

## Fighting: Fires, Cancer, & Your Family

by Jada Hudson, M.S., LCPC

Cancer. For some it's just others' distant tragedy, but for some it's the enemy that ruined the family. For many firefighters, cancer is a reality that they may have to face because, in the fire service, cancer rates are higher than in other occupations. According to a study produced by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), those in the fire service are two times more likely than non-firefighters to be diagnosed with brain cancer and liver cancer, 2.8 times more likely to be diagnosed with colon and rectal cancer, 2.5 to 3 times more likely to be diagnosed with bladder cancer, and they have a higher incidence of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma and urinary cancer than non-firefighters. Sadly, cancer hits often in the fire service.

For many, cancer diagnoses can surface unexpectedly, raising feelings of desperation, uncertainty, anger, and resentment, mixed with feelings of determination, hope, and courage. Firefighters, who are used to being strong, may feel exposed and vulnerable, or they may try to hide their true feelings with a "make the best of it," cheerful façade. At the same time, the family surrounding the cancer patient is often blindsided by their own feelings and responsibilities as they support their loved one.

Sadly, the strains cancer puts on a marriage relationship are often suffocating, and many times can end in a couple separating or divorcing. Relationships begin to break down because of poor communication, grief over the loss of what was, guilt, inability to cope with stress, fear of the unknown, fear of death, uncertainty, shame, feelings of powerlessness, and anger for being put in this position. Often, family members cope by turning to their own "comforts," such as alcohol or substance abuse, infidelity, or other types of "acting out" behavior. When children are involved, their primary source of emotional pain will come from lack of communication about the disease or avoidance of the topic of death.

Additionally, within the firefighter's surrounding community, there are psychological, social dynamics that change when cancer is present. Firefighters may feel helpless. They may search for meaning. They may have a sense of failure, and they may fear stigmas that come with having a disease. They may feel isolation or even a lack of support from health professionals. Even physically, patients may wrestle with the side effects of treatment or the uncertainty that comes with having a disease.

While cancer wreaks havoc physically, it can also be wreaking havoc emotionally beneath the surface. So, how can firefighters and their families overcome cancer's unique emotional wellness challenges?

They can move forward by managing fatigue, adjusting to physical changes, and sorting through the financial issues, address changes, and relationship dynamics associated with a cancer diagnosis. But, they need not feel alone. By increasing communication with family members and peer supporters, cancer patients can cope with processing the physical pain, the thinking about end of life, and with bereavement. In addition, seeking family therapy at regular intervals during recuperation and remission can help families stay unified through such a trying time. Simply understanding that there is a possibility of the patient or members of the family developing situational depression will help when emotions are overwhelming. And, gaining a better understanding of the firefighter's changing physical needs, and establishing a "new normal" routine will make life more comfortable and less stressful.

Being surrounded by support changes everything for firefighters. Cancer can be scary, but it cannot take what you refuse to let it take. So, fight for your family and let diagnosis, treatment, and remission, bring you together, not apart.

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