



Mental Health Subcommittee

Suicide in Wildland Fire: Culture, Sense of Belonging, Identity, and Purpose

Firefighters, as an inescapable consequence of their calling, learn to confront fear and accept their mortality. Most have addressed adversity and have developed a tolerance. But when those protective factors, for whatever reason, are weakened or lost, and other elements in the firefighter's life serve to compound risk, behavioral health issues such as substance abuse, withdrawal, depression, and suicide tend to emerge.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

<https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>

Suicide Risk and Protective Factors

<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/suicide/riskprotectivefactors.html>

Suicide Prevention Resources for Veterans

<https://www.veteranaid.org/suicide-prevention-resources-for-veterans/>

Retiring? What is Your Plan

<https://www.nvfc.org/retiring-what-s-your-emotional-plan/>

Reasons to Expand Identity Beyond the Job

<https://www.cordico.com/2020/06/20/4-reasons-first-responders-need-to-expand-their-identity-beyond-their-job/>

Separating from Service: Words from a Former Hotshot Superintendent

<https://gacc.nifc.gov/cism/documents/Written%20By%20Former%20Eldorado%20Hotshot%20Superintendent.pdf>

Resources for American Indians and Alaska Natives

<http://www.sprc.org/settings/aian>

- Culture influences how mental health is understood and defined. Culture is the response of a group of human beings, whether its firefighters, military, veterans, police, American Indians, Alaska Natives, and others to validate the needs of its members.
- Research suggests one of the most influential factors for suicide risk is culture and sense of belonging. Loss of culture can affect well-being and is well understood by those whose cultural identities provide purpose and meaning.
- If the bonds and perceptions that make the occupation so attractive and compelling are lessened or lost, such as crew disbanded for winter, seasonal layoffs, injury, retirement, or other reasons, it may sever them from the protective factors of belonging and purpose that the fire service so richly provides.
- Whether from early retirement due to injury or just the changing of seasons, the impact of separation may be acute, and the sense of loss profound. Scientific research has shown a correlation between loss of belonging and increased chances of suicide.
- Find out who you are outside of the culture or service. Learn how to live on the outside. It is never too soon to prepare.

Remember: Your life and loved ones are your legacy. Have a plan for the off-season, be prepared for premature or unexpected separation from wildland firefighting and start planning for retirement as early in your career as possible. Reach out to those who have moved on from wildland firefighting and find out what they have done to maintain their mental health outside of the job.

It may not be easy but finding time for people and activities not related to work will benefit you and your whole family in the end.

