

The Importance of RIT Training

by Jada Hudson, M.S., LCPC

Recently, I was invited by Matt Acuff and Jason Demas to participate in RIT (Rapid Intervention Team) training with the Aurora Fire Department. I attended alongside fire academy students who were to be on shift in three weeks.

According to Battalion Chief Dan Schiradelly of the Oswego Fire Department, the RIT's main task on the fireground is improving command's ability in providing firefighter safety and survival. The RIT team is usually assigned to a later arriving truck company but can be assigned to any crew if the incident commander (IC) deems it necessary.

I learned that it typically takes about a dozen firefighters to safely seek, find and rescue a firefighter from a scene, and most firefighters would rather arrive on the first or second trucks so they can be in the thick of the action.

Why RIT Assignments are So Important

Dan says the RIT assignment may not be the most popular; however, they perform functions that are incredibly important. Proactive RITs will be surveying the structure and continually advising command and chief officers of fire conditions and potential collapse. They will make sure there are multiple egress points and they ladder windows and roofs where necessary.

"RIT is one of the most demanding functions on the fireground, especially if deployed for a lost or trapped firefighter," Dan writes. "RIT demands the best of the best when it comes to making a successful rescue."

Mentally Preparing for a MAYDAY Situation

To be mentally capable and physically able to respond to a MAYDAY rescue situation, all RIT members must be properly trained and equipped. At the Aurora department, RIT training is a three-day event where participants are exposed to five different fire scenarios. Day one is classroom instruction and on day two and three the class moves to the structure where different scenarios are realistically simulated. I attended on day three.

RIT Scenarios that Simulate Real Life

When I say realistic, I mean REALISTIC! With smoke pouring from the structure and the firefighters mobilized for action, I was overwhelmed by the chaos and emotion around me. It was loud. People were screaming and I could hear the walkie talkies but couldn't make out anything intelligible. My adrenaline was rising, my heart was racing, and I knew I was feeling what must be second nature to firefighters on a call. It also struck me that this familiar training venue was now a frightening place to be. I couldn't imagine how much more intense and challenging it would be to do this in an unfamiliar place!

The scenarios felt more real than I ever would have imagined. Many real tears were shed in this artificial situation as the firefighters realized how quickly and easily this event could happen in real life. The leaders stressed the importance of training to prevent unnecessary loss of life. All morning I thought about the similarities in the way firefighters and counselors are trained to respond in a crisis situation. We are both taught to detach, emotionally, in order to be effective. In the moment of the simulated rescue scenario, I instinctively detached from my emotions and tried to assess who needed what at that...

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...moment. I began scanning faces, eyes and body language to determine where to begin. Whenever emotion entered my mind, I automatically pushed it aside so I could focus on the possible needs of others. The firefighters in the RIT training, I was sure, were doing the same thing. I can only imagine how this frequent, sometimes daily, detachment from emotion can affect firefighters in their other relationships. When it was happening to me, I was aware of it. However, I wonder if firefighters detach so much (as their norm) that they don't even realize when it is happening.

Taking Time to Debrief

Firefighters deserve and need every bit of time off that they get to be able to connect with emotions and feelings again. It's essential to their mental health, just as exercise is to their physical health. As I listened to the students debriefing afterwards, I overheard them say how the exercise helped them realize the importance of staying fit so they could perform well in RIT calls. They felt prepared, but also realized how critical it was to be able to handle the situation in the moment. Again, my eyes were opened to the mental challenges that arise for firefighters when they are called to duty and I am proud to be able to assist them, when needed, after they leave the fire.

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