the elements of the environment. A human Rhino liner, if you will, is unlikely to crack under both normal and extreme conditions. **But just like the protective layers of your gear only go so far in shielding you from harmful exposures,** your professional mindset can only protect you to a certain extent from human outcomes.

There is no way around it.

That must be why training emphasizes grit. Which isn't a half-bad quality, since grit is typically found alongside passion, persistence, and a sense of purpose. Thing is: grit has always fit snugly against the long-standing firefighter culture of machismo, strength, and stoicism. But ironically, as researcher Angela Duckworth describes, grit actually represents an ultimate concern that gives meaning to what we do. However, concern requires human connection and that connection can lead to empathic pain.

Tragic outcomes, tactical impotence, pediatric fatalities, recovery of remains, departmental betrayal, near misses and close

calls, or losing a friend to cancer or suicide all lead to psychological and emotional dings in your armor. And not only from work, but from your personal life – health scares, accidents, infidelity, divorce, and a hundred other circumstances. You cannot perceive only enough to do your job effectively without also absorbing lasting images and sensations.

NO AMOUNT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL CHAIN MAIL OR EMOTIONAL SUIT OF ARMOR CAN KEEP YOU FROM REACTING TO THE CONTENTS OF YOUR JOB.

You can be the most technically and tactically sound firefighter and still experience impacts from your work. A good thing, too, since the essence of our humanness is to think and feel.

And honestly, contrary to what some firefighters think, the day you start to really feel things on the job is not when it's time to hang it up. You know, the point where "I'm good" means "I'm good enough" and "I'm fine" means "Nothing to see here." Rather, **on the day you stop feeling or do not even recognize that you have, it is time for a recalibration.**

HERE IS A CHEAT SHEET ON HOW TO SPOT A DENT IN YOUR ARMOR.

PREP - R	INSTEAD OF:	THIS IS YOU
PATIENCE	Breathe and remember, most others have it easy and don't know better	WTF is a common thought and sometimes said aloud
READABILITY	Grade the day and give it a legitimate and relative descriptor	Give the same vague response regardless and without detail
ENGAGEMENT	Enter the home and prioritize time with humans over pets and work	Enter the home and escape to your room until coaxed out
PACING	Pause, sit still and not rush others	Either 1,000 mph, sluggish or uncooperative
ROUNDEDNESS	Equally invest in work, kids, partner, and hobbies	Overcommit to work and few interests outside



SOMETIMES THE EFFECTS OF WORK ARE OBVIOUS AND SOMETIMES THEY ARE MORE SUBTLE. BUT YOU KNOW YOU'RE A FIREFIGHTER IF:

- | Mentally, you: | Emotionally, you: | Physically, you: | Relationally, you: | Spiritually, you: |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Run worst-case scenarios in innocuous places ❑ Cannot get an intrusive memory out of your brain ❑ Either scope-lock on something or can't focus on anything | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Find it difficult to feel or fake empathy ❑ Get short-fused with people who move slowly ❑ Start to get annoyed by people who need you | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Stay extra busy when you're not on duty ❑ Prefer to do things yourself ❑ Get really ticked off when you cannot fix something | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Are frustrated by others' indecision ❑ Don't want to be alone but want to be left alone ❑ Don't have patience for others' "problems" | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Wonder why things turn out the way they do ❑ Feel your faith being tested at times ❑ Don't know whether you want to keep doing or keep existing |

At the end of the day, "It is what it is" is far easier to say than explaining it, but if you are willing to express that your human is not OK when you aren't, here are some ideas:

1. "That one hit me harder than most."
2. "I am going to have to process that one for a while."
3. "I definitely notice I am not as happy and relaxed as I usually am."
4. "I've gotta figure out why I am so irritable and impatient."
5. "I am having a serious people-suck day/week."
6. "This job is starting to seep into my home life and mess things up."
7. "Has anyone figured out how to get better sleep? My energy is crap."
8. "I cannot figure out how to get around this guy's personality."
9. "Anxiety blindsides me every once in a while, and bugs the shit out of me."
10. "I need to get a hold of my impulses or I'm gonna be in serious trouble."

So, how about a change in the old-school assumption that being professional means being unaffected, unimpacted, and unbothered by the job?

Not weak, soft, and never worth a shit. Screw that. No one respects a firefighter with a slick sleeve unblemished gear because their mettle has not yet been tested. But likewise, the rookies cannot trust you (and your family cannot rely on you) if you are not experienced in self-assessment.

The more stoic, strong, and gritty you are, the more often you have been in the path of things that may need reconciling. And you did not get into this business to stay clean, literally or metaphorically, so it only makes sense to "field day" your internal mindset,

emotional bandwidth, and relational repertoire from time to time. After all, enough dings can compromise the integrity of your proverbial armor.

So, the trade-off for the gratifying job comes down to having to catalogue and dialogue: **identify how and why the dings exist and do not keep that to yourself.** Figure out how you have become who you are and the meaning you make of the good and bad shit you have been exposed to.

It is not easy to do, but important things rarely are. And as you pass down operational wisdom to those who will someday replace you, include this practice in their preventive maintenance brief. **☑**



MRSA IS SUPER-RESILIENT, MOVING FROM SCENE TO STATION TO HOME; HERE ARE 10 WAYS TO SQUASH THIS DEADLY BUG IN ITS TRACKS

THESE BUGS ARE OUT TO GET YOU

By Bill Howe, Logistics Coordinator - Firefighter / Paramedic Retired, BAS-PSA, REMT-P USF Public Health Graduate Student and Research Assistant ICER

Fireground hazards announce themselves through heat, sound, and movement. Microbial hazards announce themselves through nothing at all. In the controlled chaos of emergency response, the most persistent danger often operates at scales invisible to the human eye. After three decades in fire and EMS, the microorganism that consistently demanded my respect was not dramatic or fast-moving. **It was a bacterium capable of riding on fabric, plastic, skin, and steel with remarkable patience: MRSA.**

The pattern appears most clearly on the routine medical calls that make up the backbone of EMS work. The dispatch describes flu-like symptoms, or dehydration, or general weakness. On arrival, the assessment relies on contact – kneeling beside a patient, steadying a shoulder, assisting with movement. Every action becomes a point of transfer.

ACCORDING TO CDC ESTIMATES, APPROXIMATELY ONE-THIRD OF THE POPULATION CARRIES STAPHYLOCOCCUS AUREUS ON THEIR SKIN, AND ROUGHLY ONE PERCENT CARRIES MRSA WITHOUT SYMPTOMS.

This statistical reality means responders frequently enter microbial environments without any visible indication that bacteria are present. Gloves create a barrier for the hands, but uniforms, boots, straps, and equipment remain fully exposed to the microbial ecosystem of the scene.

Once a responder moves from patient to apparatus, the transfer chain expands. The interior of a rescue truck becomes a highly trafficked microbiological corridor. Stretcher rails, seatbelts, pressure cuffs, oxygen bottles, radio microphones, cabinet handles, and tablets form an interconnected network of surfaces capable of sustaining bacterial life.

MRSA is particularly resilient, with documented survival on hard surfaces for days to weeks. This longevity allows bacteria to persist through multiple calls, shift changes, and equipment uses, creating an environment where microbial presence can outlast the conditions that introduced it.

The fire station functions as the next critical node in this chain. Boots enter the bay. Gear is set down. Door handles, counters, gym equipment, computers, and furniture accumulate microbial deposits over time. **The communal nature of firehouses – shared kitchens, shared recliners, shared tools – creates high-frequency cross-contact.** In these closed systems, microbes require no dramatic mechanism of entry; they simply attach themselves to human routines.

The epidemiological impact is well-established. Annual MRSA-related deaths in the United States exceed those associated with several more

publicly recognized diseases, including HIV/AIDS, emphysema, and Parkinson's disease. The disparity between public awareness and clinical reality stems from the bacterium's quiet mode of transmission. Unlike dramatic hazards, MRSA spreads through repetition and complacency – two conditions that thrive in busy stations with high call volume and variable cleaning practices.

THE FINAL AND MOST CONSEQUENTIAL TRANSFER OCCURS NOT IN THE WORKPLACE, BUT DURING THE TRANSITION BETWEEN WORK AND HOME.

Responders may shower, change clothing, or follow standard decontamination steps. The overlooked items – phones, watches, belts, stethoscopes, radio straps, duffel bags, and boots – continue to serve as microbial transport vessels.

Studies show that MRSA can persist on uniforms even after laundering if water temperatures and detergents are insufficient to disrupt the bacterial membrane. Personal electronics and bags receive even less attention, creating direct pathways from occupational exposure to household environments.

The concern becomes evident when responders consider the microbial exposure of family members, particularly children, elderly relatives, or immunocompromised individuals. Firefighters often accept risk for themselves with little hesitation, but the possibility of transporting pathogens into their homes creates an entirely different level of awareness.

Reducing microbial transmission does not require laboratory-level protocols. It requires consistent, evidence-based habits. These behaviors function not as grand interventions, but as incremental protective measures. Their cumulative effect shapes microbial pathways, reducing opportunities for bacteria to travel undetected. MRSA does not differentiate between ranks or shifts. It responds only to opportunity. Each wiped surface, washed uniform, and cleaned piece of equipment reduces that opportunity. **The measures are small, but the consequence is meaningful: a safer station, a safer crew, and a safer home.**

PRACTICAL MEASURES TO INTERRUPT THE MICROBIAL TRANSFER CHAIN

1. TREAT EVERY PATIENT ENCOUNTER AS A POTENTIAL MICROBIAL EXPOSURE.

Gloves are a barrier for hands only. Uniforms, boots, belts, and equipment remain exposed to the patient's environment. Awareness of these exposed surfaces is the first step in limiting transfer.

2. WASH HANDS IMMEDIATELY AFTER EACH CALL - EVEN WHEN GLOVES HAVE BEEN WORN.

Handwashing remains one of the most effective tools for reducing bacterial load. Alcohol-based sanitizers provide additional protection when sinks are unavailable.

3. CLEAN CRITICAL CONTACT POINTS INSIDE THE TRUCK BEFORE RETURNING TO SERVICE.

Stretcher handles, rails, belts, radio mics, cabinet doors, and reusable medical equipment should be wiped down between calls. MRSA survives for extended periods on hard plastics and metals.

4. DISINFECT HIGH-TOUCH PERSONAL ITEMS ONCE PER SHIFT.

Phones, tablets, radios, stethoscopes, watches, pens, and ID badge clips serve as microbial shuttles. These items often travel from the field to the station and to the home.

5. CHANGE CONTAMINATED UNIFORMS AT THE STATION.

Uniform fabric can retain bacteria even after laundering. Changing before going home prevents contaminated textiles from entering personal vehicles and living spaces.

6. KEEP WORK GEAR CONFINED TO WORK ZONES.

Boots, duffel bags, EMS bags, radio straps, and PPE should remain in designated station areas. Mixing work gear with personal environments widens the microbial transmission pathway.

7. SHOWER AFTER HIGH-RISK OR HIGH-CONTACT CALLS WHENEVER POSSIBLE.

Skin, hair, and exposed surfaces accumulate bacteria during routine patient contact. A quick decontamination shower significantly reduces microbial load.

8. MAINTAIN STATION HYGIENE IN SHARED ENVIRONMENTS.

Door handles, kitchen counters, recliners, gym equipment, and computer stations function as communal contact hubs. Regular cleaning interrupts microbial circulation among shift members.

9. AVOID EATING INSIDE THE APPARATUS.

Food surfaces introduce a direct pathway between microorganisms and ingestion. Removing meals from trucks eliminates one common vector entirely.

10. ENCOURAGE CREW-WIDE CONSISTENCY RATHER THAN PERFECTION.

MRSA spreads through routine, not catastrophe. Small, consistent habits across the entire crew yield the most meaningful reduction in microbial presence. **C**



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Is it Burnout or Biology?

By Rachael N. Belcher, NRP

Overlooked underlying physiology can mirror, blur, or intensify mental health conditions, complicating diagnosis and care. While conditions such as PTSD, depression, anxiety and burnout are real and prevalent, what is rarely addressed is the underlying physiology that can mimic, overlap, or exacerbate mental health conditions.

Disrupted sleep, endocrine abnormalities, nutrient deficiencies, brain injury, environmental exposures, and autonomic nervous system dysfunction all contribute to symptoms that overlap with psychiatric conditions. Without considering these biological underpinnings, providers risk misdiagnosis, under-treatment, or failure to recognize reversible contributors to distress, leaving firefighters insufficiently educated on the truth of what is happening in their minds and bodies.

