

FIREFIGHTER LIFESTYLE & HEALTH

CRACKYL

MAGAZINE

THE LEADERSHIP
GAP WE IGNORE

THE
PERFECT
FIREHOUSE
MARRIAGE

HOW TO
GPS
YOUR LIFE

20
FIREHOUSE
PERSONALITIES

BECOMING
WHO WE WERE
BUILT TO BE

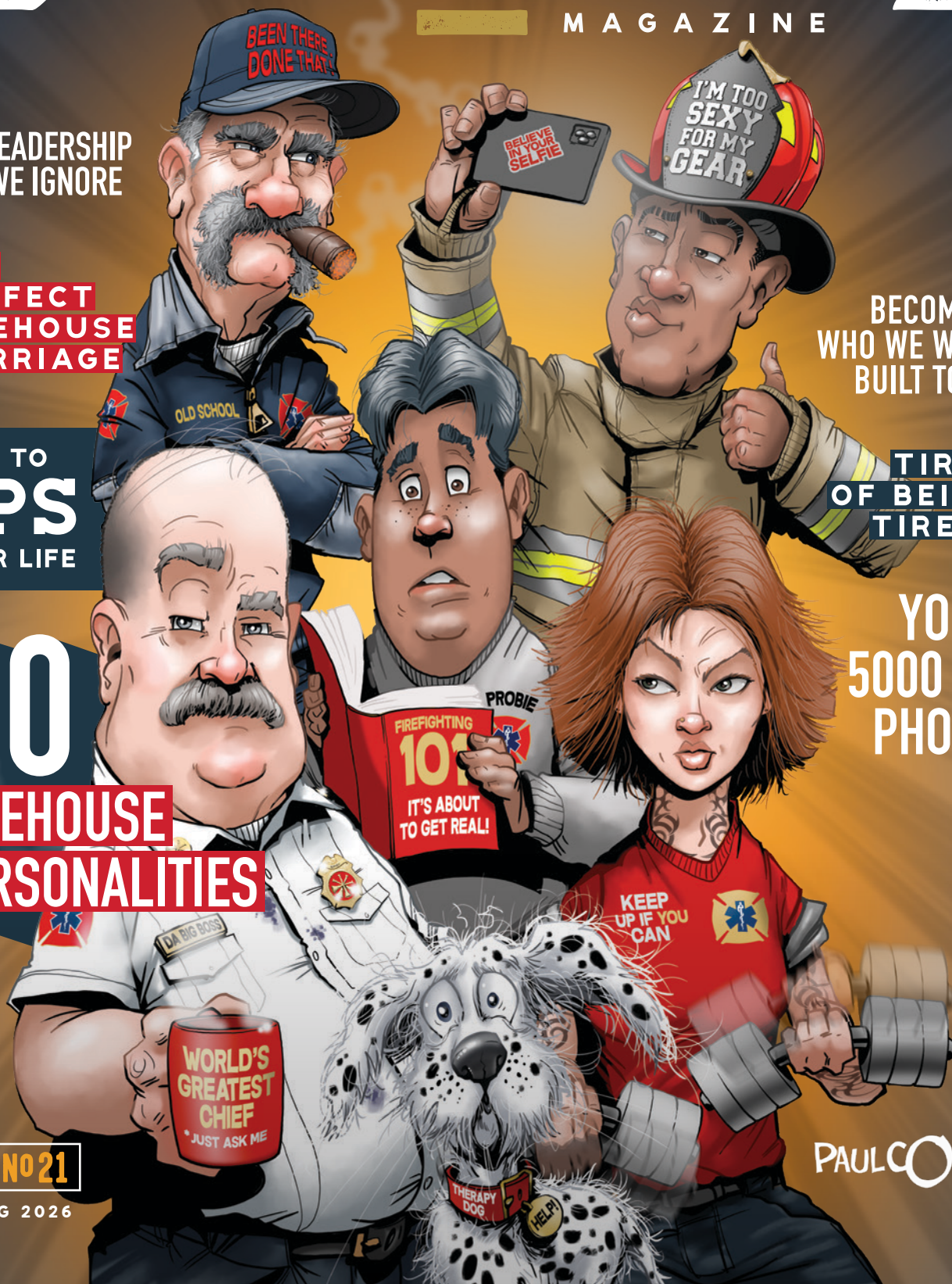
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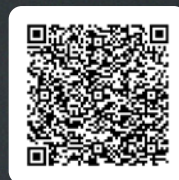
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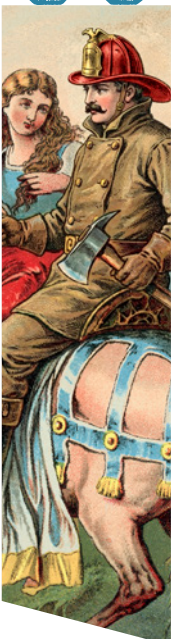
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This issue started with a simple observation: every firehouse runs on personalities. Not trucks. Not tools. But people.

The humor styles, the quiet leaders, the tension creators, the culture carriers — these human dynamics shape a station as much as any SOP ever written. Yet the fire service has never really had a shared language for talking about them.

A conversation between Melissa Lawlor and me sparked the cover story in this issue: *20 Firehouse Personalities*. It's a playful look at the archetypes that show up in nearly every station — the characters, habits, and emotional patterns that shape a crew's chemistry. Some personalities naturally click. Others clash. Those dynamics influence trust, communication, and ultimately how a company performs. To bring the idea to life visually, we asked Paul Combs to illustrate the cover and, as always, he captured the humor and truth of firehouse culture perfectly.

Inside the issue, you'll also find several pieces that challenge how we think about the lives we build around this job. *GPSing Your Life* explores the idea of navigating your path with greater intention, while *The Train Station Theory* offers a perspective on the people who move in and out of our lives along the way.

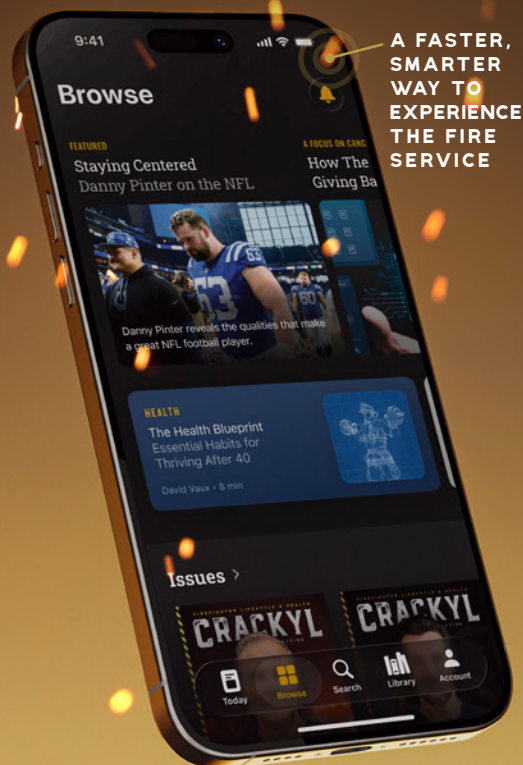
We're also proud to feature Michael Laughlin, whose story pushes beyond what most would consider human limits. What struck us most wasn't just what happened to him — it was how he thinks, and the mindset behind it.

