



Uniform Stories

with **Uniform Stories Staff**

5 stresses firefighters deal with that others don't know about

There is always the chance that something will happen that we have no control over; it's those fears that keep us up at night

Jul 15, 2019

By Michael Morse

We love this job and thank the good fortune that was bestowed upon us that we are firefighters.

And what's not to love? We eat like kings, occasionally get paid to sleep and watch TV, have a home away from home and form friendships like no other. It's as good a life as anybody could expect.



Firefighters mentally preparing themselves to face death, disfigurement, madness and disease becomes the norm, while working or not. (Photo/CDC)

We proudly display our union stickers on our cars, and most of us have a few fire department T-shirts in our wardrobe. The public respects us, and we have earned it. We know this, and believe in ourselves for the most part, but nothing in our lives is absolutely perfect.

There is always the chance that something will happen that we have no control over. And it's those fears that keep us up at night.

Every firefighter holds a few secrets that they typically keep to themselves.

1. THE WEIGHT OF RESPONSIBILITY THAT WE BEAR IS CRUSHING.

Maintaining the illusion of an aloof but invincible know-it-all, can-do firefighter is work. Believe it or not, we do it not for ourselves, but for those who depend on us.

Firefighters are always on duty. There is no down time. The mind is never at rest. People depend on us to know what to do when they don't. There are a million things that could go wrong at any second, and firefighters are expected to perform. We keep this knowledge buried for the most part, but it is always there.

2. WE ARE NOT BORN WITH THE KNOWLEDGE NECESSARY TO BE GOOD FIREFIGHTERS.

We have the aptitude for the job, but that's not enough. It needs to be nurtured and constantly challenged. There is a word for what needs to be done to ensure competence: training.

And training never ends. It is as constant as breathing. When a skill is learned, it needs to be re-learned at every available moment. There is always something new to perfect, and perfection is elusive. The training is the foundation that everything else depends upon. Having the skills to perform embedded in you through repetition helps when the real deal comes your way.

3. FEAR OF FAILURE IS THE GREATEST UNSPOKEN FEAR THAT EVERY FIREFIGHTER CARRIES WITH THEM.

We border on arrogance, saunter through town like we own the place, respond to emergencies with a can-do" confidence and bask in the glow of public confidence. But in the middle of the night, when there is nobody but you and the thoughts that run through your mind, things are not so clear.

A million scenarios play out before you, and you question whether or not you have what it takes to respond. The what-if game knows no end.

- What if the train that usually rolls through town unnoticed derails, and a toxic cloud of chlorine gas and anhydrous ammonia escapes?
- What if the baby that normally sleeps through the night is found not breathing at three in the morning?

- What if a truck carrying scrap metal takes the Thurber's Avenue curve too quickly and rolls onto a car full of college kids, trapping them, cutting them to shreds, and all you can do is watch them bleed to death while the crane that will free them slowly creeps up Rt. 95?
- What if the kid who decided to hang himself changed his mind at the last second, and you arrived a second too late?
- What if the fire is too hot, and a family of five burns to death 3 feet from where you stand, charged hoseline in hand, unable to get even 1 inch closer, and the echo of their screams is all that is left of them when you finally force the door?

Failure is not an option. There is no "nice try" in firefighting. There is success and there is failure.

Success is what makes firefighting great. Failure is soul-crushing, confidence stealing, character-destroying misery — it's the greatest unspoken fear that every firefighter carries with them.

4. WE LIVE WITH THE KNOWLEDGE THAT THE RISK OF DEVELOPING CANCER IS EXTREMELY HIGH.

Nobody wants to die. The myth that we will die so that others may live is just that, a myth. What we will do is take ridiculous chances at rescuing people — if, and only if, there is a chance we will come out alive. None of the firefighters who die in fires, collapses, accidents or explosions do so willingly. It is an insult to the integrity of life to think otherwise.

But die we do. Most often it isn't during a daring rescue, where images of a heroic firefighter are flashed across the screens of an adoring public. Most often we die alone, in bed, in agony, pain numbed by morphine, with a few people by our side, the ones that stayed with us during the struggle, when the lights are gone, and the cameras no longer roll.

We die from cancer. The things that burn emit toxins that we breathe in long after the fire is out.

- The diesel fumes in the station that no system can capture.
- The million and one chemicals that are created when a car catches fire.
- The asbestos we breathe.
- The dust that settles in our lungs and on our skin.

5. THE THINGS WE SEE IN THIS PROFESSION ARE WORSE THAN YOU COULD IMAGINE.

Going to work knowing that there is a very good chance something will happen that will eat away at your soul becomes business as usual. Mentally preparing yourself to face death, disfigurement, madness and disease becomes the norm, while working or not.

It eats away at your humanity, your compassion, and your ability to love freely and without guile. The feeling of impending doom will always be with you, consciously or subconsciously, it matters not;

what does matter is how you handle it.

The toughest among us are actually not that tough at all, they are simply the healthiest. Those who joke about the dead and make small talk of the mentally unstable are those of us who suffer the most and disguise their hurt with bravado. The rest of us just cope, and get through each day the best we can.

Firefighting is more than a way to make a living. It's a way of life. But nothing in life is free.

Even those who are fortunate enough to have the greatest job in the world know the price we pay, but for the benefit of those we love and those we protect and serve, we keep it to ourselves.

And it's killing us, slowly but surely.

This article, originally published August 9, 2015, has been updated.



About the author

Uniform Stories features a variety of contributors. These sources are experts and educators within their profession. Uniform Stories covers an array of subjects like field stories, entertaining anecdotes, and expert opinions.

Read more articles by Uniform Stories by clicking [here](#)

Tags > [Cancer Awareness](#) • [Fire Careers](#) • [Mental Health](#) • [PTSD](#) • [Safety](#) • [Stress](#) • [Stress Management](#) • [Stress Reduction](#) • [Uniform Stories](#)

RECOMMENDED FOR YOU

	Ben Franklin's lessons for first responders	Should inmates fighting Calif. wildfires deserve a chance at full-time jobs?	Breaking the 'brass ceilir face unique obstacles in service	
---	---	--	---	---

JOIN THE DISCUSSION

Please [sign in](#) or [register](#) to write your own comments below.
Before commenting, please read [FireRescue1's Commenting Policy](#)



Posted by [aportman58](#) Jan 15, 2020

Great explanation of those deep seated areas that whether we admit it or not is there at all times! I remember as a newly hired firefighter laying in the firehouse bed with my mind going wildly jumping through all the possible what if's! Fast forward over two decades later when I retired as an officer I will have to admit even though the situations

decades later when I retired as an officer I will have to admit even though the situations and complexities of the scenarios changed when I would lay down in an attempt to go to sleep! I think this lack of honesty and transparency is a major stumbling block to both old and new generations of firefighters. All brother and sister firefighters never reach a point thinking you're invincible and untouchable—it's only a matter of time before you will experience a reality check! Always be willing to admit your weaknesses—you're not alone in this fight!!! God Bless!

♥ 0



Posted by **brianinpv** May 9, 2019




Great article! As someone very interested in the profession these are things maybe I had not considered.

I appreciate your service!

Sincerely,
Brian

♥ 1

FIRERESCUE1 TOP 5

- 1 Firefighter brothers die within hours of each other
- 2 Investigation underway after naked woman found in bed at La. city fire station  5
- 3 5 stresses firefighters deal with that others don't know about  2
- 4 40 affected after jet dumps fuel on Los Angeles school playgrounds
- 5 FDNY medic attacked by partner in rig  3

[MORE FIRERESCUE1 ARTICLES >](#)