SLEEP LOSS: THE MASTER AMPLIFIER

First responders work overnight shifts, 24-hour tours, or rotating schedules. Volunteers and paid on-call firefighters are routinely toned out in the middle of the night. All of this desynchronizes the body's circadian rhythms. **This circadian misalignment alters the secretion of melatonin, cortisol, and insulin, disrupting energy balance and stress responses.**

Research shows that shift workers experience higher rates of insulin resistance and metabolic syndrome due to altered circadian regulation of glucose and lipid metabolism. Cortisol rhythms flatten in chronic night-shift workers, impairing stress recovery and mood regulation. Endocrine dysregulation translates directly into symptoms of fatigue, irritability, and poor concentration – all of which overlap with depression and burnout.

Thyroid dysfunction is another under-recognized consequence. Studies show more hypothyroidism in shift workers compared to day workers. **Hypothyroidism produces low mood, cognitive slowing, and weight gain, which can easily be mistaken for psychiatric illness.**

Sleep deprivation is a defining feature of first responder life. Sleep restriction alone produces significant cognitive deficits in memory, attention, and decision-making. **Fragmented sleep impairs emotional regulation and increases impulsivity, mimicking symptoms of mood and anxiety disorders.**

Chronic sleep loss is not only an amplifier of mental health problems but can itself masquerade as depression or generalized anxiety, creating diagnostic ambiguity. Effective evaluation of firefighters must therefore include sleep history and screening for sleep apnea or circadian rhythm disorders.

The autonomic nervous system (ANS) regulates heart rate, blood pressure, and stress reactivity. In first responders, chronic hypervigilance and repeated trauma exposures alter autonomic nervous system balance, often measurable through heart-rate variability (HRV).

Studies show significantly lower HRV in individuals with PTSD, reflecting impaired parasympathetic control. Reduced HRV is linked with symptoms of hyperarousal, panic, and poor sleep, again, overlapping with primary anxiety disorders. **For firefighters who live in a state of readiness, ANS dysfunction can create chronic fight-or-flight physiology indistinguishable from anxiety disorders.**

HRV is a powerful indicator of overall health, with a higher HRV score indicating better health. Screening HRV or simple orthostatic vitals may reveal underlying distress and guide targeted interventions, such as biofeedback, mindfulness, or vagal-stimulation techniques.

Fixing underlying biological factors can tamp down mental health symptoms




 A graphic for 'NUTRITIONAL DEFICIENCIES' featuring a split background of grey and orange with a white circle and line pointing to the text.

NUTRITIONAL DEFICIENCIES

Firehouse meals and on-the-go eating habits create predictable nutrient gaps. **Research among career firefighters found frequent under-consumption of vitamin D, magnesium, potassium, and vitamin E.**

Deficiencies in these nutrients can manifest with fatigue, muscle weakness, irritability, and low mood. **Vitamin D deficiency, in particular, has been linked to depression and impaired cognitive performance.** Magnesium insufficiency contributes to sleep disturbances and heightened stress reactivity.

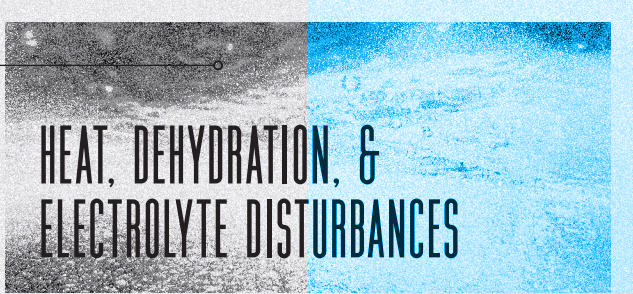
When a firefighter or medic presents with irritability, sleep issues, and poor concentration, the knee-jerk assumption may be depression or PTSD. But addressing diet and supplementation may alleviate symptoms prior to considering pharmacologic psychiatric treatment.


 A graphic for 'SMOKE, CO, & PFAS' featuring a split background of grey and teal with a white circle and line pointing to the text.

SMOKE, CO, & PFAS

Firefighters are routinely exposed to toxins with neurological and endocrine effects. Firefighters inhale smoke containing carbon monoxide, which binds hemoglobin and limits oxygen delivery. Even subacute CO exposures can produce delayed neurocognitive symptoms such as memory loss, headache, and depression-like symptoms.

Additionally, firefighters have had disproportionate exposure to PFAS from turnout gear and firefighting foams. PFAS are endocrine disruptors associated with thyroid dysfunction and metabolic abnormalities, and are highly suspected to be carcinogenic. Subclinical hypothyroid symptoms include fatigue, weight change, and cognitive slowing, again overlapping with depression.


 A graphic for 'HEAT, DEHYDRATION, & ELECTROLYTE DISTURBANCES' featuring a split background of grey and blue with a white circle and line pointing to the text.

HEAT, DEHYDRATION, & ELECTROLYTE DISTURBANCES

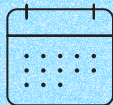
Working in high-heat environments with heavy gear increases the risk of dehydration and electrolyte imbalance among firefighters. Cognitive performance drops sharply when dehydrated, with slowed reaction times and mood changes. Overhydration without adequate sodium replacement can cause exercise-associated hyponatremia, leading to confusion, irritability, and even seizures, stressing the importance of hydrating with an electrolyte-rich beverage rather than plain water.

In the field, these physiological changes may present as acute agitation or cognitive dysfunction, easily mistaken for psychiatric breakdown. **Recognizing hydration and electrolyte status is critical when evaluating mental health complaints during or after incidents.**


 A graphic for 'TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURY' featuring a split background of grey and red with a white circle and line pointing to the text.

TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURY

First responders face the risk of traumatic brain injury through falling debris, motor vehicle crashes, falls, or blast exposures. **Even mild traumatic brain injury produces cognitive deficits, irritability, and mood instability that overlap with psychiatric disorders.** Without awareness, these neurodegenerative consequences may be misattributed to primary psychiatric illness or burnout.



1 HISTORY AND WORKLOAD:

Assess shift schedules, cumulative overtime, number of responses for volunteers, sleep patterns, head injuries, toxin exposures, and nutrition.



2 LABORATORY SCREENING:

Basic metabolic panel, fasting glucose/A1c, thyroid function tests, morning cortisol, vitamin D, magnesium, and hormones such as testosterone.



3 SLEEP AND AUTONOMICS:

Evaluate for sleep apnea, circadian rhythm disorders, HRV, and orthostatic vitals.



4 EXPOSURE-SPECIFIC TESTING:

Carboxyhemoglobin levels for CO, neurocognitive testing for TBI, thyroid screening for PFAS exposure.



5 MULTIDISCIPLINARY REFERRAL:

Integrate occupational medicine, sleep medicine, nutrition, sports-concussion clinics, and behavioral health.

5 to-dos

Given the overlap between physiology and psychology, clinicians working with first responders should adopt a structured evaluation framework. This approach ensures reversible biological contributors are ruled out before assigning purely psychiatric diagnoses.

Policy and Cultural Implications

Addressing physiology is not only a clinical imperative but a systems issue. Agencies must recognize the hidden biological toll of shift work and operational exposures.

SCHEDULING REFORMS: Minimize quick turnarounds and provide protected sleep opportunities.

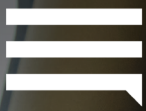
NUTRITION POLICIES: Educate on the importance of bloodwork and vitamin and mineral deficiencies, provide nutrition education, and provide electrolyte replacement strategies during heat operations.

EXPOSURE CONTROLS: Monitor PFAS in gear, enforce CO monitoring, and provide neurocognitive follow-ups after significant exposures.

SCREENING PROTOCOLS: Annual endocrine, sleep, and autonomic assessments for shift-work personnel.

INTEGRATED WELLNESS: Combine peer support and mental health services with occupational and physiological screening.

By viewing firefighter wellness as encompassing both mind and body, agencies can lower misdiagnosis rates, enhance treatment effectiveness, and boost personnel's quality of life, paving the way for long, healthy careers. **C**



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BUT THE NEED BEHIND
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FEATURES:

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**SERVINGS PER CONTAINER:
DEPENDS ON HOW WRONG
YOU WERE**



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NATURE...
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CONFIDENCE**



CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

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THE SILVER LINING WITH

TOXIC BOSSSES

By Frank Viscuso, Deputy Chief (ret), Author

75%

OF WORKERS WHO
VOLUNTARILY LEFT THEIR
JOBS DID
SO BECAUSE
OF THEIR

bosses,

NOT

THE POSITION
ITSELF.

I was once asked to speak about stress management to municipal workers from 11 counties at an annual leadership luncheon. During a conversation with the event organizer, I wanted more specifics, so I asked him to elaborate on the type of stress he meant.

“Not critical incident stress management. We would like you to talk about stress in the workplace. You know, the type of stress that comes from ...” There was a lengthy pause.

I sensed he was hesitant to say what he wanted to, so I thought I would help him out.

“Bad bosses?”
“Exactly,” he confirmed.

A couple of months later, I stood before a room of 120 administrative officers, clerks, and department heads to deliver a 45-minute presentation titled “**Stress Management: Preventing and Avoiding Mental and Physical Burnout.**”

I began by discussing common sources of workplace stress.

- **LOW SALARIES**
- **EXCESSIVE WORKLOADS**
- **LACK OF SOCIAL SUPPORT**
- **WORK THAT IS NOT ENGAGING OR CHALLENGING**
- **INEQUALITY IN RESPONSIBILITIES**
- **FEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH OR ADVANCEMENT**



I asked if anyone in the room wanted to add anything to the list. One municipal government employee with 35 years in the books raised his hand. When I called on him, he quickly blurted out,

“POOR LEADERSHIP, ORGANIZATIONAL DYSFUNCTION, NO POSITIVE FEEDBACK, LACK OF DIRECTION, DRAMA, FEELING UNDERAPPRECIATED, AND LACK OF FAIRNESS.”

“Wow, did you rehearse that?” I asked.

Many of the other attendees laughed.

“No,” he replied, “but I’ve lived it for 35 years.”

I asked whether any of the other audience members felt the same way, **and more than 90% of the attendees raised their hands.**

UNFORTUNATELY, BAD BOSSES OR POOR MANAGEMENT CREATE TOXIC CULTURES, WHICH ARE COMMON IN THE WORKPLACE.

This occurs everywhere, even in the fire service, which has often been referred to as the greatest job on Earth.

Most polls in America rank firefighting among the top professions for career satisfaction. This is why many in that profession find it interesting that, **in recent years, there appears to be a growing number of firefighters who seem bitter, frustrated, and sometimes disgruntled,** to the point that they begin counting down the days to retirement many months, and sometimes years, before they are eligible.

I spoke with members of one fire department who estimated that 15% of their members, most of their veteran core, left the job before they originally intended. One member told me their team was consumed with drama. He said many of his co-workers regularly made statements such as, **“I don’t care anymore” and “I give up.”**

HE ALSO MADE A POINT OF STRESSING THAT, IN HIS OPINION, THE BROTHERHOOD WAS DEAD.

As I dug deeper into this with him, it became abundantly clear **that his frustration had little to do with a “lack of brotherhood” and everything to do with poor leadership.**

This individual eventually admitted to me that he agreed firefighting was the greatest job on Earth, but at the same time, he was still counting down the days until he could leave what he described as a **“toxic, soul-killing environment.”**

During our group discussion, it became abundantly clear that most members of that organization loved their jobs **but attributed their discontent to poor leadership and management.**

LET THAT SINK IN FOR A MOMENT. THEY LOVE THE JOB BUT WANT TO LEAVE IT.

My conversation with these firefighters reminded me that **people leave managers, not companies.** In fact, researchers at Gallup, Inc. (an American research-based global performance-management consulting company), **reported that 75% of workers who voluntarily left their jobs did so because of their bosses, not the position itself.**

LEADERS WHO MICROMANAGE OR MAKE THEIR DECISIONS BASED ON FEAR, GREED, OR EGO OFTEN CREATE A STRESSFUL WORKING ENVIRONMENT.

Chances are, most people in leadership positions inherit a certain level of stress by the nature of their job. So they certainly would not want any additional, unnecessary stress that comes from a bad supervisor. It is for that same reason that you do not want to be the individual who creates that stress within your team through faulty leadership.

Unnecessary workplace stress is never a good thing. **When we feel stress, our bodies release cortisol.** Cortisol is known as the fight-or-flight hormone. It lets you know when you are in danger; **however, too much of it can impair rational thinking and decision-making.**

IF YOU WORK IN A TOXIC CULTURE, YOU ARE BIOLOGICALLY MORE LIKELY TO MAKE DECISIONS THAT CAN LEAD TO BAD OUTCOMES.

Do you want a bad outcome or a good one?

Yes, that was a stupid question; however, we see it all the time – **a team of talented people being led by an individual who puts me before we.**

If you worked for a person like that – good. I’m glad you’ve had that experience, **because there is one silver lining with bad bosses.** You can learn just as much from them as you can from the good ones.

