

Coping with Grief: Fire Fighters



What is grief?

Grief is a normal response of sorrow, heartache or loss that occurs after losing someone or something important to you. Grief can also occur in the aftermath of a major disaster or other traumatic event. In these instances, you may or may not have a close relationship with those lost. When a fire fighter dies in the line of duty, crew members will experience feelings of grief.

What should I expect?

Grief is not considered a psychological disorder, but does involve several emotional, behavioral and physiological reactions:

- Intense feeling of sadness, emptiness, loss or feeling nothing at all (numb)
- Waves of anger towards God, those involved in the incident or even the deceased
- Difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness or slowed thinking
- Muscle weakness or tension, abdominal discomfort or changes in appetite
- Difficulty sleeping or fatigue
- Desire to withdraw from others or disengage from usual activity
- Questions about the meaning and purpose of life

These reactions are considered normal. Grief can be experienced differently from person to person. While some will find relief in the support of crew and family, others will prefer to be alone. For most, the reactions described above usually subside within a few weeks or months. The individual can accept the loss and function in the new normal. For some, however, grief can linger and transform into complicated grief, which can also be diagnosed as clinical depression. Below are some key differences between grief and complicated grief:

Grief	Complicated Grief
Waves of emotion come and go	Sadness, anger or despair are daily and persistent
Despite desire to withdraw, individual responds positively to social support	Individual is unable to feel comfort from social support
Individual has good days and bad days	Individual has mostly bad days, daily functioning is consistently impaired
Sporadic thoughts of death are tied to desire to reunite with deceased, or a general curiosity about death	Recurring thoughts of death are tied to feeling worthless, undeserving, or unable to cope

How Fire Fighters May Cope Differently

While grief is a universal human reaction, for fire fighters and paramedics, some aspects of the grieving process are influenced by the unique aspects of job. When a fire fighter or paramedic dies in the line of duty, crew members may still be responsible for clearing the scene, carrying out usual protocol, notifying family members and other required duties.

While funerals and memorial services offer a rare moment to pause and truly honor the loss, many fire fighters and paramedics are back to work the same or next day.

Regardless of their grief or emotional state, fire fighters on shift are expected to function at full capacity, make immediate critical decisions and protect the community at large. While work provides an important sense of structure, routine and normalcy that help facilitate the grieving process, work can also be used to avoid emotion, which can complicate the grieving process.

How to Take Care of Yourself

Most fire fighters and paramedics function extremely well under pressure and the fast-paced nature of the job. For many, the hardest part is coping with the down time after a shift has ended or the memorial services conclude. Coping with grief may challenge you to act the opposite way you feel. Examples include:

- Talk about the deceased when you are ready
- Instead of trying to avoid feeling, allow waves of emotions to come and go
- Try to follow a daily routine, even when you are off duty
- Get at least 20 minutes of physical activity every day
- Eat a balanced diet and hydrate often
- Despite the urge to withdraw, allow yourself to be around others
- Avoid using food, alcohol or other substances to manage your emotions
- Find one stress outlet outside of work and do it daily (e.g. play music, see friends, exercise, pray, meditate, etc.)

Beware of Survivor's Guilt

Fire fighters and paramedics have a calling to serve others, protect their community and each other. When a line-of-duty death occurs, those brothers and sisters directly or indirectly involved with an incident may experience survivor's guilt.

This occurs when an individual feels a sense of guilt that they survived the traumatic incident when the deceased did not. Feelings that the survivor should have done more to prevent the loss may also be triggered. When an individual or department faces a tragic loss, it's important to acknowledge these feelings with others. Talking to someone is necessary to express emotion and can also help reality test irrational assumptions or beliefs. Reach out to a trusted friend, chaplain, peer support team or your EAP. Survivor's guilt is a normal response to an unnatural loss. Talking about it helps.

If you need support: