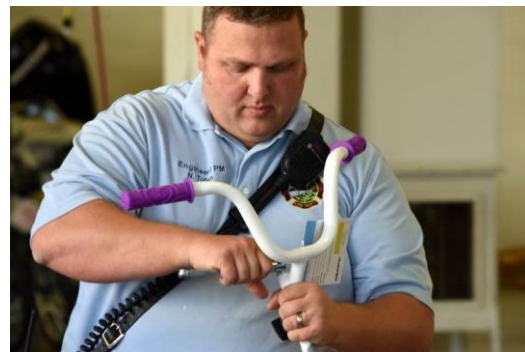


Nickolas Tuten

I'm a third generation OFD fireman. Grew up in the firehouse with men that defined what a man should be; rough, tough, responsible, servants, honest and dependable. Attributes that I tried to emulate. My father was a legend at OFD. I knew that I would never fill his shoes but I could try and make my own shoes and fill them but still trying to be what I saw growing up. Hired as a fireman in 1999, married with 4 kids, working 4 jobs to barely keep our heads above water and the power on. My mental health and weight progressively got worse. I gave everything I had for others and never took time for myself. My marriage was slowly failing, infidelity on both sides, anger, verbal fights, resentment, and depression. My dad who was my best friend died in May of 2016. In November of that same year, my good friend Matthew Ngedly completed suicide. I filed for divorce to end an 18-year marriage. The relationship with all my kids were strained as bitterness and the nasty divorce spilled into their lives. Every aspect of my life was spiraling downward. I never let anyone know how troubled I was because I was happy go lucky Nick and I needed to be the rough tough man that I thought I had to be.



I did not know how to communicate how I was feeling and that I had a plan to commit suicide. After backing Engine 6 into quarters after a call, sitting in the cab of the truck, I told my Lt. that "I can see how Matt Ngedly got to where suicide was an option, because I'm there." After the words came out of my mouth, I tried to backpedal and play it off that I was just talking about the stress of the divorce. I didn't give him much of a chance to respond or react before I changed the subject. He did notice that I wasn't myself. I wasn't acting like the happy go lucky Nick. I wasn't talking. I was to myself and acting out at times. That night at dinner, there were a bunch of fat jokes being made at me and I lashed out with the "N" word. A word that is the nastiest worst word that could be said, something I've never said, something I don't feel or believe in. I truly love every single person but I said it because I was hurt. I was immediately ashamed and sorry for saying it. The Lieutenants did what they needed to do and addressed everyone as a whole and individually after that. My lieutenant recognized that I needed help. He took



the incident to the District Chief and said Nick needs help and the response was “write him up for the comment.” I was told by the Health and Safety Chief to go to Dr. Portnoy at Centre Care to talk about the mental health aspect. Just go and check that box to get cleared back to shift. I went and fed him all lies and was told I had to go to a mandatory 3 sessions with EAP and he signed me off. I never went and no one from the department ever checked on me or if I had gone. I felt betrayed and dismissed from the department that I had given my life to. The only focus was me getting disciplined for what I had said, which I had no problem with because what I said was wrong.

As this process continued; the divorce, being treated as a racist, the demotion, my mental health worsened and I continued to put on a happy face in front of everyone. There were a few people that didn’t buy my façade and they called me. They weren’t ground breaking interventions, but simply a call saying things like, “Hey man, just calling to check on you and to tell you I’m here for you. Keep your chin up, these things will pass. Love you buddy.” They each made a few simple calls to me and it was always at a time that I needed to hear it the most. Even so, the divorce continued and my depression worsened. I found myself sitting on the edge of my bed with a gun in my mouth. I looked at everything and every problem had one common denominator and it was me, I was the problem, I was the burden. As I sat and cried, I didn’t think of my kids, I didn’t think of my mom or brothers, I thought of those 4 guys who called me, who made me feel like I mattered and I wasn’t alone. It didn’t make sense to me why that was the reason that came to my mind to make me stop squeezing the trigger and pull the gun out of my mouth. Depression isn’t logical, it doesn’t make sense. With simple phone calls, Pat Kelly, Davis Odell, Jeff Orrange, and Eric Moose saved my life. Two guys on the peer support team with training, and two guys who had no training that just reached out to check on me because they cared. I will forever be in debt to them.

I decided to get help. I didn’t use the resources the peer team has available. I did things the hard way and did it on my own and not telling anyone. Looking back, I wish I would have talked to someone, allowed people to be by my side and support me. It would have made my journey 1000% easier with the resources that are already vetted and processes known by the peer team. Once I made my way back to a “normal” sense of mental health I decided to make sure that no one would get to where I was. If I could help it, I would be there for anyone and everyone. No matter who you are, if you called at 3am and said I need you, I will be there. It’s the reason I’m on our peer support team now. I am a peer support success story.

Our jobs, our personal lives, tragedies and triumphs change us. Sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. If you are struggling with ANYTHING, call me!