YOU CAN LEARN WHAT NOT TO DO. C

WEARABLE
EEGs THAT
TRACK
COGNITIVE
CHANGES
COULD IMPACT
EVERYDAY
DECISION-
MAKING

HOW

TECHNOLOGY

IS TRANSFORMING
OUR UNDERSTANDING
OF BRAIN HEALTH

By Nolan Beise, PhD, CEO Circl Brain Health Metrics

For years, first responders have tracked physical health using objective indicators – resting heart rate, heart rate variability, sleep efficiency, and physical strain. **These tools offer early insight into how the body is functioning and recovering.** But until recently, we haven't had a similar set of tools to monitor brain function in everyday life.

That's starting to change.

For more than 60 years, scientists have been measuring brainwaves – tiny electrical signals generated by

neural activity. They've used it to study everything from attention and fatigue to emotional regulation and sleep quality. This has mostly been done in academic or medical settings, using complex equipment operated by trained specialists.

BUT JUST AS ELECTROCARDIOGRAMS (EKGs) MADE THEIR WAY FROM HOSPITALS INTO SMARTWATCHES, BRAINWAVE -SENSING TECHNOLOGY IS NOW BEGINNING TO EMERGE IN WELLNESS -ORIENTED WEARABLE DEVICES.

These developments are powered by advances in computing power, battery life, and sensor miniaturization.

Brainwaves reflect how alert, calm, focused, or fatigued we are. By using electroencephalography (EEG) – a technique for measuring brain electrical activity – researchers can detect subtle shifts in mental state long before they become noticeable to the person experiencing them.

Until recently, this kind of monitoring was limited to labs and clinics. **But wearable EEG devices are now**

becoming more accessible, lightweight, and user-friendly.

THEY'RE BEING DEVELOPED FOR EVERYDAY USE – NOT AS DIAGNOSTIC TOOLS, BUT AS WELLNESS AIDS DESIGNED TO HELP USERS UNDERSTAND THEIR MENTAL STATE OVER TIME.

That's particularly significant for high-stress professions like firefighting, where maintaining mental sharpness and resilience is critical, **but where invisible signs of fatigue or burnout can be hard to catch early.**

This shift mirrors earlier transitions in health technology. Devices that once required a hospital visit – like pulse oximeters or heart rate monitors – are now common in consumer fitness tools. **The same trajectory is beginning for brain health.**

For example, using a National Science Foundation grant, researchers at the University of Pennsylvania developed a headband EEG. That work began in 2017 and has included testing on college and professional athletes. Now it is refined to a point where it can be used in a health-care setting or at home, the researchers say.

“ABOUT 40% OF COLLEGE-GOING STUDENTS ARE ANXIOUS OR DEPRESSED IN THE U.S. THIS IS A STAGGERING NUMBER.” ONE OF THE DEVELOPERS SAID IN A PENN TODAY ARTICLE.

The challenge is that people aren't often self-aware regarding their own mental health situation, he adds. Backed by a Brain & Behavior Research Foundation grant, the Platt Labs team is working on a take-home kit that includes games and the portable EEG, which could objectively track several days of a person's emotional peaks and valleys. An already-completed lab component showed that Platt's team **could identify**

participant levels of anxiety with about 84% accuracy using novel algorithms that combined EEG-based features with heart rate variability and skin conductance, the article went on to say.

RATHER THAN DIAGNOSING CONDITIONS, THESE NEW TOOLS HELP TRACK COGNITIVE CHANGES OVER TIME.

That could mean weekly check-ins to see how your focus, recovery, or stress response is shifting. **Over time, they help build a personal baseline – offering early warnings when something is trending in the wrong direction.**

This can be particularly valuable in professions like firefighting, where stress and sleep disruption are common and where mental fatigue may accumulate gradually. Catching those changes early doesn't mean taking drastic action – it may simply mean adjusting sleep, recovery routines, or workload before problems develop.

THE GOAL ISN'T PERFECTION – IT'S AWARENESS.

Some of this technology is already on the market. Search through Amazon and you'll find a range of neurosensing headbands that can cost more than \$500.

Here is what researchers who reviewed studies comparing wearable EEG devices one could use at home with technology now used in health-care settings said in a 2024 paper.

“The findings revealed a breadth of applications across mental health, neurological, sleep, and pain disorders using primarily consumer-grade EEG headsets that provided reasonable signal fidelity. **However, there is still work remaining in terms of improving device usability, validating their performance against lab-based protocols, and ensuring ethical data practices.**”



PROACTIVE MENTAL FITNESS

Just as people train their bodies to stay strong and reduce injury risk, cognitive fitness can also be built and maintained. Early data from brain-monitoring devices **can inform decisions about sleep, nutrition, training, or downtime.**

RATHER THAN RELYING ON HOW WE FEEL, USERS CAN MAKE INFORMED ADJUSTMENTS BASED ON ACTUAL PATTERNS IN BRAIN ACTIVITY.

This kind of proactive approach doesn't replace therapy, medical care, or peer support. Instead, it adds another layer – **giving individuals more data about how they're doing and what's helping or hindering their recovery and performance.** For first responders, where the margin for error is slim, this kind of self-knowledge can be a valuable tool for long-term health.

The emergence of these tools is part of a broader trend: **health care and wellness are moving closer to the individual.** As technology becomes more powerful and portable, it's increasingly possible to catch issues early, track progress over time, and make informed choices before small problems become big ones.

For firefighters, staying mentally sharp isn't just about surviving the job – it's about performing well and recovering well. **It's about knowing when to push and when to pull back.** The brain, like any other vital organ, gives us signs. **The difference now is that we can start to hear them more clearly.**

Mental wellness has always been a part of operational readiness. **What's changing now is how we measure, understand, and act on it.** **C**

what they didn't tell you about feedback

By Jenn Dawkins, Captain / Training Officer at Vancouver Fire Rescue Services, FSWBC (Society), Sessional Instructor JIBC

HOW TO GIVE IT,
RECEIVE IT, AND
USE IT LIKE A GIFT

On the fireground, feedback comes fast; it is often blunt and delivered without concern for feelings. It can be emotionally charged. Some leaders have a better grasp of this than others.

In the firehouse, we often see that fireground feedback style still at work. Forcing a door, establishing a water supply, or even rig placement are immediate and often critical tasks. Firehouse chores are not; no life or property depends on how well the bathroom is cleaned.

Conversely, that non-emergency feedback can be anything but clear and concise. Yet, over the long run, high-quality feedback in the firehouse is critical for the health of the members and the department.

Have you ever submitted a report and only received a simple "well done," leaving you unsure about what actually went well – or what could've been better? Maybe you taught a training

class that seemed to go fine, only to hear later that some team members felt rushed. Or perhaps you've been complimented with a vague "great job on the project," but were left wondering what specifically stood out.

In each of these moments, meaningful feedback could have provided clarity, and helped guide future improvement.

We've all been on the receiving end of vague praise or unclear criticism – and left wondering what actually mattered. But real feedback isn't just about evaluation. When given with intention and clarity, it becomes one of the most powerful tools we have for growth, trust, and connection.

Recently, I was asked how I'd handle negative feedback in a 360-degree evaluation. That question prompted me to reflect on the importance of feedback overall. And here's what I've come to believe: feedback is a gift.

Why Feedback Matters

Feedback is a powerful motivator. It offers insight into how we're doing – what's working, what isn't, and where we can grow. **It's not just about correction; it's about connection, improvement, and support.**

Both positive and negative feedback serve a purpose. Positive feedback acknowledges our accomplishments and reinforces behaviors that contribute to success. Negative feedback – when delivered constructively – helps us identify gaps, improve our skills, and overcome challenges. Together, they drive engagement, growth, and stronger outcomes in all areas of life.

Think back to a time you took an exam but didn't know which questions you got wrong. Or maybe you were told a fire drill didn't go well, but weren't given any specifics. Frustrating, right? Now think of a moment when someone praised your work with clear, thoughtful words – that feeling probably stayed with you and encouraged you to keep going.

Feedback, like any skill, requires preparation and intention. It's important to focus on the work – not the person – and to avoid broad labels like "wrong." Instead, offer feedback with kindness, clarity, and specifics, including what was done well.

Unfortunately, when feedback feels personal or vague, it can shut people down instead of lifting them up.

The 3 U's of Discipline

A helpful framework to keep feedback grounded is the 3 U's. Understanding which "U" applies allows leaders, instructors, and supervisors to tailor feedback appropriately – and fairly.

UNKNOWING

Is the person unaware that the task needs to be done?

UNWILLING

Do they know and have the ability, but choose not to act?

UNABLE

Do they lack the skill or resources to do it?

A Simple Feedback Model

Here's a feedback structure that can make conversations more productive:

- ✓ Ask how they think it went. Most people are already aware of what didn't go well. Starting here sets a collaborative tone.
- ✓ Ask what they might do differently. This invites reflection – and opens the door for you to offer insight.
- ✓ Share your feedback using the guidelines in the sidebar. Be honest, kind, and specific. The goal is improvement, not perfection.

What About 360-Degree Feedback?

Multi-rater, or 360-degree feedback, is a well-rounded approach to performance evaluation. It collects input from a range of people – supervisors, peers, team members, even self-assessments – to offer a full view of someone's skills, behaviors, and impact.

Whereas a 360-degree size-up on the fireground involves generally one officer moving around the entire scene, **360-degree feedback is having the entire scene converge on the individual** – much like the incident commander getting regular scene sector reports.

It's valuable because we don't always see ourselves clearly. Multiple perspectives help us

identify blind spots, confirm strengths, and gain a more complete picture of our impact – personally and professionally.

Feedback can show up in many forms: a casual compliment, a thoughtful critique, or a formal review process. What matters most is how we give it – and how we receive it.

When done with care, feedback builds trust. It encourages growth. It strengthens teams. **And when we treat feedback as a gift – whether we're offering it or receiving it – we create space for honest conversation, self-awareness, and long-term success.**



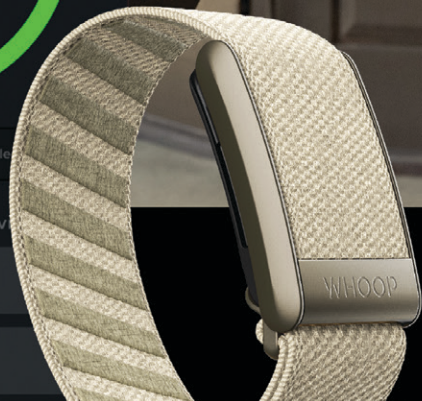
guidelines for giving effective feedback

Here are 10 principles that help feedback land constructively:

1. **BE SPECIFIC:** Share clear observations with examples.
2. **FOCUS ON BEHAVIOR, NOT THE PERSON:** Keep the conversation about actions, not personality.
3. **BE TIMELY:** The sooner feedback follows the action, the more relevant and effective it becomes.
4. **BALANCE POSITIVES AND OPPORTUNITIES:** Recognize strengths alongside areas for improvement.
5. **USE "I" STATEMENTS (BUT DON'T OVERDO IT):** Speak from your perspective – "I noticed ..." or "I felt ..."
6. **OFFER SUGGESTIONS OR ALTERNATIVES:** Feedback should guide forward progress.
7. **ENCOURAGE DIALOGUE:** Make space for two-way conversation.
8. **BE MINDFUL OF THE ENVIRONMENT:** Choose an appropriate setting.
9. **WATCH YOUR TONE:** Empathy and respect go a long way.
10. **FOLLOW UP:** Check in after some time has passed. **C**

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ALONE AT THE TOP

STEPS TO OFF-SET THE **ISOLATING EFFECTS** OF FIRE SERVICE LEADERSHIP

By Jason Corthell, Division Chief, CEO, Ironclad Wellness

WE HEAR IT OFTEN: **IT IS LONELY AT THE TOP.**

And nowhere is that more true than in the fire service. Being a fire service leader has its advantages, which is why so many of us seek it out. **It also has its pitfalls, isolation chief among them.**

This unique role presents numerous challenges, including constant needs to be met and high-pressure decisions that affect an entire organization, causing significant stress and impacting mental well-being.

Fire service leadership uniquely demands operational readiness, political navigation, training, budget management, and community relations, to name a few. Chief

officers undoubtedly hold the most responsibility for both firefighters' and civilians' lives, creating periods of immense psychological, physical, and physiological stress.

Self-sacrificing leaders often take poor care of themselves, feeling they must uphold a stoic culture resistant to acknowledging vulnerability and seeking help. While the progress is evident, and I have witnessed it firsthand through my travels as a national speaker, this job's demanding nature unfairly prioritizes operational needs over leaders' well-being, hindering their mental wellness.

The age-old myth of needing to appear strong prevents our folks from seeking the necessary support. Chief officers struggle with challenges in

seeking treatment due to insufficient information, misaligned priorities, and limited knowledge of relevant mental wellness issues affecting the fire service. Historically, training from the fire academy has emphasized self-sufficiency and fixing problems for others, rather than for ourselves as responders, which may, in turn, be part of the issue in addressing concerns with our leaders.

