



FIREFIGHTER SUICIDE REASONS AND PREVENTION

by Jada Hudson, M.S., LCPC

From celebrities to people in our own family, suicide strikes at our heart and brings shock and emotional pain to everyone left behind. Suicide in the firefighting world, unfortunately, is not only evident. It is prevalent.

Jeff Dill, a captain with the Palatine Rural Fire Protection District and a licensed counselor specializing in firefighter behavior issues, has been gathering information from suicide reports and interviewing more than 400 fire chiefs about the issue. In 2011, he founded the non-profit organization, Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance (FBHA), in part to shed light on the problem of firefighter suicide. Dill's research is a healthy start to identifying a disturbing trend, however, he has currently only reached about 20% of the known 30,000 fire departments and emergency medical service organizations nationally. The numbers thus far, though, are sobering. He reports that between 2000 and 2013, 360 firefighters committed suicide with more than 57 percent of them occurring between 2012 and 2013 out of a national population of 1.1 million career and volunteer firefighters. Also, these numbers do not include unreported suicides, which are common since families can lose benefits if the death is ruled a suicide. This begs the question, are firefighters more at risk for suicide, and if so, why?

Last year, I had the privilege of attending a conference by esteemed psychologist, Thomas Joiner. Ph.D. on the topic of suicide. The topic is an interest of mine professionally, as well as personally since my own brother died by suicide.

Joiner too experienced the consequences of suicide in his family, when his father took his own life. The experience spurred him to research theories on the causes of suicide, but he found none of them acceptable. After extensive research, he created his own theory, which I believe solidly resonates with the experience of firefighters everywhere. The Joiner theory shows that firefighters possess many risk factors for suicide. However, by encouraging belonging and continuing emotional support within the team, firefighters can actually save each other's lives by reducing the likelihood of suicide.

Joiner's Theory of Suicide

Joiner has identified three conditions that exist before someone contemplates suicide. Unfortunately, the typical personality, on-the-job experiences and working environment of firefighters can unwittingly create all three of these conditions. These conditions are:

1. Perceived Burdensomeness, which is defined by Joiner as the essential calculation that "my death is worth more than my life to my loved ones/family/society" for financial or emotional reasons. The feeling may develop from workplace stress or mistakes, or the inability to balance career and home life. Any of these can create a feeling of "perceived burdensomeness" and provide a rationale to consider suicide.

2. Thwarted Belongingness, or the feeling of being cut off or excluded from a group from which you have a strong emotional connection. Living and working together in such a tight union, firefighters form a unique bond that is not unlike a second family. When the bond is broken, either intentionally from conflict, or unintentionally from career changes like retirement, the result can be devastating to their emotional well-being.

Suicide expert Emilie Durkheim writes in his book "Suicide", that the act "...varies inversely with the degree of integration of the social groups of which the individual forms a part". In other words, Durkheim points out that our bonds within interest groups involving religion (churches or support groups), domestic society (family and friends), or political society (their community, or other environments that share a common cause or mission, e.g., the fire department) are essential to our happiness and wellbeing. Joiner noted that before his father killed himself, he went through a painful separation from a company he had worked for all his life, and experienced hurtful behavior that he classified as "betrayal" from his coworkers. Firefighters who are rejected from their co-workers may experience similar, intense feelings of thwarted belongingness.

3. The Capability to Commit Suicide, which is a human trait fed by many experiences, but most notably, escalating experiences involving pain and provocation. In his book "Interpersonal Theory of Suicide", Joiner says, "people die by suicide because they can—that is they become desensitized to pain and habituated towards violence." He identifies several events that can reduce an individual's natural aversion to suicide. Unfortunately, they are events that a firefighter may experience daily. These include repeated injuries, repeated exposure to pain and provocation, and the repeated witnessing of pain, violence, or injury.

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LIVE

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Finally, the typical personality traits that make a “good” “firefighter”, such as bravery, risk-taking, and fearlessness, are ironically also necessary for a successful or attempted suicide.

Saving A Life Through Community

A brave few have shed the light on the problem of firefighter suicide and prevention. Patrick Kenny, the Fire Chief of Western Springs, lost his son to suicide. Shortly afterward, one of his firefighters came forward and admitted to having his own suicidal thoughts. The experience was a wakeup call for fire departments to recognize how difficult it is for firefighters to ask for help, and also find professionals who understand their needs.

Thanks to Kenny’s advocacy, the need for special psychological counseling for firefighters has grown. The National Fallen Firefighter Foundation’s (NFFF) “Everyone Goes Home” project created 16 Life Safety Initiatives that include number 13, which mandates access to counseling and psychological services for all firefighters.

In response, the Illinois Fire Chief’s Educational and Research Foundation provided a grant to establish a curriculum to train counselors specialized for the unique needs of firefighters. The rigorous program required 40 hours of classroom time, 40 hours of supervised one-on-one counseling, and 40 hours of ride along time with active duty firefighters.

Counseling may help firefighters manage two of the three “risk factors” that Joiner outlines for suicide: “perceived burdensomeness” and “the capability to commit suicide”. However, the firefighter community must really pull together to minimize the second risk factor, “thwarted belongingness”.

Everyone in the department should be aware of their comrade’s emotional well-being and provide support and unconditional acceptance whenever possible. They should be on alert for signs of disconnected team members who may feel alienated from the group. While firefighters have no control over much of their job, they do have control over their interaction with each other.

Here are some steps a department can take to help prevent conditions for suicide.

1. Reach out for help. Referral to a firefighter counselor is a good first, potentially life-saving step to helping a disconnected firefighter. Firefighter counselors actually experience the firefighting lifestyle as part of their training and are sensitive to their unique emotional challenges.

2. Increase the Feeling of Belongingness for Each Member. Department leaders should be aware of the emotional state of their department and take their firefighter’s need for support seriously. Peer to peer programs are encouraged. Just as the team members take care of each other in life or death situations on-the-job, they can offer a kind word or a listening ear to help their comrade back at the station.

3. Watch for At-Risk Signs for Suicide. Everyone should watch coworkers for at-risk signs that the SPRC (Suicide Prevention Resource Center) and the FFBHA cite as the most common indicators for suicide:

- Prior suicide attempts
- Alcohol or drug abuse
- Mood and anxiety disorders, e.g., depression, PTSD
- Access to a means to kill oneself
- Isolation or distance from others
- Loss of confidence in skills
- Sleep Deprivation
- Displaced Anger
- Impulsiveness

4. Watch for Immediate Risk Signs for Suicide. The department should know the SPRC warning signs of immediate suicide risk and take action if a person exhibits any of these signs:

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

Working together to support each other emotionally and being vigilant to telltale signs that a fellow firefighter is struggling can go far to help prevent firefighter suicide. Firefighters do a wonderful job of saving lives outside the station; they can do so inside too.