At CRACKYL, we aim to highlight stories and ideas that challenge how firefighters see the job and themselves.

If you recognize a few of these personalities — including your own — then the conversation has already begun, even if only in your own mind.

Kory Pearn
PUBLISHER / EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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HOW TO GPS YOUR LIFE

By Jennifer Anderson, Founder and CEO,
First Responder Coaching

THREE KEYS TO NAVIGATE SERVICE, SEASONS AND SELF-DIRECTION

For firefighters, navigation is second nature, whether you're backing a truck into a tight station bay or finding your way through smoke and chaos. Off the job, though, navigation can feel far less intuitive. Life doesn't come with coordinates. There's no CAD system telling you where to turn next, or how to reorient yourself when you get turned around.

You cannot get where you want to go – personally or professionally – unless you know exactly where you start. This is where GPSing life comes in. But it's not the device on your dashboard. It's a simple framework that offers clarity outside the firehouse when you're challenged by a loss of personal direction and perspective.

GROUND TRUTH

THE COURAGE TO SEE YOUR CURRENT REALITY

In the fire service, you would never enter a structure without getting a read on conditions: wind, heat, smoke, and resources. But in your personal life? Many firefighters skip this step entirely.

Ground truth means asking yourself, "Where am I – honestly – right now?"

Not where you wish you were. Not where you tell people you are. But where you actually are, today.

This includes your physical state (fatigue, injury, sleep), emotional state (stress, grief, burnout indicators), relational state (your partner or kids receiving the best of you – or what's left of you), and your financial state (stability vs. overtime survival).

Firefighters are experts at reading scenes, but often struggle to read themselves with the same accuracy. The culture of toughness reinforces this silence. The belief that "I'm fine" becomes a script repeated so often that you start to believe it.

But ground truth isn't a weakness. It's situational awareness for your life. It's the first step toward regaining direction.

SYSTEM OF MOVEMENT

GETTING BACK ON COURSE

Firefighters tend to consistently hate two things: changes and the way things are. But with new SOPs, new gear, and new routines, change is inevitable. In coaching, I've learned something profoundly true: your life doesn't change in leaps. It changes by traveling small paths that lead to bigger things.

But drifting off course happens not because of carelessness, but because of commitment. The qualities that make you exceptional in the fire service – dependability, self-sacrifice, discipline – can overwhelm the rest of your life if you're not actively navigating it.

Firefighters drift when the job becomes their only identity, when stress accumulates faster than recovery, when fatigue becomes normal, when relationships get your leftovers, or when silence replaces communication. Drift is not a failure. It's a sign you haven't checked your coordinates in a while.

So how do we get back on course? Consider any of the following:

- A sleep routine that protects your energy
- A 10-minute decompression ritual after tough shifts
- Clear communication with your spouse about needs and schedules
- A financial plan that reduces stress-driven overtime
- A monthly check-in with a mentor, therapist, or coach
- A crew member who asks, "How may I best support you today?"

Systems aren't about perfection. They're about movement – consistent, steady, and sustainable movement. Check in with yourself using the GPS tool monthly, and allow yourself a chance to realign.

It could be adding a family night, saying no to one overtime shift, scheduling physical therapy, booking a coaching appointment, re-establishing a workout habit, or asking a friend to check in weekly. Small shifts, repeated consistently, create long-term change.

You serve your community with precision. You deserve the same clarity in your own life. **C**

PURPOSE PULSE

WHAT SEASON ARE YOU IN RIGHT NOW?

Purpose isn't a one-time discovery. It shifts. It evolves. And first responders, perhaps more than any other profession, move through wildly different "seasons" of life and identity. The problem is this: when your purpose changes but your habits don't, you drift.

Ambition season: Your early career, where there is a hunger to learn and to serve.

Family season: Whether you're raising kids or strengthening/repairing a marriage.

Recovery season: Often found after a significant call, injury, loss, or transition.

Legacy season: Where you mentor others, work to shape culture, and think about what you want to leave behind.

Performing a purpose pulse check forces us to reflect on what matters most in this season and whether the calendar reflects it. When you ignore your season, you fall into frustration. When you honor it, you regain momentum, energy, and direction.



COUNTER PUNCHING

THE SUBSTANCE USE + TRAUMA COMBO

///

A RISING CRISIS
AMONG FIRST
RESPONDERS
INVOLVES UNTREATED
TRAUMA AND
SUBSTANCE USE
DISORDER (SUD),
BUT THIS SITUATION
IS NOT INEVITABLE

By Dr. Tomer Anbar, CEO, Institutes of Health

Today, employers who embrace culturally competent, transdisciplinary trauma-informed care models are witnessing something extraordinary.

THE OVERWHELMING MAJORITY OF FIREFIGHTERS TREATED FOR COMPLEX PTSD AND SUD NOT ONLY RECOVER, BUT THEY RE-ENTER THE WORKFORCE WITH RENEWED PURPOSE.

These numbers are not just statistics; rather, they are lifelines. They reflect a transformational shift in how we treat firefighters when they need help the most.

WHY FIREFIGHTERS TURN TO SUBSTANCES

With repeated exposure to trauma coupled with sleep deprivation, musculoskeletal injuries, and a culture of stoic perseverance, **it's no surprise that alcohol, opioids, or stimulants can become a crutch.** But what starts as a way to sleep through the night or dull the pain can become a trap.

When PTSD, traumatic brain injury, or chronic pain go unrecognized and untreated, **substance use escalates.** What follows is a dual-

diagnosis spiral: **trauma fuels substance use, and substance use deepens trauma's hold.**

Many firefighters suffer not just from trauma, **but from organizational betrayal, a deep injury felt when departments fail to protect, support, or advocate for their own.** It is what happens when a firefighter is told, "Just push through," or sent to an off-the-shelf rehabilitation program that lacks understanding of what it means to be first on the scene.

IT'S WHAT HAPPENS WHEN SYSTEMS FALL SHORT, LEAVING FIREFIGHTERS FEELING INVISIBLE.

CULTURAL COMPETENCE IS NOT A BUZZWORD. IT'S A LIFELINE

To reverse this crisis, medical and psychological providers must become culturally competent. **This means:**

- **Understanding the firehouse code:** the loyalty, the humor, the silence, and the scars
- **Speaking the language of tactical athletes,** not generic patients
- **Physically vetting SUD and PTSD programs** to ensure they deliver results, not just temporary relief

It also means risk managers, claims examiners, physicians, and psychologists **must be aligned, not just contractually, but philosophically.** When cities like San Diego adopted transdisciplinary trauma-integrated models that truly reflected the fire culture, the outcomes were transformational. Firefighters did not just get better; **they came back stronger.**

THE PIVOTAL ROLE OF RISK MANAGERS: COST-EFFECTIVE CARE STARTS WITH THE RIGHT REFERRAL

Risk managers occupy one of the most influential positions in reversing the tide of firefighter trauma and substance use. By referring injured firefighters to programs that are both clinically effective and culturally aligned, they can drive outcomes that matter most: **long-term recovery, return to service, and cost containment.**

Programs with validated success rates, where nearly all participants resolved their PTSD and SUD

diagnoses and went on to reclaim meaningful roles, **are rewriting what recovery looks like.** Risk managers who champion these models are not just supporting their firefighters;

THEY ARE PROTECTING DEPARTMENT READINESS, REDUCING PROLONGED DISABILITY COSTS, AND UPHOLDING THE MISSION OF PUBLIC SAFETY.