The operational model within the fire service can be described as spontaneous or automatic: when the bell sounds, our personnel rush to the scene, address the issue, and then return to the station, resuming their day. This reactive approach is ingrained throughout our lives as responders, often spanning many years.

However, once in a leadership role, it requires a shift toward a preventative and proactive approach. Just as chief officers must focus on things like building codes, inspection programs and community education to reduce incidents, leaders must prioritize their own mental wellness needs, as well as those of others. This can be challenging for many, particularly more veteran leaders, who are accustomed to putting the needs of others before their own.

THE CULTURE OF SELFLESSNESS, WHILE VITAL TO OUR JOBS, CAN BECOME A MASSIVE HURDLE TO ADDRESSING OUR PERSONAL WELL-BEING.

Fire service leaders face drastic shifts from being part of a crew or shift and inevitably find themselves at fewer social events, and with no more clique biases. **This transition from friend to boss can strain relationships.** Constant availability, a five-day work week, stress, and emotional dissolution from crisis exposure all impact family life, as well. This fuels a sense of isolation.

The weight of leadership is heavy, sometimes crippling, and can make a leader feel responsible for the success or failure of a mission and their people's well-being. This burden is often worn personally, adding to the mental toll. Fear of criticism further isolates leaders, and keeps them from seeking support.

Early warning signs can range from irritability, sleep disturbances, and detachment, signaling burnout, which impacts performance and morale. **Putting mental health first is crucial, yet resistance to change remains a significant challenge in the fire service.**

The consequences of high and unresolved stress extend far beyond the actions of that person. **A leader's impaired well-being has a trickle-down effect that touches every facet, from response times to employee motivation and overall organizational effectiveness.** Addressing these instances requires an approach that places leadership wellness and facilitation at the same level for the entire organization, emphasizing individual well-being and organizational health, no matter what position or rank is held.



Open dialogue on mental wellness is crucial for fostering well-being in leadership roles, especially for fire chiefs. Leading by example is the single most powerful action one can take, followed by initiating and participating in conversations to destigmatize stress and trauma. This creates a nurturing culture where seeking help is encouraged, not just allowed.



We must also prioritize **realistic self-care**, integrating it into our demanding schedules. As firefighters, we deal in extremes. Yet, crash dieting and a half-marathon next week are impractical if walking upstairs leaves you out of breath. Similarly, overwhelming yourself with support groups and daily counseling may not be practical.

Set achievable goals, establish new routines. Minimal determination can enhance time management and direction, creating self-care space without extra pressure. Implementing small, consistent change leads to significant improvements in mental well-being over time.



Networking and support systems are fantastic for fire service leaders. Formal peer support, mentorship, and therapy are great tools to help leaders navigate these challenges. A supportive tribe, both at work and at home, reduces isolation and equips leaders to better manage on and off the job pressures more efficiently.

Organizations that embed proactive care from the jump, through programs in upper-level conferences and initiatives, generate a strong culture of leadership wellness. This, in turn, empowers those in charge to manage their mental well-being effectively from the early stages

of their journey. A pre-emptive approach is key to building a resilient leadership team, just like it is in building a fire-resistant community

Isolation doesn't have to be a cost of leadership in the fire service. C

FRANK LEEB ON PURPOSE

By Rick Markley, Executive Editor,
CRACKYL Magazine



Editor's note: In 2025, Frank Leeb joined CRACKYL as a senior advisor. And while it may seem like a blatant self-promotion to feature him on the cover (and there was a long, hard internal debate on if and how to treat this), Leeb's contributions to the

*fire service outweighed those concerns. In the end, we had always planned to feature him, but he formally joined the team before we could do so. And while there's no turning back the clock, **it would have been a greater disservice not to share his story.***





FDNY PROBATIONARY SCHOOL GRADUATION IN 1992.

If the fire service were a dark, cloudless night sky, it would be full of stars.

Some would be so faint you could barely make them out with the naked eye. Some would have shined bright a long time ago and are now faded. Some would have flashed and exploded suddenly. Others still would be slowly growing in intensity. **And some would simply outshine the rest.**

THE ONES YOU JUST COULDN'T TAKE YOUR EYES OFF. FRANK LEEB IS ONE OF THOSE STARS.

Scientists in the U.S are building a special-purpose observatory to calibrate about 10 of the brightest stars. From that they can measure any star's brightness. Astronomers use the term "standard candles" for fixed points against which star brightness is measured.

In the fire service, our measurements aren't so precise, yet we can still discern between the genuinely bright stars, the dim ones, and the shooting comets. For us, the standard candles could be built around something like this: **purposeful, driven, intellectually curious, passionate, grateful, compassionate,**

and committed. And here's how Leeb lines up with those measuring points.

In 1983, Leeb joined the East Farmingdale Fire Department as a cadet on Long Island, N.Y. When he was old enough to become a full-fledged volunteer firefighter for the department, he did just that. He remains an active volunteer today; although, he admits to being less active than he once was.

He started two-hatting in 1992 when he joined FDNY.

There, he shot through the ranks in North America's largest fire department (second-largest in the world just behind Tokyo). He tested for and passed every promotional exam that came his way. He went back to school for a bachelor's degree, and later a master's degree. **He was there for 9/11 and the aftermath.** He deployed to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

BY THE TIME HE RETIRED FROM FDNY IN 2024, HE HAD RISEN TO ASSISTANT DEPUTY CHIEF AND HAD OVERSEEN THE DEPARTMENT'S FIRE ACADEMY, TRAINING, AND SAFETY.

Shortly after Leeb retired from FDNY, the Gettin' Salty podcast did something interesting.



LEEBS AS A YOUNG LIEUTENANT FOR ENGINE 324 IN 2003.

They did a *This is Your Life*-type episode, where a long list of guests came on partly to bust Leeb's chops **and partly to recall the most profound things about him as a person and a firefighter.** Several had been in promotional exam study groups with Leeb and talked about how driven he was in the group, and how as soon as one exam was cleared, he pushed to get ready for the next.

When you strive for things – be it getting through fire academy, a promotion exam, a graduate degree or a book launch – failure lurks around every corner.

EXPERTS WILL TELL YOU IT IS NOT IF YOU FAIL, BUT HOW YOU FAIL.

"The way I process failure has evolved over time. To be clear, I don't like to fail, and that has always shaped how seriously I take it," Leeb says.

"THE BIGGEST SHIFT CAME WHEN I LEARNED TO TURN FAILURE INTO ACTION, USING IT AS MOTIVATION FOR IMPROVEMENT."

That change happened organically in the fire service, **driven by a constant desire to be better.**

"In training, I view failure as an opportunity to improve, to identify gaps and prepare. On the fireground, however, my mindset is different. **I do everything possible to prevent failure.**

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

The approach there is to play to win; failure is not an option. **Lives, including our own, depend on our ability to perform.**"

Of course our standard-candles yardstick doesn't start and stop at the firehouse door. **Leeb has become a force in the fire service health and wellness arenas.** Seriously, try going to any health and wellness conference without bumping into Leeb – you can't do it, not happening; **he's pretty much everywhere.**

Shortly before retiring, he took the helm of the First Responder Center for Excellence, an affiliate of the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation **that focuses on education, and death and injury prevention.** He's authored two books, serves on countless boards and committees (UL Fire Safety Research Institute, NFPA, and Science to the Station, to name just three). He's a vendor, teacher, speaker – often the keynote – at, again, nearly every industry health and wellness event.

Oh, and we need to add one more to our measurement: **humility.** We've all run across the FIG JAMer (F*ck, I'm Great, Just Ask Me) in our lives. They instantly lose brightness points on our standard candle scale.

To say Leeb was hesitant to do this interview is ... well ... an understatement. He'll talk to anyone and everyone for hours about the fire service, how to make it better, and the amazing job others are doing to get us there. **Talk about himself? That took a bit of convincing.**

So just what the hell is burning inside this star that makes it shine so bright, that makes him achieve so much? **The short, simple answer is purpose.**

"I LOVE THE FIRE SERVICE," HE SAYS. "I HAVE GIVEN SO MUCH TO THE FIRE SERVICE, BUT I TELL YOU WHAT, I HAVE GOTTEN WAY MORE BACK.

"If you love the fire service and the people, the fire



VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTER LEEB STRETCHING A LINE AT A CARWASH FIRE IN 2018. PHOTO BY STEVEN PFOST JR.

service and the people will love you back. Not every day, but they will love you back. **I can't even really put into words what I've gotten from the fire service."**

He credits amazing role models both inside and outside FDNY for the successes he's had along the way. He then quickly shifts back to what powers his pink-toy-bunny-with-a-drum drive.

"I don't recall struggling with imposter syndrome or anything like that," Leeb says. "I always put in the sets and reps to prepare for the rank I was moving into, and I was motivated at every rank to get better. **I was really a learning sponge."**

Because?

"WHAT I DID FEEL WAS THE WEIGHT OF RESPONSIBILITY TO TAKE CARE OF MY FIREFIGHTERS," HE SAYS.

"They know I cared for them and that I put in the work to be the best I could be. At the highest ranks of the FDNY, the staff chief rank, which is a top-20 position within the organization,

requires a lot of time. **You are rarely off duty.**

"HOWEVER, THESE POSITIONS COME WITH THE POWER TO CHANGE THE ORGANIZATION, WHICH WAS A MOTIVATING FACTOR FOR ME.

"It is an opportunity to give back to the organization that has been so good to me. The opportunity to work in training and move the needle on initiatives that impact the health, wellness, and safety of firefighters was extremely important to me."

HE'S SAID MORE THAN ONCE THAT IF HE LIVES TO BE 150, HE STILL WOULDN'T BE ABLE TO GO TO ENOUGH FIRES TO SATISFY HIS LOVE FOR THE JOB.

Yet for someone who loves the job as much as he does, Leeb gets that there is more to it than just the job. **There's quality of life and longevity.** And so part of his drive is the urgency to leave the fire service better than he found it.

"Our generation of firefighters, we will be judged," he says.



LEEBS INSTRUCTING AT THE FDNY FIRE ACADEMY, WHICH HE OVERSAW.

"We will be judged on how well we did in mitigating the cancer risk to our firefighters and how well we handled the mental health crisis. Again, we're a microcosm of society, but how are we handling it differently?"

That level of hard-charging – year after year, decade after decade – is of course, more than sheer willpower. **It is deliberation, planning, choices and sacrifices.** Leeb says he's made sleep and diet top priorities. He's deliberate in how and when he drinks alcohol – none on the eve he's about to present (he owes it to event attendees to bring his A-game), and not enough to jack up his sleep on days he's not presenting. He exercises every day, whether at home or on the road. He's learned to maximize his time by getting tasks done while traveling. **And he's learned to say no to things that don't align with his purpose.**

"At this stage in my career, at this stage in my life,



IN 2017, LEEB SPOKE AT THE TALL BUILDINGS CONFERENCE IN LONDON.

I don't do anything that I don't think is worth it, that is off-brand," he says. **"I'm not looking to waste my time."**

IN SHORT, HE SAYS, IT IS ABOUT KNOWING WHAT MATTERS AND FOCUSING ON THAT. THERE SIMPLY ISN'T ENOUGH TIME AND ENERGY IN LIFE TO FRITTER IT AWAY ON POINTLESS THINGS.

And we've left off one more important standard candles measure: **resiliency.** Yeah, yeah, yeah, we all need it

to keep us out of survive mode and in thrive mode. But consider all the tragedy and trauma you would encounter running with and leading the country's biggest fire department. Add into that history book events like 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina. Then pile on the stress of hard charging through your career. **You better have a plan for how to bounce back.**

"In the fire service, you see so much heartbreak, both in those we are sworn to protect and inside the job, as well," Leeb says. "It is the team you work with that helps you get through it all. **The kitchen table is a magical place.**

"We also know that sometimes, despite our best efforts, we do not always get the outcome we desire. But that must never be due to a lack of preparation. **It is my preparation and that of my teams that has made me better able to cope with the outcomes from a mental standpoint.**

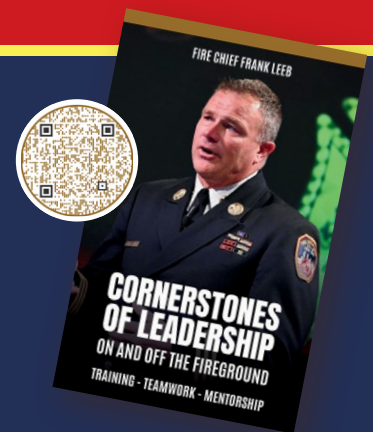
"Another thing that worked for me after a particularly disturbing incident, perhaps where a child or family died in a fire, is that I **typically did not read about the incident or watch it on the news.** Reading or watching the news made it personal, and when that happened, it bothered me more.

"There have been many incidents and experiences where I know I left a piece of me at the scene or hospital.



GET MORE FRANK LEEB

Here you can find all of Frank Leeb's published articles, videos, podcasts, FDNY training tips and a whole lot more!



Check out his first book, *Cornerstones of Leadership: On and Off the Fireground*



Check out the book he co-authored with Billy Goldfeder, *30 Fires You Must Know.*



LEEBS DELIVERS THE KEYNOTE ADDRESS AT FIREHOUSE EXPO IN 2022.

A QUICK SELF-CHECK DISGUISED AS A BREAK

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"EXERCISE AND BEING AROUND PEOPLE WHO YOU CARE FOR AND WHO CARE FOR YOU DO WONDERS TO HELP WHEN STRESS OR EMOTIONS ARE HIGH.

"And of course, your family, you need support outside the job, **and nobody is better than family.**"

Like many high achievers, family is one of Leeb's load-bearing walls. **He says he focuses on being as present as he can when home and looks for ways to include them in work projects, such as his first book. And yet for someone who says he has very few regrets in life, he knows he's sacrificed important family time for his career.** And he knows family life can be fragile.

Bobby Leeb was Frank's brother, older by 10 years. He led Frank into the fire service, mentored him,

and fought fire next to him. **Then he died, suddenly, at the too-young age of 36.**

"He was 10 years older, so he was the guy, right? He would take me after school to go hit a baseball at the field or just do anything. He would go to different events and would always have me tag along.

"THAT I'M A NEW YORK CITY FIREFIGHTER IS BECAUSE OF MY BROTHER, BECAUSE HE INTRODUCED ME TO THE FIRE SERVICE AT SUCH A YOUNG AGE."

Bobby Leeb had a heart problem he was unaware of. He was out one morning, it was a Thursday, when he went into cardiac arrest. **No one performed CPR.**

"When I went to the Naval Postgraduate School for my master's, I wound

up writing about out-of-hospital cardiac arrest and the survival rates – something that was so off topic for me," Leeb says. "I initially wanted to write about the FDNY fire and EMS merger. **I was really glad I did the topic that I did. I dedicated my thesis to my brother.**

"Early quality CPR makes a difference. **There's a huge variation in different parts of the country on if you go into cardiac arrest out of a hospital, whether you're going to live or die.**

"I miss him every day ... to have one more conversation on the back step of the apparatus with him and to discuss a fire. **I was fortunate to learn a lot from him, to have many different fires with him.** I'm grateful for that, but I'm also sad that I don't have more of those opportunities with him."

Unlike astronomers gazing up, we don't improve our understanding of what it means to be a firefighter by comparing ourselves to the brightest or dimmest stars.

We gaze upon the bright stars to motivate us to live and work better, and to provide guidance on how to get there. And it is the really bright stars who set aside their humility to help others navigate their journey across life's sky. **C**



MEET NYSAFC

Back in 1904, 60 fire chiefs from across New York formed the New York State Association of Fire Chiefs. The group has since grown beyond its stateliness. Now it has more than 10,000 members from 34 states (and three countries) and from all ranks and branches of the fire service. It also has members from the EMS and community risk reduction disciplines.

"They are an incredible group," Leeb says. "Their reach in the fire service is tremendous. I'm excited about the partnership with them where all of their members are going to get a subscription to CRACKYL Magazine." This will raise awareness of the areas where we have not done enough to protect our firefighters, Leeb adds.

That aligns with NYSAFC's goals. Boiled down, the group's goals are to improve first responder safety and wellness, reduce civilian death, injury and property loss, and promote legislation that benefits first responders and the communities they serve.

NYSAFC's crown jewel is its annual Fire Industry, Rescue and EMS Expo. This year's FIRE 2026 will be the association's 120th year of putting on the conference. Held in Syracuse, N.Y., from June 10–13, it will have seminars, hands-on training, and exhibitor space for products and services.



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HOW TO FAKE WELLNESS

By CRACKYL Editorial Team

LIKE A PRO

STEP 1:

MASTER THE 'THERAPY-LITE' BUZZWORDS

Start sentences with:

"I'm working on my boundaries."

"It's all about balance, right?"

"My therapist said ..."

Do you actually have a therapist or boundaries? No. But sprinkling in terms like "emotional bandwidth," "trauma response," or "self-regulation" will confuse just enough people into thinking you're in a good place.

Bonus: Misuse at least one of them in a meeting for dramatic effect.

SYSTEM BREAKDOWN:

This is a surface-level signal masking system-level drift. You're mimicking language from people doing the work, without embedding it into your process. Words are noise if they don't change your patterns.

TRY THIS:

Forget the script. Choose one word and tie it to an action. "Boundaries?" Say no to something. "Self-regulation?" Remove a reaction that burns you out. Speak less. Apply more.

STEP 2:

THE PERFECT INSTAGRAM WELLNESS POST

Find a photo of a lake. Or boots on a dock. Or your dog.

Caption: "Grateful for the stillness." You're actually at the cottage because your marriage is imploding, but no one needs to know that.

#FirefighterLife
#MentalHealthMatters
#ResilientAF

Now go scream into a pillow.

SYSTEM BREAKDOWN:

You're optimizing external perception while abandoning internal coherence. You've confused optics for outcome – managing image instead of managing your state.

TRY THIS:

Delete the caption. Use that moment to reflect, rather than perform. Ask yourself what you're avoiding by curating calm. Presence doesn't need a post.

THE FIREHOUSE GUIDE TO LOOKING EMOTIONALLY DIALED-IN WHILE SECRETLY FALLING APART

Wellness is trending harder than mustaches in November. Actually taking care of yourself sounds great in theory. But let's be honest – who has time for that when you've got a 72-hour shift, a busted shoulder you haven't told anyone about, and a pension countdown running in your head like a gameshow timer?

Don't worry. We've got you with this guide to looking like you've got your mental health together, without actually doing the work. And do be sure to not take any of this too seriously – it's a parody, after all. Now that the lawyers are happy, let the posing begin.

STEP 3:

TALK ABOUT SLEEP - A LOT

"I'm prioritizing sleep this year."

"Rest is key for recovery."

Meanwhile: doom scrolling until 2 a.m., pounding caffeine, and blaming your Fitbit.

SYSTEM BREAKDOWN:

You're intellectualizing a basic function while running a schedule that contradicts it. You're chasing a metric instead of owning your rhythm.

TRY THIS:

Control one variable tonight: the screen. Set a shutdown time. Nothing changes without input control. You don't need sleep data; you need sleep.

STEP 4:

BECOME THE 'SUPPORT GUY' WITHOUT SUPPORTING YOURSELF

You're the firehouse rock. The one they call. The one who never needs anything. Cool story. Until you quietly implode.

SYSTEM BREAKDOWN:

You've offloaded your emotional processing by over-functioning for others. You're outsourcing the work you won't do on yourself. It feels helpful. It's actually corrosive.

TRY THIS:

Turn your best advice inward. The next time you check on someone, ask: "Am I avoiding this same thing?" Mirror your mentorship. Apply your own protocol.



STEP 5:

PICK UP AN EXTRA SHIFT EVERY TIME THINGS GET TENSE

Marriage tense? Schedule a 24. Home's heavy? Grab a callback. Kids jerks? Stay hours after the vllie call ends to do equipment checks.

You say you're dedicated. You're actually disappearing in uniform.

SYSTEM BREAKDOWN:

This is workload-as-avoidance. You've weaponized duty to dodge discomfort. That's not loyalty, it's escape masked as sacrifice.

TRY THIS:

Say no once this month – and mean it. Invest that reclaimed time in the part of your life that doesn't wear turnout gear. Avoidance kills connection

STEP 6:

TELL YOUR SPOUSE, 'I DON'T WANT TO BURDEN YOU'

Sounds noble, right? But what you really mean is, "I don't trust myself to be vulnerable." What your spouse hears is, "You don't trust me." So you ghost behind good intentions.

SYSTEM BREAKDOWN:

You've reframed emotional avoidance as protection. But protecting others from your truth guarantees disconnection. That's an internal feedback loop gone silent.

TRY THIS:

Say something. Not everything. Start with, "It's been a lot lately." Let the door crack open. Connection starts before the full download.

STEP 7:

START A TATTOO SLEEVE AND CALL IT 'HEALING'

Therapist ghosted? Time for six hours of wolves, Roman numerals on a giant clock, a ship on stormy seas, and blackout shading. Now your trauma has shading – but no processing.

SYSTEM BREAKDOWN:

You externalized pain into ink. The story's on your arm, but it's still unsaid. You're archiving emotion instead of integrating it.

TRY THIS:

Tell someone what the art means. The tattoo isn't the therapy, it's the symbol. The shift happens when you put language to the wound.

STEP 8:

BUY A MOTORCYCLE TO PROCESS EMOTIONS AT TOP GEAR

You call it freedom. It's actually throttle therapy for trauma you won't name. You're not riding toward anything. You're running from something. Fast.

SYSTEM BREAKDOWN:

You've traded reflection for sensation. Movement as distraction. This is escapism that feels like clarity but delivers no structural reset.

TRY THIS:

Ride, sure. But log the thought you're avoiding every time you hit the ignition. The truth's not on the road, it's in the silence you're dodging.

STEP 9:

START MICRODOSING - SUPPLEMENTS

Now your cabinet looks like a pharmacy. You've biohacked your gut, optimized your brain, and still haven't cried in eight years.

SYSTEM BREAKDOWN:

You're engineering chemistry to fix what's emotional. It's tactical avoidance, not performance optimization. The protocol is spotless, but the human system is offline.

TRY THIS:

Keep the stack if it helps, but add one low-tech check-in. Write down how you feel before the pill. The awareness matters more than the compound.

STEP 10:

GET A DOG YOU CAN EMOTIONALLY PROJECT ONTO

You say he's a rescue. The truth is, you are. You talk to the dog more than your spouse. You've definitely whispered, "You're the only one who understands me."

SYSTEM BREAKDOWN:

You've outsourced emotional safety to something that can't challenge you. That's not healing, it's a controlled connection.

TRY THIS:

Love the dog. But bring one human into the loop. If your most honest conversations involve four paws, it's time to rewire your emotional risk threshold.



THIS ARTICLE WASN'T WRITTEN TO MOCK YOU; IT WAS WRITTEN TO REFLECT YOU.

Frame by frame, moment by moment, it shows what your internal dialogue might sound like when no one's watching. The second job you picked up. The extra shift you didn't need. The foam roller you haven't touched. Each one isn't just a behavior – it's a signal. A system running on survival mode, even if it looks like discipline from the outside.

These steps are meant to call you out, but more than that, they're meant to reveal what lies beneath the surface: the disconnect, the patterns, and the slow depletion of energy. Because when you can name the problem, you can fix the system. When you fix the system, you stop faking it – and finally start building a life that holds. **C**

