

# THE FIREFIGHTER “MAKE IT SAFE” INITIATIVE

CURRENT ISSUES IN PEER SUPPORT

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The 3 “seconds” of Firefighting  
Primary and Secondary Danger  
The “Make it Safe” Firefighter Initiative

Make it Safe

Firefighter  
Initiative

# The Three “Seconds” of Firefighting



# The Three “Seconds”

## Secondary Injury, Secondary Trauma, Secondary Danger

*Secondary injury* is the harm that can be caused to firefighters when they are poorly treated following involvement in a critical incident.

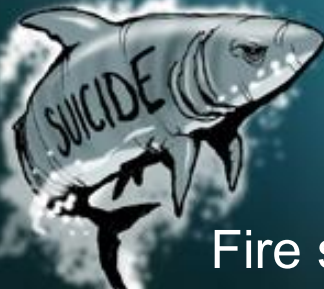
*Secondary trauma* — also known as vicarious trauma — refers to the indirect traumatization that can occur when a person is exposed to others who have been directly traumatized. Secondary trauma is a real concern for the spouses and family members of firefighters that have been involved in a critical incident, as well as previously non-traumatized firefighters and others participating in departmental critical incident group debriefings.

The *secondary danger* of firefighting is the idea that equates “asking for help” with “personal and professional weakness”. *Secondary danger* can be summed up as an attitude which includes the idea that firefighters must “show no weakness.”

To better understand “secondary danger” consider the fire service culture...

PAUL COMBS  
DRAWN BY FIRE  
FIRE ENGINEERING ©2013

I DON'T NEED  
ANY HELP -  
I CAN RESCUE  
MYSELF



Fire service culture: I'll deal with this on my own...

The image features a bright, yellow-orange background representing a fire scene. In the foreground, the dark silhouettes of three firefighters are visible. They are wearing helmets and gear, and their forms are partially obscured by the intense light of the fire behind them. The overall mood is one of bravery and danger.

# **Fire Service Culture: Firefighter Primary and Secondary Danger**

Jack A. Digliani, PhD, EdD

# Firefighter Primary Danger



The primary danger of firefighting is comprised of:

- (1) physical primary danger and
- (2) psychological primary danger.

## **Firefighter Physical Primary Danger**

The physical primary danger of firefighting is comprised of the inherent risks of the job, such as responding to toxic spills, entering burning buildings, venting roofs, rescues, and so on. You need only to read a newspaper or watch a news broadcast about a major fire incident to understand the physical primary danger of firefighting. These circumstances represent situations wherein a firefighter may be physically harmed.

# Firefighter Psychological Primary Danger

The psychological primary danger of firefighting is related to, but distinguishable from the physical primary danger of firefighting. The psychological primary danger of firefighting is represented in the increased probability that due to the nature of firefighting, firefighters will be exposed to critical incidents, work-related cumulative stress, and human tragedy, thereby increasing the probability of stress-related psychological and emotional difficulties.

# Firefighting Physical and Psychological Primary Danger



Another way of saying this is that the physical primary danger of firefighting constitutes a work environment that generates the psychological primary danger of firefighting. In addition to the primary dangers of firefighting, there is a secondary danger.



# Firefighter Secondary Danger



The secondary danger of firefighting is an insidious artifact of the fire service culture and is often strengthened and reinforced by firefighters themselves. It is the idea that equates “*asking for psychological help*” with “*personal and professional weakness.*”

*Secondary danger is:*

- (1) strengthened by the fear of department or peer ridicule or reprisal for seeking psychological help, and
- (2) reinforced by actual department or peer ridicule or reprisal for seeking psychological help...

# Secondary Danger

...the idea that equates “asking for psychological help” with “personal and professional weakness” can also be reinforced by *friends, family members, personal self-talk, and firefighters’ internalized ideas about what a firefighter should be!*

Combined, these factors encourage some firefighters to conclude that good firefighters must “show no weakness,” including the “mental weakness” sometimes associated with seeking psychological intervention and support.





The fire service  
primary dangers  
are addressed  
by basic, advanced,  
and  
ongoing  
training





There are many programs for the firefighter Primary Dangers...*but what about firefighter Secondary Danger ?*



How dangerous is Firefighter Secondary Danger?

*How dangerous is firefighter secondary danger?*



So dangerous that some firefighters will  
suicide before asking for help.

The  
***“Make it Safe” Firefighter Initiative***  
is aimed at reducing the **secondary danger**  
of firefighting, and thereby reduce the number  
of firefighter suicides

Make it Safe

**Firefighter  
Initiative**

Developed in 2013 as an adjunct to the Make it Safe Police Officer Initiative.

Make it Safe

**Police  
Officer  
Initiative**

## The Make it Safe Firefighter 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 ridicule or reprisal.
- (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 fire service 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 (COMPASS).