THE NEW STANDARD: TRANSDISCIPLINARY BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL THERAPEUTIC COMMUNITIES

The most effective programs now integrate:

- **Neurologists** to assess and treat undiagnosed brain injuries
- **Addictionologists** and psychiatrists to medically manage detox and dual diagnoses
- **Clinical psychologists and trauma therapists** trained in firefighter-specific protocols
- **Physical therapists, occupational therapists, and chronic pain specialists** who understand cumulative injury patterns
- **Peer support** from fellow firefighters in recovery within a residential therapeutic community model
- **Nutrition and sleep science** to restore baseline functioning

THIS IS NOT JUST REHABILITATION: IT'S A FULL RESET, A SUSTAINED REINTEGRATION INTO LIFE, SERVICE, AND SELF.

WHY RISK MANAGERS AND FIRE CHIEFS MUST LEAD THE CHARGE

If you are a fire chief, risk manager, union representative, or city official, know this: **your policies and provider choices are either breaking the chain or reinforcing it.** Sending a firefighter to a generic program that does not understand their culture contributes to the tragedy. You would not send an Olympic athlete to a generalist for a torn ACL. **Why send your most elite first responders to a program that does not speak their language or deliver proven results?**

THE RESULTS ARE IN: RECOVERY IS POSSIBLE. SO IS RETURN TO WORK

Departments that invest in integrated, culturally competent care are seeing:

- Most participants **no longer meet the diagnostic criteria for PTSD**
- Most return to **meaningful work or active duty**
- None discharged with a **sense of abandonment**

These are not outliers; they are indicators of a new gold standard for treatment and recovery in the fire service.

THIS IS THE NEW FIRE LINE. ARE YOU READY?

When a firefighter reaches out for help, it is not weakness – **it is a call for backup.** If we fail to respond with competence, urgency, and cultural respect, we become part of the trauma. But if we answer with the right team, the right treatment, and the right understanding, **we become part of their recovery.** **C**

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The Train Station Theory

for understanding life's connections

By Frank Viscuso, (ret) Deputy Chief, Keynote Speaker and Author

Looking at our relationships in a train-station context helps us value them for what they are

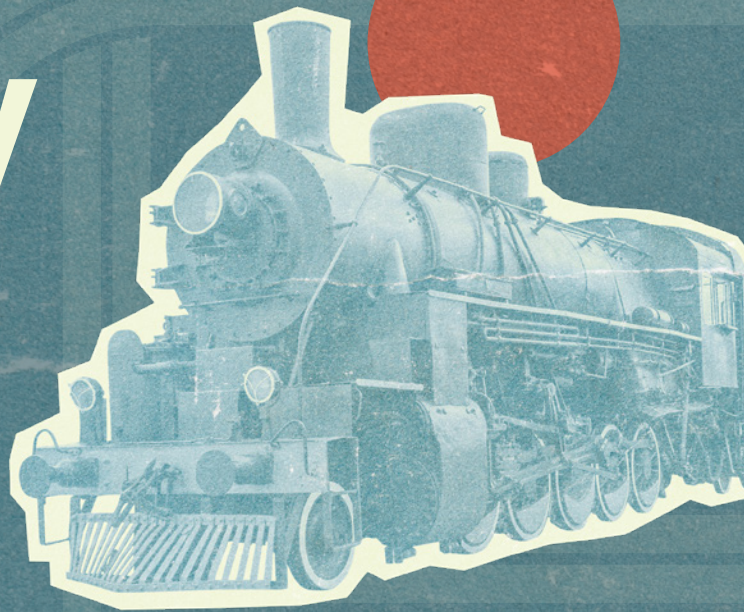
Imagine life as a busy train station, a grand central hub where countless souls arrive, depart, and briefly intertwine. It's a concept that resonates deeply, a powerful metaphor for the ebb and flow of human connection that shapes who we are and who we are destined to become.

Like a seasoned conductor, we must learn to observe, understand, and sometimes even direct the traffic of relationships in our lives. This isn't about being cold or calculating; it's about being wise, discerning, and ultimately more effective in our personal and professional journeys.

Think about it. You've seen them, haven't you? **The folks who hop on your proverbial train for just a few stops – a fleeting acquaintance, a project collaborator, a temporary mentor.** They bring a burst of energy, a fresh perspective, or a specific skill, and then, just as quickly, they're off to their next destination.

Then there are those who ride alongside us for what feels like an eternity – our family, our closest friends, our long-term colleagues. These are the steady companions, the ones who witness our triumphs and our struggles. The ones who ride alongside us on the rigs and break bread with us back at the station. The officers who teach us the basics, as well as the life lessons we carry into each fire, along with our axes and halligans. These people are the anchors in our personal narratives.

And then, heartbreakingly, there are those who depart before we're ready to wave goodbye – a sudden and unexpected loss, a friendship that fades, a colleague who transfers to another organization, a professional partnership that dissolves. Each departure, regardless of its nature, leaves an indelible mark.



There's a profound truth embedded within this Train Station Theory: every single person, no matter how brief their journey with us, leaves a mark.

They are not mere passengers; they are teachers, catalysts, and contributors to the grand tapestry of our lives. Even the most challenging interactions can offer invaluable insights into our own resilience, communication style, and boundaries, because every interaction, positive or negative, presents an opportunity for growth if we are open to it.

Consider the short-stop passengers. Perhaps it was a senior firefighter who mentored you when you were a probationary firefighter, or a stranger who offered a kind word when you were silently struggling, or someone who pushed you to think outside the box. Their influence might have seemed minor at the time, but these small interactions accumulate, subtly shaping your knowledge, empathy, and problem-solving abilities.

Then there are the long-haul companions. These are the relationships that require consistent effort, nurturing, and mutual respect. They are the ones who truly know you, who celebrate your successes as if they were their own, and who stand by you during your darkest hours. These connections are the bedrock of our emotional well-being and often provide the greatest opportunities for deep personal growth. Maintaining these relationships requires intentionality, active listening, self-reflection, and a willingness to invest time and energy.

And what about those who depart prematurely? This is perhaps the most challenging aspect of the Train Station Theory. Whether it's the loss of a loved one, the end of a cherished friendship, or the dissolution of a professional partnership, these departures can leave us feeling adrift and heartbroken.

However, even in these moments of sorrow, there are lessons to be learned. They teach us about resilience, about the preciousness of time, and about the importance of cherishing the connections we have while they are present. When we experience these types of losses, it introduces us to adversity, but even in adversity, there is an opportunity to find strength, to refine our perspective, and to move closer to the person we were destined to become all along.