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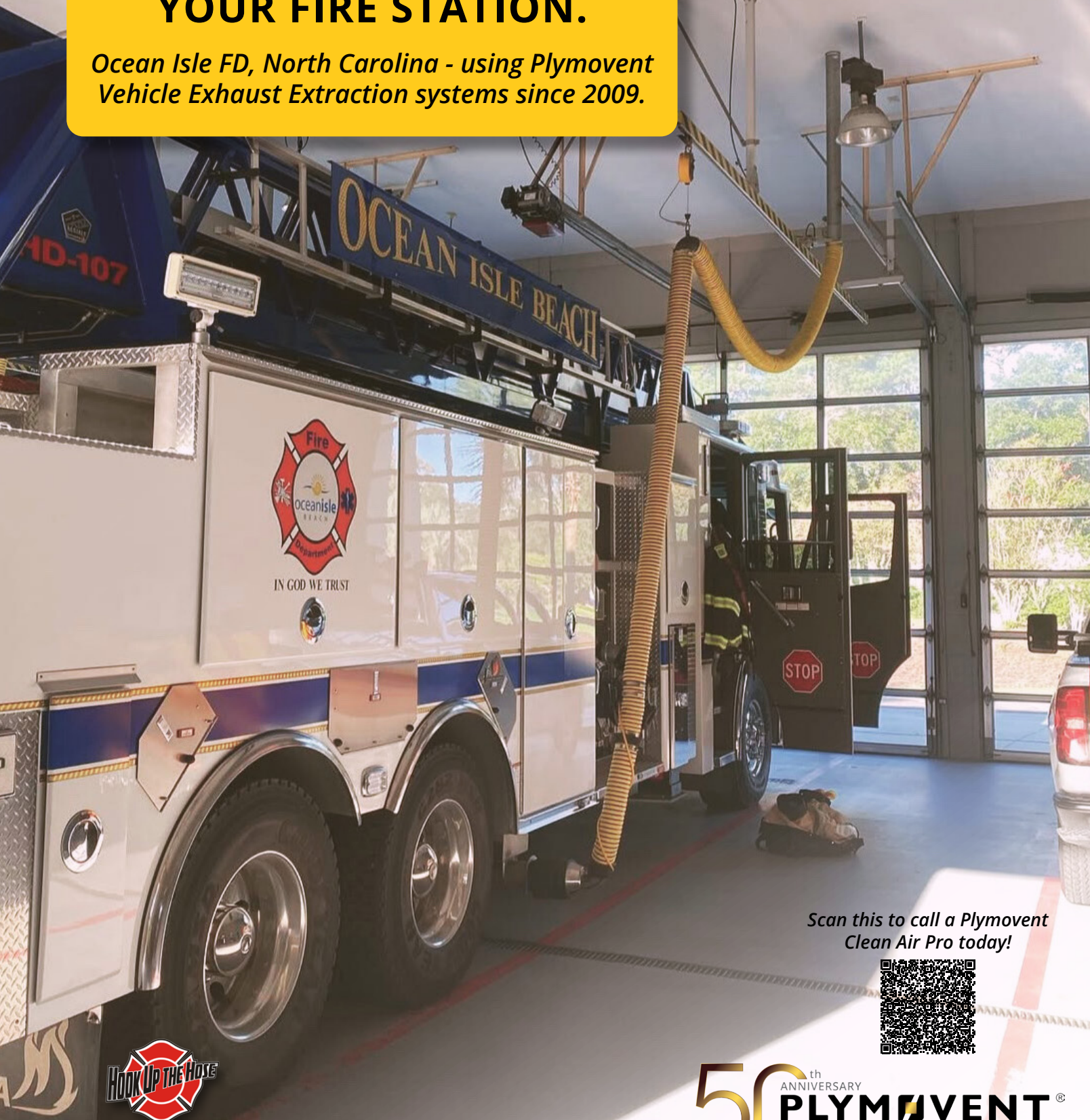
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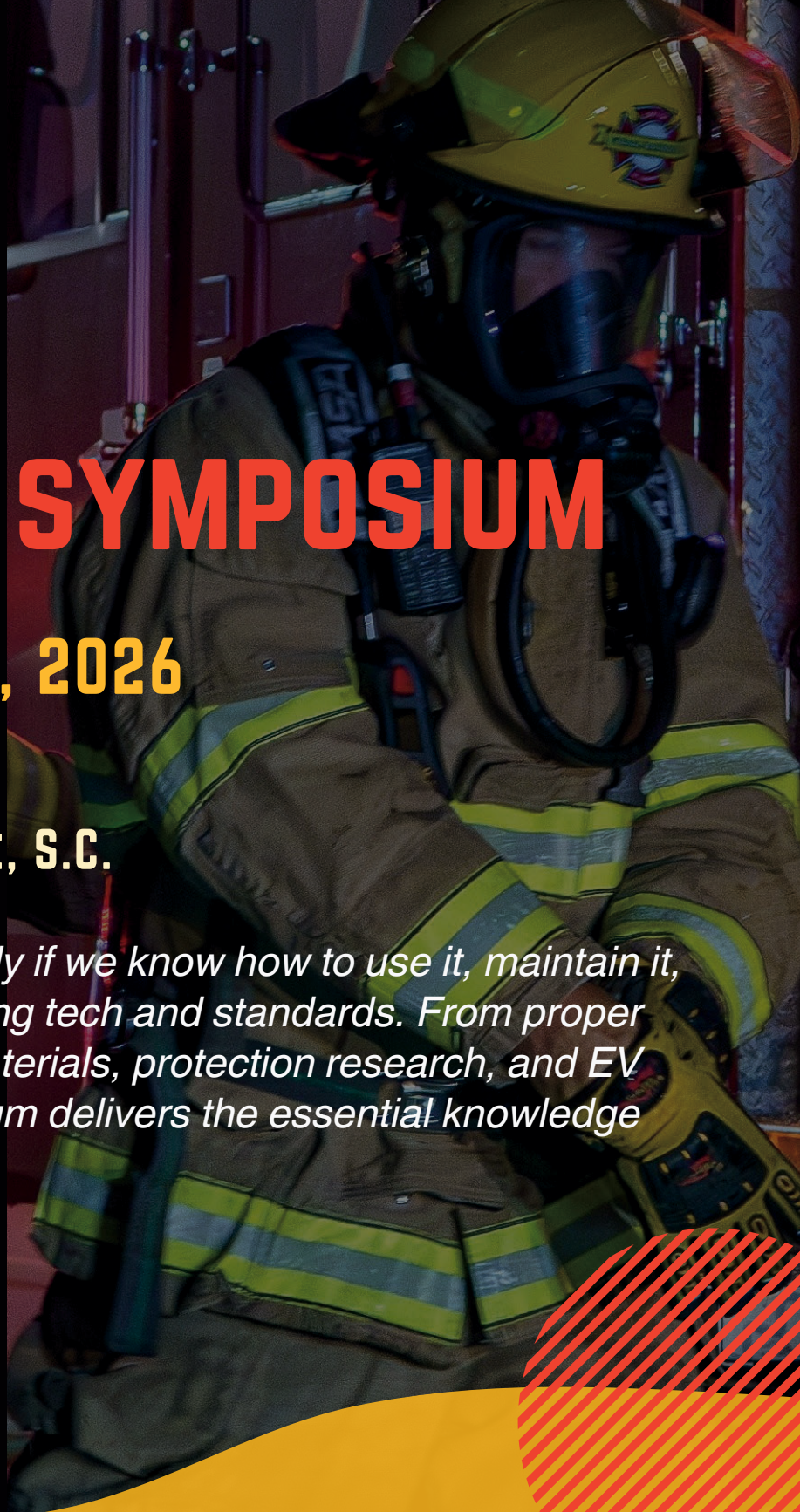


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HOW TO STAND UP FIREFIGHTER SAFETY STAND DOWN

LEARN MORE
ABOUT SAFETY
STAND DOWN
2026



By Deputy Fire Chief Darin Wallentine, Sarasota County Fire Department, Sarasota, FL IAFC Safety, Health, and Survival Section Vice-Chair

Every June, the fire service takes a collective pause for the annual Firefighter Safety Stand Down. **For one week, volunteer and career departments across North America focus on a single theme aimed at reducing line-of-duty deaths and injuries.** It's a reset button of sorts and an intentional moment to slow the tempo, reflect on how we operate, and **recommit to sending everyone home safely.**

But here's the truth: the success of the Firefighter Safety Stand Down lives or dies by the level of commitment

from the top. Fire chiefs set the tone, the pace, and the expectation. Without visible, genuine support from command, the week can easily devolve into a check-the-box exercise. **Chiefs who walk the talk reinforce that wellness, mental health, and risk reduction aren't optional but operational requirements.**

Departments that thrive under this mindset often see ripple effects far beyond the week itself, seeing lower injury rates, improved morale, and stronger trust between the ranks.

The simple act of pausing operations for a focused conversation tells firefighters that leadership values their lives more than the next response-time metric.

MAKING THE STAND DOWN COUNT

Chiefs who prioritize engagement early and often hold the keys to transforming the week from an obligation **into an opportunity.**

Below are ways to elevate awareness, participation, and impact.

LEAD THE CONVERSATION

Kick off the week personally. Whether through a station visit, video message, or morning briefing, hearing directly from the fire chief reinforces that safety isn't delegated, but owned. Share a story from your own career. Authenticity is the intent, and your personnel will recognize it.

CONNECT IT TO REAL DATA

Make it local. Connect the Stand Down theme to your department's injury reports, near-miss data, or safety-related statistics. Firefighters pay attention when they see how the topic applies to their crews and their calls.

EMPOWER COMPANY OFFICERS

Provide captains and lieutenants with ready-to-use discussion guides provided by the Safety Stand Down planning and resources, short training videos, or tabletop scenarios related to the year's theme. When officers have tools, they're more likely to lead effective station-level conversations rather than squeeze in a quick safety talk between runs.

RECOGNIZE YOUR DEPARTMENT'S ENGAGEMENT

Highlight the companies or individuals who take the Stand Down to heart. Recognition, even in simple forms like a social media post or department newsletter, reinforces the behavior you want repeated.

BRING IN ALLIES

Partner with your health and wellness team, peer support group, local hospital, or mutual aid agencies. The broader the involvement, the more meaningful the message. Safety is a shared mission, not a solo effort.

SUSTAINING THE MOMENTUM

The Firefighter Safety Stand Down should never end on Friday or the last day of the month. The best departments use lessons learned to drive ongoing improvements, update

policies, refine training, or identify new wellness resources. Equally important is revisiting the conversation later. A six-month mid-year check **keeps the focus alive and shows that leadership remains invested long after the banners come down.**

The Safety Stand Down is not about taking firefighters off the line; it's about bringing them back to the heart of why we serve. **To protect others without sacrificing ourselves.** So, when the third week of June rolls around, **lead from the front.** **C**



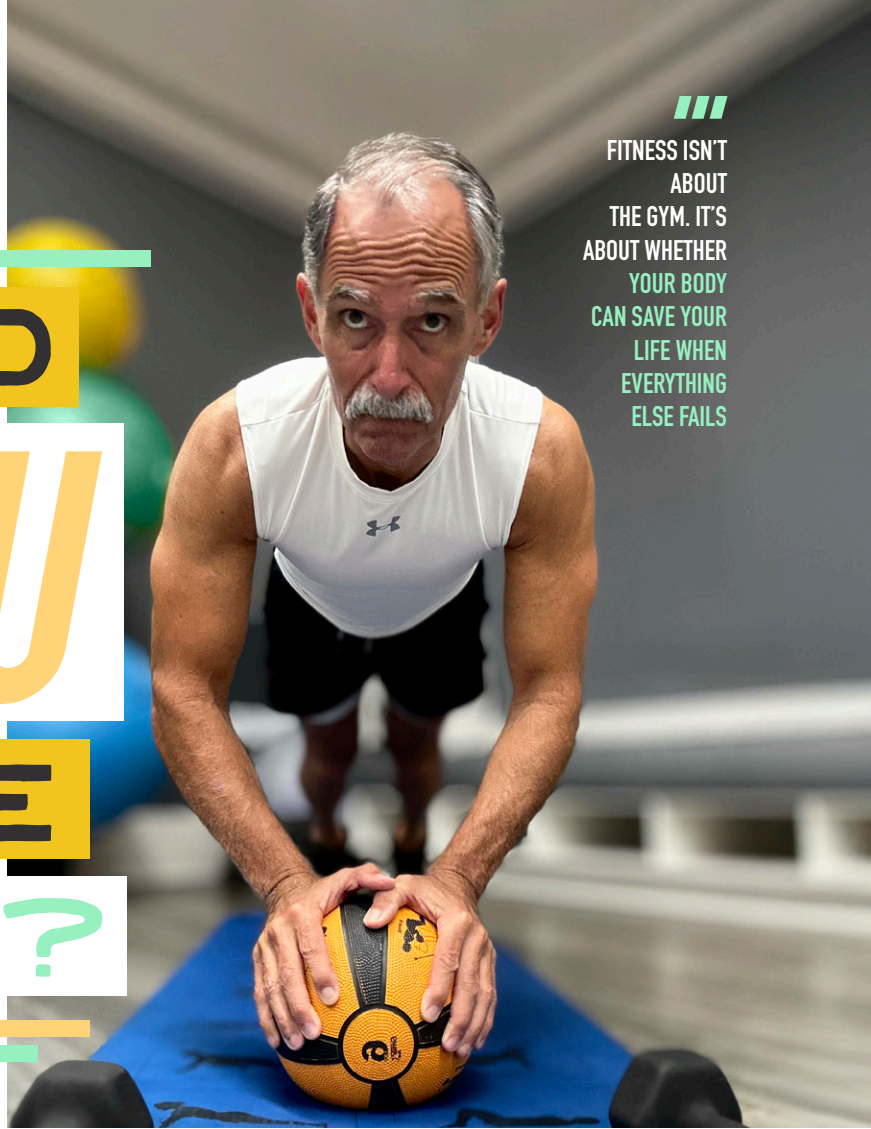
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 FITNESS ISN'T
 ABOUT
 THE GYM. IT'S
 ABOUT WHETHER
 YOUR BODY
 CAN SAVE YOUR
 LIFE WHEN
 EVERYTHING
 ELSE FAILS

COULD

YOU

RESCUE

YOU?



By Marc Bashoor, Senior Fire Advisor - FireRescue1.com; Keynote Speaker; Fire Chief, Public Safety Director, & Emergency Manager, Retired

If you went down inside a fire, if your body gave out under the weight of your own habits, could you drag yourself out? It's the question I had to face myself.

On day 15 in the hospital, an internist shook his head and told me, "**You shouldn't be here.**" I was gaunt, chest tubes in place, barely able to walk. He said, "Most people who have that happen to them, what happened to you, don't survive."

"THE ONLY REASON YOU'RE STILL ALIVE IS THAT YOU WERE IN SUCH GOOD SHAPE. YOUR BODY WAS ABLE TO COMPENSATE."

It was the second time my world stopped. The first was when the ER

doctor told me they had found a mass on my lung.

