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Fire Physical and Psychological Primary Danger and Secondary Danger

The physical and psychological primary danger of firefighting is comprised of the inherent risks of the job, such as working in motor vehicle traffic, confronting dangerous fire scenes, and an increased probability of exposure to critical incidents. Sadly, there is an insidious and lesser known *secondary danger* in firefighting. This danger is often unspecified and seldom discussed. It is an artifact of the fire culture and is frequently reinforced by firefighters themselves. It is the idea that equates “asking for help” with “personal and professional weakness”. Secondary danger is suspected to be a significant factor in firefighter suicide. For more information about physical and psychological primary danger and secondary danger see *Contemporary Issues in Police Psychology* (Digliani, J.A., 2015). The Firefighter Make It Safe Initiative is an extrapolation and modification of the Make It Safe Police Officer Initiative.

The “Make it Safe” Firefighter Initiative

Make it safe for firefighters to ask for psychological support

The Make it Safe Initiative is a concerted effort to reduce the secondary danger of firefighting.

The Make it Safe Initiative seeks to:

- (1) make it personally and professionally acceptable for firefighters to engage peer and professional psychological support services without fear of agency or peer reprisal or ridicule.
- (2) reduce firefighter fears about asking for psychological support when confronting potentially overwhelming job or other life difficulties.
- (3) change organizational climates that discourage firefighters from seeking psychological help by reducing explicit and implicit organizational messages that imply asking for help is indicative of personal and professional weakness.
- (4) alter the profession-wide firefighting culture that generally views asking for psychological help as a personal or professional weakness.
- (5) improve the career-long psychological wellness of firefighters by encouraging fire departments to adopt long-term and comprehensive firefighter-support strategies such as the Comprehensive Model for Peer Advanced Strategic Support.

How serious is firefighter secondary danger? So serious that some firefighters will choose suicide over asking for help.

Twelve primary components of the Make it Safe Firefighter Initiative

The Make it Safe Firefighter Initiative encourages:

- (1) every firefighter to "self-monitor" and to take personal responsibility for his or her mental wellness.
- (2) every firefighter to seek psychological support when confronting potentially overwhelming difficulties (firefighters do not have to "go it alone").
- (3) every firefighter to diminish the sometimes deadly effects of secondary danger by reaching out to other firefighters known to be facing difficult circumstances.
- (4) veteran and ranking firefighters to use their status to help reduce secondary danger (veteran and ranking firefighters can reduce secondary danger by openly discussing it, appropriately sharing selected personal experiences, avoiding the use of pejorative terms to describe firefighters seeking or engaging psychological support, and talking about the acceptability of seeking psychological support when confronting stressful circumstances).
- (5) fire department administrators to better educate themselves about the nature of secondary danger and to take the lead in secondary danger reduction.
- (6) fire department administrators to issue a departmental memo encouraging firefighters to engage psychological support services when confronting potentially overwhelming stress (the memo should include information about confidentiality and available support resources).
- (7) basic training in stress management, stress inoculation, critical incidents, posttraumatic stress, fire family dynamics, substance use and addiction, and the warning signs of depression and suicide.
- (8) the development of programs that engage pre-emptive, early-warning, and periodic department-wide firefighter support interventions (for example, proactive annual check in, "early warning" policies designed to support firefighters displaying signs of stress, and regularly scheduled stress inoculation and critical incident stressor management training).
- (9) fire departments to initiate incident-specific protocols to support firefighters and their families when firefighters are involved in critical incidents.
- (10) fire departments to create appropriately structured, properly trained, and clinically supervised peer support teams.
- (11) fire departments to provide easy and confidential access to counseling and specialized psychological support services.
- (12) firefighters at all levels of the organization to enhance the agency climate so that others are encouraged to ask for help when experiencing psychological or emotional difficulties instead of keeping and acting out a deadly secret.

**If firefighters wish to do the best for themselves and other firefighters,
it's time to make a change. It's time to make a difference.**