A wise person will understand how each person they connect with, regardless of when, how, and for how long, fits into their lives. But the

deeper wisdom lies in understanding when to hold tight to those connections and when to gracefully let them catch their next train. This isn't about being selfish; it's about self-awareness and respecting others' individual journeys. Not everyone is meant to be on your train for the entire ride, and that's perfectly, wonderfully OK. Trying to force someone to stay on your train when their destination is different will only lead to frustration and resentment for both parties.

How do we discern when to hold on and when to let go? It requires keen observation and a deep understanding of our own values and goals. Ask yourself: Does this person align with my values? Do they contribute to my growth? Do I contribute to their growth? If the answers to these questions are consistently negative, it might be time to acknowledge that their journey is diverging from yours. This doesn't mean there's animosity; it simply means recognizing that different paths are sometimes necessary for individual fulfillment.

In a professional context, this theory is equally powerful. Think about your team members, your mentors, or the community you serve. **Some will be with you for the long haul, contributing to your organization's core mission. Others are incident-specific, offering specialized skills for a limited time to help you mitigate a challenge.**

And sometimes, a partnership or a working relationship will come to an end, not due to failure, but because their next opportunity lies elsewhere for either you or them. **Acknowledging this fluidity enables smoother transitions and fosters a culture of respect and understanding rather than resentment or disappointment.**

Ultimately, the Train Station Theory encourages us to embrace the transient nature of many relationships while deeply valuing the enduring ones. It's a call to be present in every interaction, to learn from every encounter, and to release with grace when the time comes. It reminds us that our lives are enriched by the diverse cast of characters who step onto our train, even if only for a brief moment.

So, next time you encounter someone new, or reflect on someone who has departed, remember that each person is a unique journey, and each interaction is a valuable stop along your own incredible ride. **C**

THE ONLY WAY WITH MICHAEL LAUGHLIN

By Tina Costanza, Digital Editor, CRACKYL Magazine

CANADA'S FIRST ABOVE-KNEE AMPUTEE TO RETURN TO FULL-TIME FIREFIGHTING IS PROOF A FULFILLING LIFE IS POSSIBLE AFTER MULTIPLE TRAGEDIES

Michael Laughlin knew exactly what to do. Lying in a ditch near Kingston, Ont., with his right leg torn off at the knee after a deer struck his motorcycle, he relied on his firefighter training: call for help, give your location, apply a tourniquet. That training kept him alive, but recovery demanded something else.

Laughlin, 45, is a full-time firefighter and acting captain with Kingston Fire and Rescue. He's poised to become a full captain soon. **He's also Canada's first above-knee amputee to return to full-time firefighting.** That distinction led to interviews, profiles, and the documentary *You Were There for Me*.

HIS STORY IS EXTRAORDINARY NOT ONLY BECAUSE OF THE TRAUMA BUT BECAUSE OF THE DELIBERATE CHOICE HE MADE NOT JUST TO SURVIVE, BUT TO THRIVE.

At 26, a decade before the motorcycle accident, a snowmobile accident shattered his femur, tibia, fibula, kneecap, and ulna. In between the two accidents, Laughlin lost his girlfriend of four years to suicide, fell into opioid addiction, and was arrested for buying illegal painkillers.

So he has a lot to talk about, including what firefighters rarely talk about: the headspace between getting hurt and the return to duty.

Before his traumatic injuries, Laughlin's identity was simple and solid. He grew up on a farm, played competitive sports from childhood

into adulthood, and built a reputation as someone who could take a hit and keep going. "I thought I was invincible," Laughlin says. **"I just thought I could do whatever I wanted and nothing would ever hurt me."**

Firefighting fit that identity. Everything Laughlin did – co-ops, volunteering, dispatch work – was aimed at getting on the job. He became "Mike the firefighter," the guy who would run into a fire or do anything to help someone else.

The snowmobile accident gave that version of himself its first serious blow.

In both accidents, the physical damage was obvious – he now has a prosthetic leg, a titanium plate in his arm, a titanium rod in place of his femur, and 33 pins and screws holding everything together. The psychological damage was less visible.

"I'm now the victim," Laughlin recalls thinking after the snowmobile accident. "I never wanted to be a victim." **So he decided to "flip the script on that. I'm going to beat whatever they put in front of me."**

That included the loss of his leg. Surgeons had reattached it, but there was no blood flow.

"It wasn't part of me," Laughlin says. "I didn't even feel it. And when they went to amputate, I grieved for a little bit, for about an hour."



"I THOUGHT I WAS INVINCIBLE."

Then he asked his dad to look up the best prosthetic leg in the world. The search results revealed an image of a Green Beret in a prosthetic leg that looked like something out of *The Terminator*. "It's amazing," Laughlin says. "And he's this big, strong guy. I'm like, 'I'm going to be that guy. And I'm going to be a firefighter.' **I had already decided ... I wasn't going to be a victim. I was gonna beat it.**"

Laughlin realized he was actually reinventing himself. When he decided he was going to be Canada's first above-knee amputee to return to full-time firefighting, he did some research. He found amputees who tried volunteer firefighting.

"The physical testing is much, much lower as a volunteer," Laughlin says. "It's so competitive for full-time that the athleticism you have to have, and the strength, is top notch. And I had to pass that test." If he couldn't pass the test (without modifications), "I don't want to be out there slowing down my team or being a liability to my team. **I was determined ... I was going to pass, no matter what.**"

That kind of resolve didn't come out of nowhere. Laughlin says it was shaped early, by growing up on a farm and reinforced through sports. "I don't like to lose, and I always played at the highest level of sports." (He was captain of a fastball championship team). "I was always a leader. I took a lot of pride in being a leader. It was like, 'No one had done this before. Well, I'm going to lead the way.' **I'm going to show people that no matter what you're going through, you can beat it. If you have a positive attitude and you want it badly enough.**"

The mindset that helped him survive didn't make recovery easy, though. He remembers his first day of physiotherapy after the snowmobile accident. In his head, he had already mapped out the plan: get up, walk the floor, do pushups, and get stronger.

Instead, the therapist helped him sit on the edge of the bed.

"They're like, 'Great job. That's Day One,'" he says. "And I was so discouraged and disappointed! The next day I stood up on my legs, and they held me, and they're like, 'That's a great Day Two! And I'm like, 'What? I was planning on running today!' **I had to take a step back and realize, OK, today I'll do one step, tomorrow I'll do two, then I'll do four, and I'll keep doubling that.**"

Laughlin returned to work after the motorcycle accident by passing those same physical tests as everyone else. "I just trained. The more repetitive stuff you do, the better you get at it. It goes for anything. I did the drills over and over until I got confident in it. I'm very confident in my leg now. I put it on in the morning and I go, but I still have slip ups."

TODAY, HIS CREW OFTEN FORGETS HE HAS A PROSTHETIC LEG AT ALL, WHICH LAUGHLIN SAYS IS THE GREATEST COMPLIMENT. BUT DOUBT LINGERS.