# The 12 elements of the Make it Safe Firefighter Initiative



Make it Safe

**Firefighter  
Initiative**



# The Make it Safe Firefighter Initiative encourages:

(1) every firefighter to "self-monitor" and to take personal responsibility for their mental wellness.

The logo features the text "MENTAL WELLNESS MATTERS" in a bold, sans-serif font. "MENTAL" and "WELLNESS" are in blue, while "MATTERS" is in white. A blue horizontal line is positioned below the text. To the right of the text is a stylized blue silhouette of a human head in profile, facing right. Inside the head is a red heart. The background of the head area is filled with a pattern of blue hexagons of varying sizes.

**MENTAL  
WELLNESS  
MATTERS**

# Make it Safe Firefighter Initiative

(2) every firefighter to seek psychological support when confronting potentially overwhelming difficulties (firefighters do not have to "go it alone").

**Tough firefighters  
ask for help**



# Make it Safe Firefighter Initiative

(3) every firefighter to diminish the sometimes deadly effects of secondary danger by reaching out to other firefighters known to be facing difficult circumstances.

**REACH OUT**

you may save a life

# Make it Safe Firefighter Initiative

(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.

# Make it Safe Firefighter Initiative

(5) fire department administrators to better educate themselves about the nature of secondary danger and to take the lead in secondary danger reduction.



# Make it Safe Firefighter Initiative

(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).

# Make it Safe Firefighter Initiative

(7) basic training in stress management, stress inoculation, critical incidents, posttraumatic stress, firefighter family dynamics, substance use and addiction, and the warning signs of depression and suicide.



**STRESS**

# Make it Safe Firefighter Initiative

(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).



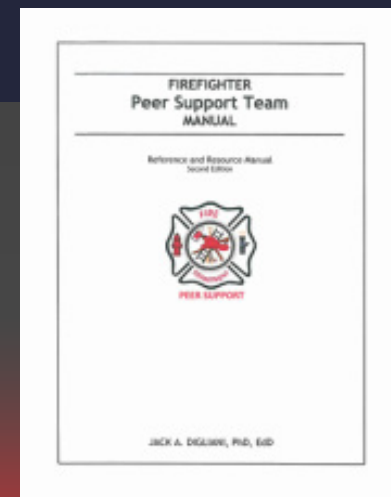
# Make it Safe Firefighter Initiative

(9) agencies to initiate incident-specific protocols to support firefighters and their families when firefighters are involved in critical incidents.



# Make it Safe Firefighter Initiative

(10) fire departments to create appropriately structured, properly trained, and clinically supervised peer support teams.



Serve-Save-Support-Surpass

# Make it Safe Firefighter Initiative

(11) fire departments to provide easy and confidential access to counseling and specialized firefighter psychological support services.

Counseling  
**CONFIDENTIAL**

# Make it Safe Firefighter Initiative

(12) firefighters at all levels of the department 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.



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# Make it Safe Firefighter Initiative

Members of fire service peer support teams can help reduce police secondary danger by sharing **Make it Safe Firefighter Initiative** information with administrators, presenting Initiative information at shift briefings, and discussing the Initiative in appropriate individual and group settings.



Firefighter

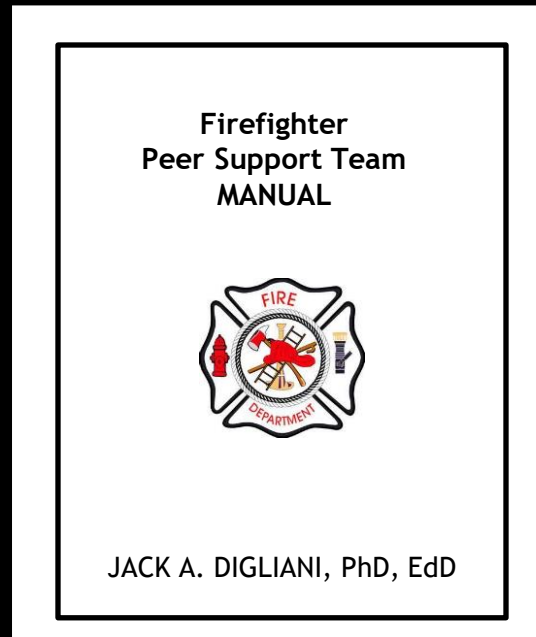


Peer Support Team

Additional ways to reduce secondary danger ?

# Firefighter Peer Support Team Manual

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For information about implementing the Initiative, the COMPASS program, to download the latest edition of the Firefighter Peer Support Team Manual at no cost, or to contact Jack A. Digliani visit <https://www.jackdigliani.com>

“Make it Safe”

# Firefighter Initiative

Current Issues in Peer Support



Peer Support: Serve-Save-Support-Surpass