

RESILIENCE

SUMMER 2021



NATIONAL WILDFIRE COORDINATING GROUP
Risk Management Committee - Mental Health Subcommittee



"Resilience is more about adaptation than resistance or recovery."

Dr. Richard Gist,
Deputy Director Kansas City (MO) Fire Department

The pandemic has been complex, rapidly changing, and replete with multifaceted stressors, such as social isolation, childcare/schooling challenges, economic stress/strain, and the threat of infection (Mancini, 2020, Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, Policy). These stressors have the potential to amplify existing cumulative demands encountered by wildland fire personnel, such as job-related hazards, cumulative losses of people, places or things, and a consistent need to make difficult decisions. While many may consider job-related hazards to be the big-ticket stressors, issues like work policies and pay, interrupted sleep patterns, longevity of fire assignments, and challenging work/personal relationships can generate many competing demands. The combination of pandemic and work-related stress has the potential to create tremendous obstacles to maintaining well-being and resilience.

The American Psychological Association defines resilience as "the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress, such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems, or workplace and financial stressors." Research has demonstrated that responses to potentially traumatic experiences show substantial variation (Bonanno & Mancini, 2012) from person to person, and at different times after stressors. Some individuals may experience relatively few stress reactions and exhibit adaptive functioning, whereas others may experience more persistent and potentially debilitating symptoms. The cumulation of stressful experiences over time can result in stress reactions that come as a surprise to someone who previously would not have experienced similar circumstances as stressful. The most consistently reported protective factor for adaptation, or resilience, is the capacity to maintain the quality of social relationships while navigating through adversity and

Maintaining resilience can be challenging in the best of times, and the current circumstances can make it even more difficult. While these tips and strategies are offered as a way to improve well-being and resilience, if you find that they are not enough, seek social support, mentoring, or counseling. At times when we are at our lowest, the support of others is often required in the same way that medical intervention or physical therapy is needed when we injure ourselves. Remember that no one is at their best when cumulative stress occurs, so be patient with yourself and others, find small, regular ways to establish calm and quiet your mind, and know that you are one phone call or text away from getting through difficult times.



stress (Taylor, 2006). Social relationships characterized by authenticity, caring, meaningful conversations, and practical and emotional support, have the capacity to promote well-being, provide for emotional regulation, and contribute to resilience.

To facilitate resilience and adaptation to life's most demanding challenges, the following What Helps tips are offered as a menu to choose from by the National Center for PTSD, <https://www.ptsd.va.gov/>:

What Helps

- Talking to another person for support or spending time with others
- Engaging in positive distracting activities (sports, hobbies, reading)
- Getting adequate rest and eating healthy meals
- Trying to maintain a normal schedule
- Scheduling pleasant activities
- Taking breaks
- Focusing on something practical that you can do right now to manage the situation better
- Using relaxation methods (breathing exercises, meditation, calming self-talk, soothing music)
- Participating in a support group
- Exercising in moderation
- Keeping a journal
- Seeking mentoring or counseling



In response to the combined pandemic and wildland fire stressors, six helpful human performance strategies have been recommended for use during challenging times, or to get yourself back on track after a setback:

#1. Get ahead of obstacles.

TRY THIS: "If...Then" Planning

- Pre-plan your course of action when you come up against an obstacle, so you can quickly overcome it. You might think, "If this happens, then I'll do that."

#2. Reconnect with what is important to you.

TRY THIS: Regularly connect to your values

- Sometimes you forget what is worth your best effort, and why it matters. Ask yourself, "How do my efforts help create a better world for myself and others?"

#3. Chop your goals into bite-size pieces.

TRY THIS: Focus on the process rather than the outcome

- Goals that seem too big, complex, or far away can feel overwhelming and lead you to procrastination. Forget (mostly) about your goal and focus on nailing each step of your plan. For complex goals, find time to celebrate small wins.

#4. Ask for help.

TRY THIS: Ask others for feedback

- Working toward goals does not have to be a solo venture. By asking others for feedback, you can develop your growth mindset and learn new strategies as you work toward your goals. You will strengthen your connection with others too!

#5. Just do it.

TRY THIS: Stop thinking and go for it

- Do not get caught in paralysis by analysis. Commit to a small action, which can help develop a habit, and help support your goals.

#6. Create a new spark.

TRY THIS: Go back and forth between deeply imagining the benefits of reaching your goal and what you must overcome to get there

- It can be hard to stay motivated day to day. By imagining the benefits and contemplating the obstacles, it helps your brain to combine future rewards with the energy you need to tackle hurdles in your way.

Additional resources can be found at: <https://www.hprc-online.org/>.