"I have to push it away," Laughlin says. "Say we're going up 10 flights of stairs. I'm like, 'Oh, can I do this?' And then you gotta pep talk yourself and be like, 'Yep, you can do this. **You've done this before. At least you're going to try. Don't give up.**' I think all amputees have that little bit of doubt or uncertainty that creeps in once in a while, but you just

got to work through it. That's the only way; we have no choice. The leg's not growing back. If I lay down and gave up, people will see that, and they would think that's OK. And it's not OK ... I try to be the first one up those stairs, even if it hurts my left leg so bad and it's burning, I ignore it. And I get to the top just to prove a point. I've always had that mentality that everyone's watching, and I have to be a good example."

LAUGHLIN ALSO ACCEPTED SOMETHING MANY FIREFIGHTERS RESIST: HELP.

Kingston Fire and Rescue's return-to-work program allowed him to come back on shift in a modified role, enabling him to stay connected to his crew. "I think every department should adopt that," he says. "Because you still feel part of the team. And that's a big part of it; when I was out, I missed it."

Isolation is one of the biggest threats injured firefighters face, especially mentally. Laughlin saw it firsthand in the hospital: patients with no visitors or support, no one telling them they'd be OK.

"No wonder people get depressed and they don't recover very quickly or at all," he says, and highlights the power of developing relationships. "When you do that, you have a support team ... you're always getting picked up. Everyone who came (to the hospital) were like, 'Hey, Laughie, if anybody can do it, you can. If anybody can get back from this, you can get back from this.' When someone says that to you, you feel obligated to make a big effort to get back. At least I did."

And remember Laughlin's girlfriend died by suicide and he developed an addiction to pain medications. "I was using them to function," he says. And then he got arrested. Just one of those events can be very isolating.

He credits his family with pushing him to beat his addiction. It was the motivation he needed to begin to rebuild his life through small, consistent habits: going to the gym, eating well, and focusing on routines. He also went to a clinic, a tough move as a public figure (i.e., firefighter, athlete), he didn't want to be seen. So he went to a clinic out of town, and he got help.



Eventually, the case against Laughlin for buying illegal painkillers got thrown out (his job stood up for him, knowing what he'd been through), but going to court a bunch of times gave his ego a beating. "There's no hiding this: he's a drug addict and a criminal." It took a lot to get past that, he admitted in an interview with *From the Depths of Darkness To the Light of Success*. "I always say now, time heals everything. In two weeks, someone else is going to be the big story."

LAUGHLIN'S ADVICE TO FIREFIGHTERS NAVIGATING UNCERTAINTY OR INJURY IS TO ASK FOR HELP, AND GO THROUGH THE RIGHT AVENUES.

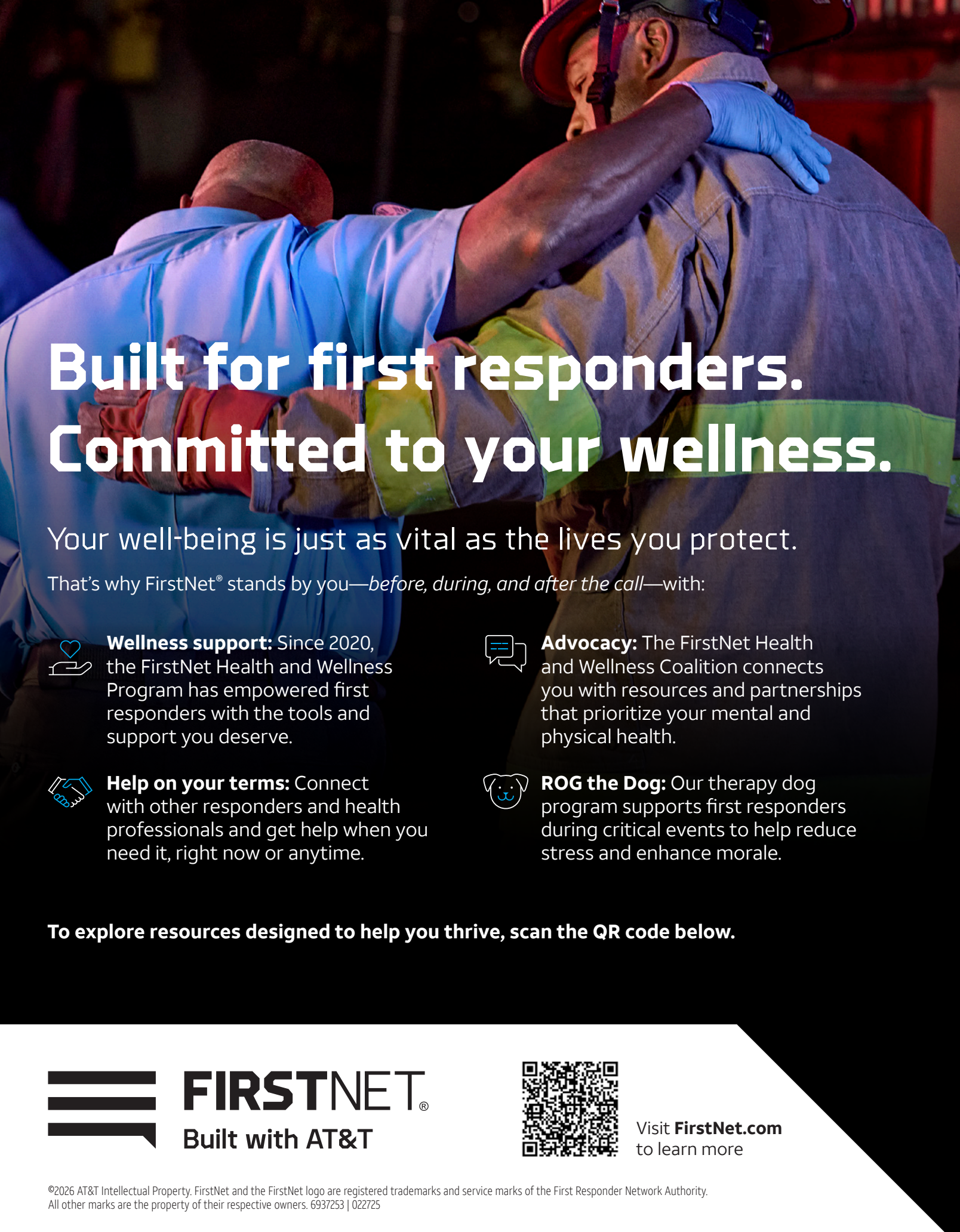
"If you're injured, don't shrug it off. Don't be afraid to ask for help and get yourself healed up," Laughlin says. "Don't worry about what other people think. Worry about yourself, because you're very valuable to your family, and you're valuable to your team. We need you at your best shape and your peak performance."

Today, Laughlin is back on a snowmobile and motorcycle, although with more awareness. He has a family of his own now: His wife, Angela, their son Lincoln, 6, and his stepdaughter, Keiana, 15.

Laughlin now shares what he's learned through his book, *Untapped 60*, co-written with his best friend, Jarrett Robertson.