I SHOULDN'T BE HERE. BUT I AM. AND I WANT TO TELL YOU WHY.

My fire service career began as a volunteer with the Bowie Volunteer Fire Department in Prince George's County, Md. **On my 16th birthday in 1981, I rode my bicycle to the firehouse and handed in the application.** The son of a World War II Marine veteran, who was a Baptist minister and a mail carrier for 30 years after the war, I became a first-generation fire service member.

Back then, there was zero direction or interest in fitness as a necessity. While there was a cursory entrance physical, there was no program like

CPAT, no agility test of any kind. **Sign up, show up, take a 40-hour class, get the pager – that was it.**

When I was hired six years later and in PGFD's recruit school 18, **I was not ready for the physical rigors.** At Silver Hill Station 29, I was assigned with firefighter Joe Farri, a competitive powerlifter – the superman lifter in the firehouse. Joe showed me how much I still had to learn. I wasn't a powerlifter, **but I learned that fitness mattered if you wanted to survive in this business.**

As I moved through the ranks, gyms became my second home. **And if fitness wasn't a priority for management, I made sure it was a priority for my crews.** Nobody was going to outwork us – that was our plan.

'WHO'S THAT FAT-ASS?'

After my first retirement, I let myself go. Little to no fitness, eating whatever I wanted, my waistline expanding one belt hole at a time.

In 2007, my wife was reading the newspaper when I looked over and asked, "Who's that fat-ass on the front page?" **Without missing a beat, she flipped it around: "That would be you, hon."**

I literally didn't recognize myself. Vanity hit first, but then the reality.

HOW COULD ANYONE PULL ME OUT OF A FIRE IF I WENT DOWN?

That picture flipped the switch. I started taking care of myself again, setting the example, and thinking about our firefighters having to pull my fat ass, plus 85 pounds of gear, out of a fire. **That thought alone kept me moving forward.**

People talk a lot about "motivation" to go to the gym, **but what you really need is discipline.** You need the discipline to walk through the door every day, and then the motivation to train with purpose. **Motivation without discipline just fades away.**

Over the years, I've had my share of yo-yo weight loss, but I eventually settled on what worked for me. **I learned that every body and everybody is different.** There's no single plan.

MY FITNESS BASICS



CALORIES IN VS. CALORIES OUT



EXTRA SUGAR IS YOUR ENEMY



WATER IS YOUR FRIEND



CARBONATED DRINKS ARE NOT YOUR FRIEND



AMINO ACIDS MATTER

I wasn't a doctor or a nutritionist, but I didn't need to be. These basics carried me. **And they ended up saving my life.**

By 2023, I was in the best shape of my life, even placing third in my age class in a "Mr. Fitness" photo competition. **Then came the cough.** Just a bad cough, I thought. My doctor gave me pills and told me to come back if I had a fever.

In January 2024, I carried a low-grade fever for a few days. I was also losing a little weight without trying. Then, at 2 a.m. on Feb. 23, I woke up with sharp pain tearing through my back. I couldn't breathe. My wife rushed me to the ER. **The doctor looked at my X-ray and said, "Mr. Bashoor, we found a mass on your lung."**

Two days later, at a third ER, a doctor finally told me what nobody else had – **I had a collapsed lung.** Within minutes, they were inserting tubes

into my chest. Six surgeries later, a last-ditch stapling method finally reinflated it.

I LOST 20% OF MY LUNG CAPACITY, BUT I SURVIVED.

When they sent me home after 33 days, I weighed 126 pounds. My neighbors didn't even recognize me as I shuffled outside with a cane. **But with physical therapy and nutrition support, I began the climb back.** Within four months, I was nearly back to weightlifting and muscle growth, about 10 pounds lighter but squarely healthy.

That recovery reshaped not only my body but also my message.

Even before this, I had been delivering a program called Could You Rescue You? At first, it was about operational and functional readiness in the fire service. After my collapse, it became

personal. **Doctors told me I only survived because I was in shape.** My wife even found a study of 15,000 lung-collapse patients – **only one with circumstances like mine had lived. One in 15,000.**

So now I ask every firefighter what I had to ask myself: **Could you rescue you? If you went down, could your body handle it? If your habits caught up with you, would you survive?**

THE UNIFORM WON'T SAVE YOU. THE CREW WON'T ALWAYS SAVE YOU. IT'S ON YOU.

There's more to fitness than lifting weights, and there's more to life than the fire service. **You only get one body.** Be your own advocate. Be disciplined. Protect it.

Because one day, it might be the only reason you're still here. C

What your spending says about your **identity**

A PERSPECTIVE FROM YOUR
FIREFIGHTER CREDIT UNION

THREE MUST-KNOWS ABOUT IDENTITY-DRIVEN SPENDING

By Firefighters First Credit Union

The fire service culture often shapes spending habits, influences financial decisions, and even defines what “enough” looks like.

From high-dollar toys to high-quality tools, the way you spend can tell a story — **one about pride, belonging, or balance.** It is essential to ensure that the story supports the life you’re working so hard to build.

Let’s look at three common money mindsets we see in the fire service — and how to keep them healthy, sustainable, and aligned with your goals.

1

Big Purchases, Big Feelings:

WHEN SPENDING BECOMES EMOTIONAL RECOVERY

Firefighters often invest in big-ticket items — the boat, the bike, the truck, the backyard bar. But these purchases aren’t just about things. **They often reflect something deeper: a sense of reward, relief, or identity after long stretches of stress, trauma, and unpredictable shifts.**

In a profession that values toughness, performance, and control, spending can feel like taking back some stability.

But when spending turns into emotional repair instead of a financial choice, it can quietly lead to debt and reduced savings. Recognizing that doesn’t mean giving up what you enjoy — it means asking a key question: “What am I really buying here?”

If the answer sounds like validation, relief, or escape it may be wise to wait one pay cycle. If you still want it after that, it’s a decision — not an impulse.

2

Gearhead Spending:

WHEN “BUY ONCE, CRY ONCE” WORKS IN YOUR FAVOR

Firefighters take pride in good gear and craftsmanship – and for good reason. The phrase “Buy once, cry once” reflects a mindset built on quality, reliability, and pride in your work.

That same approach can be a smart financial strategy when used intentionally. Investing in high-quality items – from work boots and tools to household gear – often saves money over time. The trick is separating practical quality from status quality.

When you spend for durability and function, you’re making a sound investment. Otherwise, it can turn into an unnecessary expense.

Credit Union Tip: Keep a “tools and quality” line in your budget. When higher-cost items are planned, you can feel confident knowing you’re investing wisely – not reacting emotionally.

3

The Shift Work Spending Cycle:

WHEN YOUR SCHEDULE CONTROLS YOUR CASH FLOW

Firefighters typically don’t live on a 9-to-5 schedule. Between 24-hour shifts, overtime, side jobs, and recovery days, your income – and energy – can fluctuate a lot. **And that rhythm often creates a spending loop: Overtime > Burnout > Spending > Guilt > More Overtime.**


Breaking that cycle means setting up systems that work with your schedule, not against it:

- Automate savings on payday so it happens before spending starts.
- Create a “burnout fund” – money set aside for stress relief that doesn’t derail your goals.
- Talk about money openly with your family, crew, or credit union. These conversations normalize financial awareness.

In the End:

SPENDING IS STORYTELLING

Every dollar tells a story – about pride, fatigue, belonging, or escape. **And for firefighters, those stories are powerful.**

As your credit union, we’re here to help you understand what those stories mean and how to shape them into something lasting – a story that honors your service, protects your family, and builds the future you’ve earned. Your job is to protect others. Ours is to help protect your financial future. 



FirefightersFirst
CREDIT UNION
It's yours.



VISIT US FOR BUDGETING
AND EDUCATIONAL
RESOURCES TO HELP STAY
FINANCIALLY BALANCED.

HIDDEN FORCES

SHAPING OUR PERFORMANCE

By Tony Correia, Retired, Nearly 50-year fire service veteran, Director of the Burlington Township (NJ) Fire Department, and current President of the New Jersey State Fire Chiefs Association

MENTAL MAYDAYS CAN LEAD TO TERRIBLE OUTCOMES ON THE FIREGROUND; **WE CAN TRAIN TO PREVENT THEM AND RESPOND TO THEM**

Beneath the layers of protective gear and rapid response protocols lies a complex biological and psychological landscape that influences a firefighter's performance, decision-making, and ultimate ability to save lives. **Understanding these hidden forces isn't just academic; it's critical** for optimizing outcomes in the face of complex and ever-changing emergency

scene environments, including the chaos, danger, and challenges of reducing death and disability.

Emergency responders operate in environments that push the limits of the human body and mind, battling heat, toxic smoke, and exertion that strain their cardiovascular and respiratory systems. Stress, as explained by Dr. Robert Sapolsky,

triggers hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol, preparing the body for fight-or-flight. While essential in emergencies, chronic stress can harm brain function and contribute to anxiety and depression.

BUT THE CHALLENGE EXTENDS FAR BEYOND THE PHYSICAL.

The mental burden is immense. Making rapid decisions in a dangerous environment, amidst emotional trauma, can create intense psychological arousal.

These impacts affect both cognitive and psychomotor performance.

Decision-making, already a high-stakes endeavor, is further complicated by incomplete information, time pressure, and the insidious influence of cognitive biases. For example, one such bias is confirmation bias. This happens when a responder seeks only information that confirms an initial (and potentially incorrect) assessment. The availability heuristic is our brain's natural tendency to assign the most importance to that which is easiest to recall can cause us to overestimate rare events due to vivid past experiences. These biases, if unchecked, can lead to serious judgment errors.

Human factors can be direct and/or indirect – such as lack of sleep, unfamiliarity, or even executive pressures (departmental) – which adds another layer of complexity.

The very environments that shape a responder's worldview can also dictate their coping abilities and reaction to stimuli. For example, a culture that rewards stoicism can inadvertently discourage personnel from seeking help for mental health struggles, exacerbating the silent suffering that is a known precursor to burnout and substance abuse.

The goal, then, is not to eliminate these biological and psychological responses – for many are essential for survival – but to equip responders with the tools to recognize, manage, and even leverage them. Elite training programs, such as those of the Navy SEALs, employ Stress Inoculation Training, progressively exposing

individuals to escalating stressors in controlled environments. By desensitizing trainees to the potential chaos they might encounter, it allows them to practice maintaining cognitive function under extreme duress.

The same principle applies to first responders. **Repeated, realistic scenario-based training helps build a mental library of patterns and promotes recognition-primed decision making.** As experienced responders encounter familiar cues, they can bypass lengthy analytical processes, enabling rapid, effective decisions based on learned pattern instincts.

However, recognizing when to engage and when not to is equally crucial. *Developing Firefighter Resilience*, a text focused on positive psychology for first responders, emphasizes the importance of building emotional wellness and self-efficacy. It advocates comprehensive training that includes not just technical skills but also stress-regulation techniques and mental preparedness.

Until recently, we had limited data on the impact of stressors during firefighting activities. This is why techniques like tactical breathing can help regulate the stress response by controlling the breath, allowing for a critical “tactical pause” before acting. It's prudent that both leaders and peers be trained to recognize these signs in others. **It fosters a culture where asking for help or stepping back from an overwhelming situation is seen as a sign of strength, not weakness.** A mayday call shouldn't be limited solely to physical emergencies; recognizing and acknowledging a cognitive or emotional mayday is equally vital to prevent catastrophic errors while preserving long-term well-being.



ULTIMATELY, OPTIMIZING PERFORMANCE IN HIGH-STRESS EMERGENCIES REQUIRES A HOLISTIC

APPROACH:

- **Regular fitness training** for strength, agility, flexibility, and aerobic stamina to meet the demands of fire and emergency response challenges
- Rigorous, **realistic stress inoculation training**, mental rehearsal, and foundational physical and psychological wellness
- Intentional use of **physiological regulation techniques** (e.g., tactical breathing), active bias countering, conscious maintenance of situational awareness, and effective communication
- **Knowing when to tactically withdraw**, using formal rehab, and engaging in structured debriefings and accessible mental health support

LIKE AN ICEBERG, WHERE WE JUST SEE WHAT'S ABOVE THE WATERLINE, IT'S VITAL TO REMEMBER THERE'S SO MUCH MORE BELOW IT. IN FACT, THERE'S A WORLD OF INFORMATION YET TO BE SEEN IN THE FIRE SERVICE INDUSTRY. C

TRAVEL

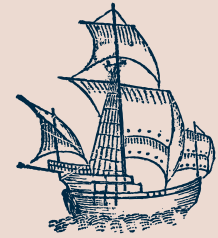
RIDING THE WIND ON A TALL MAST SHIP

By Liz Fleming, Host of Liz Fleming Travels
on iHeart Radio

"THE SEA IS
A DESERT
OF WAVES,
A WILDERNESS
OF WATER."

