

A Firefighter's MAYDAY: Before, During, & After

by Jada Hudson, M.S., LCPC

"Do what you can, with what you have, where you are."

—Theodore Roosevelt

The word "MAYDAY" is one of the scariest words a firefighter can hear and the hardest for a firefighter to transmit. It typically means one or more firefighters are down and in need of a rescue. How do you deal with a MAYDAY? Knowing how to cope before, during and after the call is important for all firefighters.

Before the MAYDAY

In training, firefighters are taught to prepare for any emergency mentally and physically, and that includes a MAYDAY. Physically, you must be able to handle the demanding tasks of the rescue. Even more challenging, however, is remaining disciplined, focused on the task at hand and working within the team when your first response may be to rush in to help the person on your own. Rarely is this what you should do. To implement your training in such a crisis situation, you are called to disconnect from your emotional response and impulses so you can do what is best for the victim.

When I had the opportunity to attend a recent RIT training session which included a simulated MAYDAY situation, I was proud of the way I could disconnect from my emotions as I moved through the rescue scenario with the firefighters.

Then later that week when a firefighter friend shared his "Employee Emergency Information" form with me, it was a different story. There, on a piece of paper, was everything needed in preparation for my friend if he fell victim to a fire. It gave all pertinent information on who to call if he was lost in action, how to make final arrangements, what was to be done with his body...even what songs he might want played at his funeral. When I saw my name on the paper as someone to be contacted in this event, all the emotion hit me with the realization on paper, that my friend goes off to work every day with the possibility of not returning. Any day, my friend, or anyone in his department, may need to call a "MAYDAY", or even worse, be the reason that the "MAYDAY" is called.

In some ways, you just can't prepare for a MAYDAY. However, I'm impressed with how the department does what they can both in training and administration to help firefighters before, during and after an incident.

During a MAYDAY

I've only been in a simulated "MAYDAY" fire experience but perhaps you have experienced the real thing yourself.

I recently read a heartbreaking, dramatic story of a firefighter lost in a 1987 fire in Columbus, OH. His name was John Nance, a 51-year-old who had been in the department for 27 years. Attempting to subdue an arson fire, he fell through the first floor to the basement. The story recounted the tireless efforts of the team, first to first locate him within the complex, then to attempt multiple rescue techniques. They tried to hoist him up manually, lower a ladder, open the floor, etc. Unfortunately, Nance was overcome by smoke and fire as his firefighter brothers struggled with depleted air tanks and ineffective measures that failed to save him.

Jada Hudson is owner of Hudson Clinical Counseling and an LCPC serving women, children and firefighters. She specializes in pediatric death and substance abuse. Group counseling available.

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I can only imagine how hard it was for those firefighters to call MAYDAY. Struggling, doing their best with all their training and abilities, Nance was lost.

"It's mentally tough to train on the need to call a MAYDAY," writes Dan Schiradelly, Battalion Chief of the Oswego Fire Department, "because firefighters have a hard time admitting when they are in trouble themselves. They believe they can overcome the situation on their own. Firefighters need to realize when they need help and call for it immediately."

Firefighters all train to prepare for a "MAYDAY" on the job, but they should also be aware when they need to call "MAYDAY" in their personal life as well. As a therapist, I see a direct correlation between the "MAYDAY" on the job, when a physical rescue is needed and a personal "MAYDAY" when a firefighter is in need of emotional support. While the "MAYDAY" call on the job is to the RIT team, the personal "MAYDAY" for emotional support should be to a therapist or a peer supporter.

Also, just as it is difficult for firefighters to call for backup, it's hard to call a therapist but doing so could save a firefighter's health, relationships and even their life, if they are experiencing depression. Making that call may be the hardest thing to do, but one of the most important things you can do to protect yourself.

The MAYDAY Aftermath

In the best case scenario, a MAYDAY call does not end with complete loss, but rather with rehabilitation of the body, mind and spirit. In the aftermath of John Nance's death, I read that 70-80 of his fellow firefighters and friends quietly pitched in to complete a renovation project at a farmhouse that John had purchased. They replaced windows and doors, installed siding, poured a concrete floor, added AC, plumbing, drywall, etc., much to the gratitude of Linda, his widow. It was their way of coping with the loss in a healthy manner.

According to Dan, the unfortunate death of John Nance also led to improvements in procedures and rescue techniques within the firefighting world. When the incident was investigated, they found that some mistakes were made during the rescue. For example, there was an attempted rescue by a solo fireman that should not have happened, and different measures could have been tried to extract Nance from his position.

In the aftermath of MAYDAY, the loss or even injury of a firefighter is never an easy thing to accept. Doctors and rehabilitative specialists can bring healing and hope to a victim's physical well-being, but for emotional support, firefighters may need to talk to someone with a shared perspective.

So while MAYDAYS are a necessary part of a firefighter's life and are always unexpected, training for them beforehand, reacting appropriately in the moment, and engaging in self-care afterwards can help immensely. If you ever feel like you are experiencing an emotional MAYDAY, please get help from a qualified therapist or peer supporter. It can make all the difference for you, both on and off the job.

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