It encourages people to face vulnerability and build strength through adversity. He also speaks at events across North America, sharing his story as proof that it's possible to overcome challenges and build a meaningful life, just like he has. One day, one step, and one staircase at a time. **C**





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The Real Priorities of Firefighters

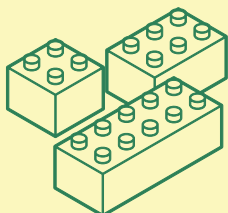
Survey Says: Coffee Machines Get Us

Data doesn't lie, but according to a completely unverified survey for firefighters that we made up at the kitchen table, wellness ranked below fixing the squeak in the recliner ... again.

STRESS & COPING

43%

say they'd rather walk barefoot on LEGO than attend a peer support session



73%

of firefighters say adjusting the thermostat gives them a stronger sense of control than therapy ever could

11%

have created covert "comfort coalitions" to monitor and reverse changes after hours

37%

cited "emotional ambush" in peer support sessions

6%

cited "too many hugs" in the sessions

68%

of firefighters believe their station has a ghost but only 7% believe in behavioral health programs. One respondent said, "I got no time for no therapy BS. But that cold spot in the bay? That shit's real."



LIFESTYLE



81%
27%
2%

say the coffee machine understands them better than most people

have named the coffee machine

have made the coffee machine an emergency contact

HEALTH & FITNESS

64%

believe stretching is a sign of weakness or yoga infiltration

[92% simultaneously report chronic lower back pain and mysterious shoulder clicks



57%

say they only go to the gym to avoid chores, not to train

FINANCE



29%
0%

admit they've looked at buying a boat before starting a retirement plan

regret it. "It builds morale," said one lieutenant. He named his boat "Pension Drift."

RELATIONSHIPS

54%

communicate with their partner mostly through memes during shifts

76%

say they've had deeper conversations with the night-shift crew than with their spouse in the past 30 days [c](#)



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AS SEEN ON
**SHARK
TANK**



It's amazing how light a phone feels when you are scrolling through social media, sending a text to a friend, or checking the weather. It practically floats in your hand. Doesn't it? But, to use it for yourself, when it's time to call for help or admit you are struggling, it suddenly becomes heavy. Not a pound, not 2 pounds, but somehow it feels like 5,000 pounds.

LOW
5000
POUNDS

By Chris Moore,
Fire Captain/Paramedic/
National Keynote Speaker,
Save a Warrior Alumni

POUNDS
POUNDS

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

I know this feeling intimately. **I have felt that invisible weight pressing down on my chest, a tight knot in my stomach, and the hesitation that turns a simple action into a monumental challenge.**

PICKING UP THAT PHONE, DIALING A NUMBER, AND ASKING FOR HELP WAS, WITHOUT QUESTION, MY HEAVIEST LIFT.

In a firehouse, surrounded by the men and women who have seen the same horrors I have, it felt almost impossible.

We joke about calls that make us shake, about scenes we cannot unsee, and we tell ourselves stories of invincibility. And we do it well.

BUT SOMETIMES, WHEN THE TRUCKS ARE PARKED, THE LIGHTS ARE OFF, AND THE FIREHOUSE IS QUIET, THE WEIGHT OF ALL WE HAVE SEEN PRESSES DOWN ON US.

We laugh to keep the darkness at bay, swap stories over burnt coffee, and pretend everything is fine – but inside, **we're being crushed.**

For years, I told myself I was fine. I could handle it. I had seen worse, done worse. Asking for help seemed

almost ... well, unthinkable. **It was a contradiction to everything I had been trained to be.**

How could a seasoned firefighter, a man who had run into burning buildings and faced the unimaginable, be “weak” enough to need therapy?

And so the weight grew. It was not just the memories of calls and tragedies, though they were there; **it was the slow accumulation of**



HOW COULD A SEASONED FIREFIGHTER, A MAN WHO HAD RUN INTO BURNING BUILDINGS AND FACED THE UNIMAGINABLE, BE “WEAK” ENOUGH TO NEED THERAPY?

stress, sleepless nights, and the moments of doubt that crept in when no one was watching.

That's when the phone appeared in my life, both as a lifeline and a mountain. **I would stare at it, hold it, and then put it down again.**

The number of a trauma-informed therapist who works with first responders was saved, right there in my contacts. I knew it.

AND YET, EVERY TIME I IMAGINED PRESSING THE “CALL” BUTTON, MY PHONE FELT IMPOSSIBLY HEAVY. IT TOOK ME MONTHS TO CALL.

When I finally did, I whispered the two words that felt monumental:

“Help me.”

In that moment, time stood still. I often wonder what he was thinking on the other end during that eerie silence, **but all that mattered in that moment was that I finally asked for help.**

Calling was the first hurdle, and it was enormous – but the next hardest thing lurked just around the corner.

Growing up as a Gen Xer, I imagined therapy would look something like this: I walk into the office, the therapist sits in a smoker's jacket, pipe in hand, with a roaring fire in the background.

I lie on a couch, vulnerable and confessing all of my deepest, darkest thoughts about the demons that haunt me.

It could not have been further from the truth. **Therapy was simply two safe men in a secure environment, talking.** He offered professional thoughts, ideas, and solutions to help me with my mental health. I was introduced to cognitive behavioral therapy and writing/journaling therapy.

The writing was cathartic and liberating. Putting thoughts and feelings on paper, organizing and confronting them in black and white, felt like lifting invisible weights off my shoulders.

THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT THE
QUIET OF A PEN ON PAPER THAT
MIRRORS THE CALM AFTER A FIRE.

It is slower, deliberate, controlled,
the opposite of the chaos we face on
the job. It gives you space to breathe,
to reflect, and to finally feel what
you have been holding in. And after
decades of moving quickly, reacting
to alarms, and
putting out fires
– both literal and
metaphorical
– it felt
revolutionary.

I REALIZED THEN
THE PHONE
WAS NOT HEAVY
– THE FEAR WAS.

Fear of judgment.
Fear of admitting I was not invincible.
**Fear that my career, my reputation,
and my sense of self might somehow
crumble if I confessed I needed help.**

And here is the thing about fear:
it grows when you ignore it. It
inflates ordinary objects into
monumental obstacles.

A PHONE BECOMES A BOULDER.
**A CONVERSATION BECOMES AN
ORDEAL.** THE SIMPLE ACT
OF ASKING FOR HELP FEELS
LIKE LIFTING 5,000 POUNDS.

But once you place that call,
everything shifts. **You no longer carry
the weight alone, and healing begins.**
How does this relate to the firehouse?

CHECKING ON A TEAMMATE'S
PSYCHE SHOULD BE **AS NATURAL
AS DAILY GEAR INSPECTIONS OR
CLEANING THE TRUCKS.**

Passing the torch is not just about
skill, knowledge, and tradition.
**It is also about honesty, compassion,
and courage.** It is about teaching



IT'S ABOUT TEACHING THE NEXT GENERATION THAT STRENGTH IS NOT THE ABSENCE OF VULNERABILITY; **IT'S THE WILLINGNESS TO FACE IT.**

the next generation that strength
is not the absence of vulnerability;
it is the willingness to face it.

Once you make that call, the
world does not suddenly become
perfect, nor do the memories
and trauma disappear.