- LANGSTON
HUGHES





We hurried to the top deck, not wanting to miss a second of Star Clipper's dramatic sail away. **Staring up at the tall masts, we felt the breeze on our faces and heard music begin to swell** – classical music, with strong, insistent bass notes.

SUDDENLY, THE SAILS BEGAN TO RISE UP THE MASTS – SEEMINGLY MILES OF WHITE CANVAS SOARING TOWARD THE SKY.

One by one they unfurled and filled with wind as our beautiful ship surged into the waves.

Sail away is special on any cruise, but on a tall-masted ship like Star Clipper, it's a moment to be remembered. You feel as if your heart has leapt forward with her and that your adventures together are truly beginning.

Our Star Clipper experience began in Athens, Greece, where we boarded and tucked ourselves into our compact but comfortable cabin. There are no balcony suites on a sailing

vessel – **instead, staterooms have a single porthole which, on stormy days, looks very much like the door of the washing machine with the water swirling endlessly outside.** We were a wee bit seasick here and there, but mostly loved our cabin.

Each day, we sailed to a different Greek island. **There are many, and each has its own individual character.** Some we recognized from the popular movie "Mamma Mia," and all share a couple of outstanding features, the most important of which is fabulous food.

SMALL TAVERNAS WITH WELCOMING OUTDOOR PATIOS LINED THE STREETS OF EACH PORT WE VISITED.

If you go and find you can resist the smell of souvlaki, or the sight of plump rectangles of feta cheese topping the fresh Greek salads, **you're stronger than we are.**

We gave in without a struggle at each spot, enjoying not only the delicious food but also the second outstanding feature of every port – **the furry parade of friendly stray cats that**

wound through the tables, looking for pats and possibly the odd bit of souvlaki.

NOT AGGRESSIVE, THESE CATS WERE SIMPLY AMBASSADORS OF WELCOME, ADDING TO THE AMBIANCE OF AN ALREADY VERY FRIENDLY COUNTRY.

Back on board, we worked off some of the pita bread we'd enjoyed with our salads by hooking ourselves into climbing gear **and ascending the mast for a spectacular view of the Aegean Sea.** The climb wasn't mandatory, but many guests gave it a try and we were glad we did.

At mealtimes, we gathered in the elegant main dining room, **where guests came together in groups to share their adventures and raise a few glasses.** A mix of European, British and North American travellers made for interesting conversations in which politics was largely, and wisely, absent.

We were simply there to enjoy the sun, the sea and the sailing – a glorious adventure, and one we hope to repeat someday soon. **C**

HOW HELPING OTHERS IS SELF-HELP

IF YOU COULD **PEEL**
AWAY THE LAYERS
OF A FIREFIGHTER,
WHAT WOULD YOU
BE LEFT WITH?

We don't mean the layer-by-layer flesh stripping of horror films... that would be illegal. We mean the metaphoric exploration into the core of what makes us us.

By Rick Markley, Executive Editor, CRACKYL Magazine

SCIENCE SHOWS A WIDE RANGE OF LEGIT HEALTH BENEFITS TO VOLUNTEERING



When you strip away, onion layer after onion layer, all the differences and nuances that make up the typical firefighter, you're left with a very others-focused human. If this others focus wasn't the reason we got into this gig, it is often the reason we stay. Our service to others is what we teach our recruits, portray to our communities, and the narratives we tell ourselves as we define fire service culture.

And when we ditch the job shirt for a spiffy Hawaiian button-down or a too-tight workout tee, the others-focused part tags along. It doesn't start and stop at the firehouse door.

Again, we either became firefighters because we were so others focused or became so others focused because we wanted to remain firefighters. Repeat that once or twice to really understand the impact.

We are so others focused, in fact, that some of the best health and wellness advice available tells us to take a few steps back from that focus — to shift some of the focus to ourselves. We are encouraged to take up hobbies, meditate, walk in nature, do yoga, journal, create boundaries and just have some good old me time.

All sound advice; you should do it.

And when you get done journaling about how your yoga session went, consider turning back to that core value, that others focus. You can take what is often blamed for burning you out, beating you down, and make it what raises you up.

Yeah, yeah, nice words, you say. But where's the proof?

Thought you'd never ask.

It turns out, there's a copious amount of research on volunteering's impact

on our wellness. That research tells us that those who volunteer their time on others focused activities reap some very real health and wellness benefits. And they are improvements to conditions that have long dogged firefighters. Those include reduced anxiety, lower blood pressure, reduced depression, reduced risk of cardiovascular disease, better cognitive executive functions and a longer life — actually four years longer, which is kind of like getting re-elected.

"To most firefighters, this won't come as a huge surprise," says Sara Jahnke. She is a senior scientist with the Center for Fire, Rescue & EMS Health Research, and she launched Science to the Station: A Health and Wellness Alliance. "We've all come away with those warm, fuzzy feelings from helping others; I think it is called happiness. Seriously, science shows there are real benefits to the volunteer, and that is exciting because it gives us another way to protect and heal ourselves."

The trick, as one study found, is to make sure your volunteer efforts benefit others, not you. A paper published by Volunteering Australia in late 2021 did a deep dive into scientific research on the mental health benefits of volunteering.

One of the findings was that people reported better mental health when their volunteer work benefited others. That benefit evaporated when the volunteering was self-focused — such as doing it to learn a new skill or broaden career networks.

Another nugget from the Australian paper is those who were being treated for mental health conditions reported improvements in rebuilding self-identity and returning to a feeling of living a normal life when they engaged in volunteering activity compared with those who did no volunteering.

A 2016 study that looked at the benefits of volunteering on the U.K. population found even those who reported infrequently volunteering experienced mental health benefits. Those who never volunteered — not so much; they got zilch. That study examined population-wide data collected from 1991 to 2008. By tracking subjects over many years, they found older people benefited more from volunteering than younger people. However, a study out of the U.S. published in 2023 that looked at previous research, reported even adolescents benefit from doing volunteer work, and concurred that older individuals benefited considerably more.

A 2020 STUDY THAT EXAMINED THE HEALTH BENEFITS IN OLDER ADULTS WHO VOLUNTEERED AT LEAST 100 HOURS PER YEAR SHOWED, AMONG OTHER THINGS, THEIR MORTALITY RATE DROPPED BY 44%.

In short, some volunteering appears better than none, but more is better. Focusing that volunteer work on benefiting others gives the volunteer the greatest benefit. And volunteering can be a useful way to guard against mental health issues, and be an effective way to help treat serious ones.

When you peel it all back, our strength really can be, well, our strength. Putting in the time to help others with no expected return or self-interest turns out to be one of the better self-help tools available. **C**



FOR MORE INFORMATION ON THE SCIENCE ALLIANCE AND TO ACCESS THIS AND OTHER FIREFIGHTER HEALTH AND WELLNESS RESEARCH FINDINGS, VISIT [SCIENCE-ALLIANCE.ORG](https://www.science-alliance.org)





WORKPLACE VIOLENCE PREVENTION FOR FIRST RESPONDERS

Between **57-93%** of fire and EMS responders experience an act of verbal and/or physical violence at least once.

Workplace Violence Prevention for First Responders is a free, online course that aims to equip fire and EMS responders with the skills and knowledge to protect themselves in potentially violent situations.

Practical Strategies for Safety complements the Workplace Violence Prevention for First Responders course. It provides practical strategies you can use while on a call to help lessen the possibility of workplace violence.

Scan the QR codes to register for our free, self-paced courses.



Workplace Violence Prevention for First Responders



Practical Strategies for Safety



get the data
FIRST
Center for Firefighter Injury Research & Safety Trends
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espresso yourself

THE DRINKS BREWING
IN COFFEE CULTURE

Step aside, dogs, because coffee really is (hu)man's best friend. And while coffee might not have been around as long as dogs (we will let them have that accolade), its relevance in our lives is uncontested.

Coffee, known for bringing happiness, fulfillment, and joy, is enjoyed by more than 1 billion people every day. Roughly 73% of Americans drink coffee daily. Starbucks remains the top coffee brand, with Dunkin' close

behind. And those who love coffee are happy to go out and get a cup at least once a week, sometimes with dessert on the side.

Whether you drip, boil, press, percolate, stir, inhale, or drive more than 20 minutes to get your joe, coffee remains a favorite for many, no matter the hour.

But have you ever considered, even just for a minute, if it could be better?

Coffee snobs – er, connoisseurs – know the answer to that, and go to great lengths to enjoy their cup of joe.

If you're seeking more joy in your beans but are curious about the total caffeine intake, try some of these alternatives and brace yourself to possibly become one of those aforementioned snobs.

Because once you French press, you'll never go back ...

CAFFÉ AMERICANO

~154 mg
(per 8 oz)

TOTAL CAFFEINE

75%

H2O PERCENTAGE

25%

ESPRESSO PERCENTAGE



Loosely translated as American coffee – is an espresso shot with hot water, usually in a 1:3 ratio, meaning one part espresso to three parts water. Some folks even prefer to run their espresso “long,” which means the barista extends the brewing time, allowing more hot water to pass through the espresso grounds. This results in a bolder flavor. Dress it up however you like afterward, but those who enjoy this beverage say it's far better than coffee and needs little in the way of flavor enhancers, i.e., don't drown it in cream or sugar.

ESPRESSO SHOT

~64 mg
(per 1 oz)

TOTAL CAFFEINE

0%

MILK PERCENTAGE

100%

ESPRESSO PERCENTAGE



Yes, you're allowed to feel hardcore. This little beauty delivers a quick and intense burst of flavor and caffeine from espresso, like a cold gust of wind. But don't be intimidated; it's actually smooth and enjoyable, and if taking it straight back scares you, try it either with con panna (whipped cream on top) or affogato (literally over real vanilla ice cream). There are also other ways to enjoy it, and while it might be fun to watch an old Italian mafia movie to obtain them, you can simply Google different ways to enjoy your espresso (not espresso – the mob will find you).

CAFFÉ LATTE



~64 mg

(per 8 oz)

TOTAL CAFFEINE

75%

MILK PERCENTAGE

25%

ESPRESSO PERCENTAGE

Caffé latte is an espresso shot with steamed milk, often 2%. You can substitute the milk with any dairy alternative and add your own toppings or flavors. However, milk tends to be naturally sweet and can overpower the balance in this warm, comforting drink. Try it as described before adding anything to sweeten the drink. And if you must add sugar, go for honey.

CAPPUCCINOS



~64 mg

(per 8 oz)

TOTAL CAFFEINE

10-25%

MILK PERCENTAGE

25-50%

FROTH PERCENTAGE

25%

ESPRESSO PERCENTAGE

Cappuccinos are a cousin of the latte, with a much lighter volume, mainly because most of the milk used in the drink is froth. This creates a light balance with the espresso that starts the experience. Usually, only a splash of actual liquid milk is mixed with the espresso. Some prefer their cappuccinos dry, meaning less milk and more froth, while others prefer them wet, with less froth and more milk, making it closer to a latte.

COLD BREW



100-200mg

(per 8 oz)

TOTAL CAFFEINE

0%

MILK PERCENTAGE

100%

COFFEE PERCENTAGE

Cold brew isn't the coffee you left on your desk and came back to drink seven hours later, but we aren't judging if you do that. Cold brew is a newer coffee method, also known as cold water extraction, that involves steeping coffee grounds for 12 to 24 hours before filtering and cooling. Often served over ice or with cream and sugar, this alternative to hot coffee is more powerful and you might find it more enjoyable than simply cooling your pot of coffee in the fridge.

caffeine facts

- 1 The average caffeine in a standard cup of coffee is about 95 mg, which accounts for 25% of your recommended daily intake. However, reaching 400 mg isn't the goal; it's about staying below that to avoid negative side effects like jitters, anxiety, poor sleep, and heart palpitations.
- 1 Caffeine has a half-life of 6 – 8 hours. That means half of what you drink at 2 p.m. may still be in your system at 8 – 10 p.m. — right when you're trying to sleep. However, if you're on nights, then this works in your favor.
- 1 Decaf coffee is not completely caffeine-free; it still has 8.6 – 13.9 mg of caffeine. A cup of regular drip coffee has around 95 – 200 mg.
- 1 McDonald's coffee has about 9.1 mg of caffeine per fluid ounce. Starbucks has more than double that, at 20.6 mg. Deathwish Coffee has the most, at 54.2 mg per ounce.
- 1 Coffee is a diuretic, so it causes more frequent urination. It also increases GI motility, so be close to a toilet if you indulge first thing in the a.m.
- 1 Women metabolize caffeine about 25% faster than men.
- 1 The lighter the roast, the higher the caffeine. The darker, the lower. So go ahead and get that light roast the next time you finish a shift and need to stay awake through 10 extracurriculars, a children's birthday party, and a family dinner where you're making dessert. Might we suggest bringing coffee and cake? ☕



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- **Pre-plan for Yourself:** Track today. Document for tomorrow.



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