



FILLING THE VOID: TIPS FOR HANDLING THE CHANGING SEASONS

As the fall colors splash across the landscape it indicates for many of us the end of our employment for the season. Some will furlough and return in the spring, some of you are seasonal and unsure of what is next for employment or where. After a season with all of your crew you may be facing the possibility of disconnect from the comrades who have been through the same experiences as you, who understand the impacts of wildland fires. For all of us it is an indicator of change, maybe we are moving into our winter season of prescribed burning, maybe we are employed through the winter months while the rest of our crew is furloughed and having fun skiing the slopes.

Although some of us look forward to the end of the season, others amongst us experience a higher level of depression, anxiety, feelings of isolation, relationship issues and even suicide ideation. The slow fire season this year may have some feeling anxious about the financial impacts for the winter months ahead. How do we combat these concerns? How do we maintain comprehensive fitness, both physically and mentally, throughout the year? How do we reintegrate with families after long seasons of being gone for work or working endless long hours at our home units?

Here are some tips and ideas for managing mental and physical health throughout the year:

- **Identify the concerns** that employees have in regards to the end of the season, discuss this as a group to show that each of us are not alone in our fears.
- **Have a regular exercise routine.** It doesn't have to be fancy, maybe you just go for a walk every morning with your dog but make a plan and stick to it.
- **Volunteer.** Local animal shelters always need someone to walk a dog or love on a cat and would be happy to have you for any amount of time each week. Other volunteer ideas are reading to kids each week, habitat for humanity, reach out to your local senior center and find opportunities through churches. Other organizations include, but are not limited to; Big Brothers Big Sisters, Community Services, provision of firewood for the elderly and all of these groups would welcome the energy our firefighters can bring.

- **Create a chat group, facebook group, instagram group or other social media group** with a hashtag to help show each other across the miles where you are, what is keeping you all occupied during the off-months and to help keep you connected.
- **Insure that crew members have a home and support for the off-season**, help them to reach out to the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) prior to the end of their employment if they need help with these resources. Also reach out to your local fire departments and identify who their “go-to” clinicians are in the area. Seek out community chaplains organizations, support groups such as AA and other resources in the local area to share with your crews.
- **Use the buddy system**, make plans to stay connected on a regular basis with one or more crew members.
- Build a communication plan for expressing your feelings, thoughts, concerns with those you trust and care about in your daily life. Use it to develop how to say what you are thinking, how to convey what you want to say and how it will be delivered, perhaps it is written or maybe you do it in person.
- **Plan projects** with your spouse, significant other and/or kids if you have them, use this project to make time for them and connect. Being gone on assignment, or working long hours at the home unit for multiple days on end, can take its toll on the ability to remain connected. It can create a feeling of isolation so having something in common that brings you all together is essential.
- **Plan date nights or family nights.** Make the conscious effort to block out the same window each week or month to spend time connecting with your family and during that time put down the phones. Disconnect from social media, phones and internet during this window of time. Allow yourselves the opportunity to make each other the focus with no distractions.
- **Take “me time” as part of your regular routine.** Use that time to be alone, to do something for yourself. Get a massage, go for a run, go rock climbing, read a book, take time to go hunting with friends or hang out at the beach.....just take time each week for yourself. By giving your self the attention you need and deserve, you are able to then care for the other people who depend on you be they family, friends or co-workers.
- **When each new season starts, take the time to talk to crews and employees about the resources available** to them for learning to manage their budgets, planning for the off-season, the impacts of alcohol and their mental health and the need to have a support group in place. Make sure that new employees complete the paperwork for insurance, benefits, TSP if they are interested and other critical pieces of documentation that can in the long run hopefully bring peace of mind.

Conclusion

The following connect strategies are designed to help the individual feel that she or he is not alone, there are caring others around and there are ways to stay connected to others. Social connectedness is one of the strongest, protective factors, and is linked to emotional well-being and recovery.

CONNECT

Connect targets three types of social support:

- 1) *Instrumental Support:* the provision of material aid (such as assistance with daily task, woodcutting, remodel, material aid). Many firefighters and EMS providers have indicated that they prefer this type of support to emotional support in difficult times... we're doers!
- 2) *Informational Support:* The provision of relevant information (such as advice or guidance) intended to help the individual cope with current difficulties
- 3) *Emotional Support:* the expression of empathy, caring, reassurance and provision of opportunities for emotional expression and venting

Connect Strategies: Self

Here are a few strategies for connecting with others:

- Know the value of good mentors and friends.
- Surround yourself with people who are genuine, authentic, and honest.
- Make friends with people you can be yourself with, and talk with about what bothers you.
- Discipline yourself to have conversations with people who know you well enough to know when something is bothering you.
- Reprioritize your schedule to spend more time with those who mean the most to you.

Connect Strategies: Others

Here are a few strategies for helping others connect:

- If someone has retreated because of an incident, find ways to indirectly include them in projects and create collaborative opportunities with peers, to get them back into doing something meaningful.
- With introverts, bring them back being connected after they recharge, whatever that looks like for them.
- If someone is in the orange/red zone and resistant to getting support, and they trust you, don't be afraid to be more authoritative in getting them the help they need.
- In the middle of intensive stress, keep people moving; get them engaged in activities that facilitate talking while you do things. For instance, while moving, have people briefly report out on successes, loose ends, and their plan for the next 24 hours.
- Depending on your role, don't be afraid to sit and just listen and be comfortable letting a stressed person talk. The fact that you're in the same culture carries a lot of weight and can be more helpful than talking to anyone else.
- Keep calling, texting, and writing letters to the families and co-workers of fallen firefighters. Regardless if they pick up the phone or not, the fact that someone remembers them on an Anniversary date, or on any random day, is what is helpful.

Resources:

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, call 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

Be the One to Help Save a Life

Veterans Crisis Line, call 800-273-8255 or text 838255

Center for Firefighter Behavioral Health

First Responder Center for Excellence

Employee Assistance Program, ESPYR (Aspire), call 1-800-869-0276

Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM)

BLM 2019 suicide awareness poster series

NWCG Mental Health Subcommittee

USFS Suicide Awareness Toolbox