**BUT WHAT HAPPENS IS YOU
NO LONGER CARRY IT ALONE.**

You start your journey inward.
**You gradually gain clarity and
begin taking steps toward healing.**

The hardest step is always the first.
Picking up that phone, dialing a
number, and admitting you are not
OK, **those moments are bigger than
any fire you have ever fought.** That
call requires courage we rarely

celebrate in our profession, **but that
courage is every bit as heroic.**

AND HERE IS THE PARADOX:
**THE MORE WE DO IT, THE EASIER IT
BECOMES** – EACH CONVERSATION,
TEXT, CHECK-IN WITH A FRIEND,
OR THERAPY SESSION CHIPS AWAY
AT THE WEIGHT.

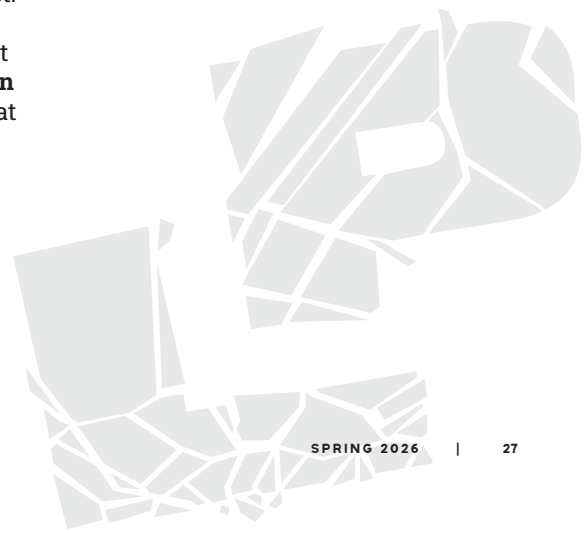
The phone
becomes lighter.
**The call becomes
possible. The
path to wellness
becomes realistic.**

WE OWE IT TO
OURSELVES,
OUR CREWS,
AND THE NEXT

**GENERATION OF FIRST RESPONDERS
TO MAKE IT EASIER FOR EVERYONE
TO CARRY LESS WEIGHT.**

To make it normal, accepted,
and celebrated to ask for help.
Your 5,000 pound phone is only
heavy until you decide to act.

Courage is not just charging into
a burning building, **it is picking
up a phone, dialing a number,
and saying, "I need help."** That
is heroism in its purest form. **C**



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Perfect FIREHOUSE MARRIAGE:

Is it just a fairy tale?

By Rachelle Zemlock, PsyD

Strain on relationships is a hot topic among firefighters around the dinner table.

What often gets left out is the additional stress and mental health challenges that come from relationship strain. Firefighters spend many hours training for technical skills; it's time we also directed some of that training to nurturing their most important partnership – **their marriage.**

Look, marriage is hard. Then you add in a rotating unpredictable schedule, volunteers called out at the worst times, high stress, trauma, and consistent sleep deprivation. **That's a recipe for chaos.**

However, as a fire spouse and couples therapist, I believe that while the ideal relationship that we grew up imagining might not reflect this chaos, we can create wonderfully happy marriages with intention and understanding from both partners.

Following these five guidelines will **help bring that homelife chaos closer to perfection.**



Communication: A Key Factor

Good communication is essential in any relationship, especially for firefighters and their spouses. You both need to come together regularly to discuss and align on important matters. You have to make time for this because, trust me, your schedule and mood won't accommodate it. With unpredictable schedules and limited time together, effective communication tools become crucial for firefighter couples. Shared calendars can help manage plans, and regular "debriefs" or check-ins allow both partners to stay in sync.



Fueling the Friendship

While the idea of a “perfect” marriage suggests that love flows effortlessly, strong emotional and physical intimacy grows from a solid friendship. As life shifts focus to kids, home responsibilities, caring for aged parents and endless to-do lists, you might find yourself wondering, “Why aren’t we as intimate as we used to be?” This often occurs because couples stop doing the things that initially brought them joy together, like going on fun adventures, hiking, engaging in 100 questions about each other, sharing stories about the day’s adventures, and simply being there for one another, even during disagreements. Re-establishing that solid friendship is step one in rekindling intimacy.



Prioritizing the Marriage

Many firefighters are passionate about their jobs, but it’s important to remember that this career is not there for the long haul – it will dump you at some point. It has no loyalty; it’s willing to move on happily without you. Your marriage, on the other hand, wants to be in it for the long run. A healthy marriage requires ongoing attention and investment – you can’t wait until retirement to focus on your partnership. Small, meaningful moments every single day add up and create a strong connection.



Effectively Resolving Conflict

Every relationship faces conflict, but how couples handle disagreements can make a world of difference. Instead of viewing conflict as something to “win” or “be right,” it’s really about understanding your partner’s perspective. Conflict escalates when both people dig in their heels and want to argue until they’re blue in the face. Instead, happy couples have a secret weapon: the ability to calmly discuss and listen to each other to find resolutions that work for both. Conflict serves a purpose; it’s a chance to learn and grow together. When that doesn’t happen, you may find yourselves rehashing the same arguments over and over.



Be a Team

You’re a team. Just like at work, when you and your crew need to keep everything running smoothly. You have to communicate, share information you gather, be each other’s eyes and ears, and stay on the same page. It’s the same principles at home, where both partners must work together to ensure a strong partnership. Sorry, when you go home, there’s no authority on scene. Think in terms of this is our marriage – so how do we want it to go?

No one is expected to just know how to communicate effectively, just as you’re not expected to know how to drive a rig without training. So, if things feel tough, reach out to a professional for a little guidance – **your marriage is worth it.**

Getting help early, when things are still going well, gives your relationship a greater chance of thriving.

The idea of a “perfect firehouse marriage” might seem like a distant dream, **but understanding what**

it takes to build a strong partnership is within reach. By focusing on effective communication, nurturing your friendship, prioritizing each other, and approaching conflict as a team, couples can cultivate a resilient

and rewarding relationship – even amidst the challenges of firefighting. **Remember, investing in your marriage isn’t just about keeping the flame alive; it’s about creating a bond that can thrive through the highs and lows of life together. C**



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THE LEADERSHIP GAP WE IGNORE

WHY CALM AUTHORITY,
CLARITY, AND CHARACTER
OUTPERFORM VOLUME
ON THE FIREGROUND

By Dave Robertson, Founder
of Fire-Edge: Fire Service
Career Builder

Consider this scenario. It seemed simple enough when the engine arrived on location: black smoke poured from a broken window with an orange flickering glow just beneath that smoke. A recruit firefighter moved to stretch a pre-connected attack line, mask up and wait for the captain.

But the recruit, anxious to do a good job, shouldered the hose load awkwardly and moved too fast. The hose snagged, the loops fell apart, and in an instant, he was yanked off balance, sprawling onto the tangled mess of spaghetti that was once the attack line. Thankfully, the second-in crew quickly knocked down the fire.

Afterward, crews gathered around the front bumper of the engine, anticipating a short hot wash of the incident. But instead of kudos or constructive criticism, the company captain launched into a tirade directed at the recruit who fumbled the hose. He focused on the recruit's lack of ability, firefighting knowledge, and situational awareness, and even got personal, saying the recruit "chose the wrong profession."

Years later, that rookie was promoted and, as a newly minted captain, modeled himself after the flawed captain. **The cycle of dysfunctional leadership continues.**

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

NOW CONSIDER THE SAME SCENE, BUT TWO THINGS CHANGE.

1. Seeing the recruit stumble, the captain tells another firefighter, **"Help the new guy. Let's get him into this firefight the right way."**

2. During the hot wash, the captain guides others to critique themselves. In that safe space, the recruit admits the hose fumble. So, the captain says, **"Good catch. How do you solve that?"** which prompts a group discussion about the recruit's mistake. This gives the recruit a valuable lesson, celebrates the incident's success, commends the recruit's humility and accountability, and ends with a call for more training.

Here, the captain operates quietly but firmly. His intent is clear, and he creates a psychologically safe space for the crew to self-critique, and more importantly, for the recruit to learn from the experience.

Ask someone what a firefighter looks like, and you'll often get a snapshot of a two-dimensional tough male archetype. Ask about a firefighter's qualities, and you'll get an oversimplified version of a battle-scarred and tested warrior willing to lay everything on the line for the sake of incident success.

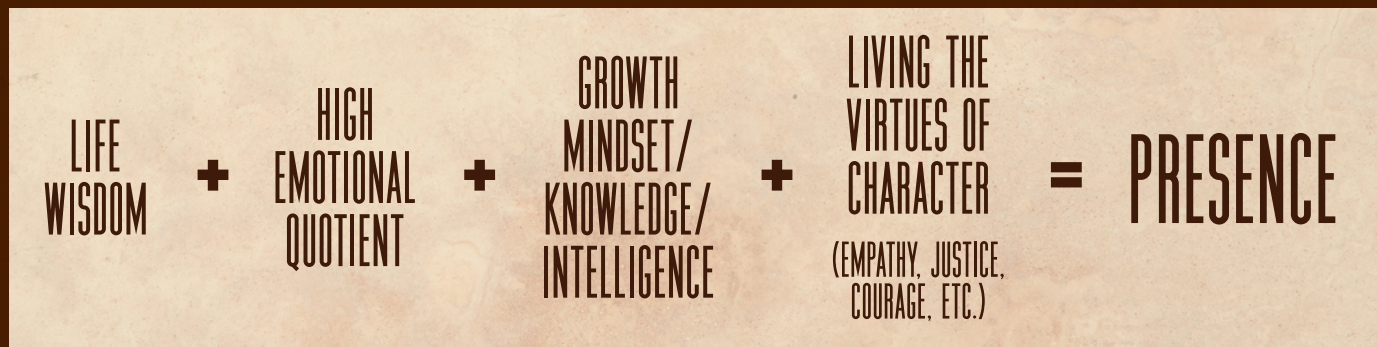
The problem with being tough is that it often feels hollow. Simply, true toughness is about grit, resilience after failure, and agility in the face of obstacles and challenges. **But grinding through something isn't the same as presence.** And the problem of false toughness is that it insinuates itself into positions of authority and rank.

Defining presence can be a significant challenge. When we say someone "has presence," we're describing how a room can collapse around them and how all eyes turn to them when they enter. Their physical movements reside in confidence and competence. Trying to define it has us searching for words about something that evokes feelings, like trying to explain how we felt about our first crush.

But there are physical cues, those outward appearances that help us frame the idea of presence.

IT COMES DOWN TO THIS: PRESENCE IS THE PHYSICAL MANIFESTATION OF A PERSON'S PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL QUALITIES — THE WALKING, TALKING CULMINATION OF INTEGRATING A PERSON'S EXPERIENCES INTO PRACTICAL APPLICATION.

IF THOSE QUALITIES AND EXPERIENCES WERE AN EQUATION, IT MIGHT LOOK LIKE THIS:



In the fire service, when we say someone has presence, we actually mean they command it. In the field, it might look like the outward chill of the incident commander in the face of chaos, their resolute decision-making, how they give direction in a calm, firm, and fully understandable way,

and how they move with the poise of command and an economy of action.

An incident commander operating without command presence leads to scenes that devolve into poorly executed events with equally poor outcomes: more property loss, missed

or failed rescue opportunities, and a higher risk of citizen or firefighter injury, even death. And so, explaining that bundle of qualities that makes up command presence can be difficult. **While elusive, there are traits and behaviors that point to what the leader with true presence embodies.**

HALLMARKS OF COMMAND PRESENCE



TEMPERANCE

Temperance is the quality of self-restraint, characterized by calmness, patience, and self-control. It signals to others to observe, listen, and trust that I'll communicate the right way, once.



DECISIVENESS

Decisiveness in operations, assignments and communications. This is taking in data, processing it quickly, landing on a clear course of action and communicating it. This only comes from depth of operational knowledge and real-world mileage.



INTENSITY

Properly directed intensity reflects Theodore Roosevelt's quote to "speak softly and carry a big stick." It involves conveying key messages through direct eye contact, open body language, and appropriate words. It emphasizes urgency for the task, not the people.



UNDERSTANDING THE SPOTLIGHT

Understanding the spotlight means others look up to you, making it a powerful form of leadership. When you perform, you demonstrate physical composure, deliberate movement, and quiet confidence that show certainty.



LEADING WITH CHARACTER

Leading with character means consistently embodying virtues like courage, integrity, humility, and humanity in every action and decision.

All the traits that form the backbone of command presence – quiet authority, steadiness that inspires confidence, motivation that activates crews towards mission success, and all under the umbrella of the virtues of character – translate perfectly into developing and curating a department culture. A culture that operates with the benchmarks of psychological safety: open communication, mutual trust and respect between leadership and peers, ample room for constructive growth, and consistent support.

The problem occurs when a blurred and skewed perception of toughness collides with the true definition of presence, when someone in a position of authority or command equates the brash elements of toughness with leadership, believing that looking, acting, and being tough come down to increased volume, aggressive tone of voice, harsh language, and sometimes outright bravado. **Basically, they think that yelling equates to command presence. It does not.**

Culture drives everything in a fire department: how it operates, trains, hires, etc. It also drives how people act, and what is both tolerated and allowed. A culture can operate under the misguided belief that being an aggressive firefighter (progressive, smart, with a true sense of toughness) is the same as being an aggressive person (they're not). It's then considered OK to be that aggressor, equating the two.

LET'S ADMIT IT: THE FIRE SERVICE PUSHES THE TOUGH GUY NARRATIVE.

I've been guilty of pushing it myself. I was once told by a fellow instructor, a Gulf War Marine vet, that the 40-strong recruit class we were teaching was

afraid of me. I'd bark at them, dressing them down frequently. I rationalized it as their rite of passage and that I was getting them used to the life-or-death situations where fast talking and harsh words were how we communicated. In the end, though, it was all performative.

As for how to balance the legitimate quality of true toughness, the question doesn't need to be a binary proposition. **A fire department can be both tactically aggressive and culturally mature.** Department members can possess the traits and soft skills of effective leadership.

That looks like having command presence on scene, while still trusting companies and individual crew members to act independently while knowing the leader's intent. It's time to close the book on performative toughness. Keep the grit, keep the standards, but lead with presence. **C**



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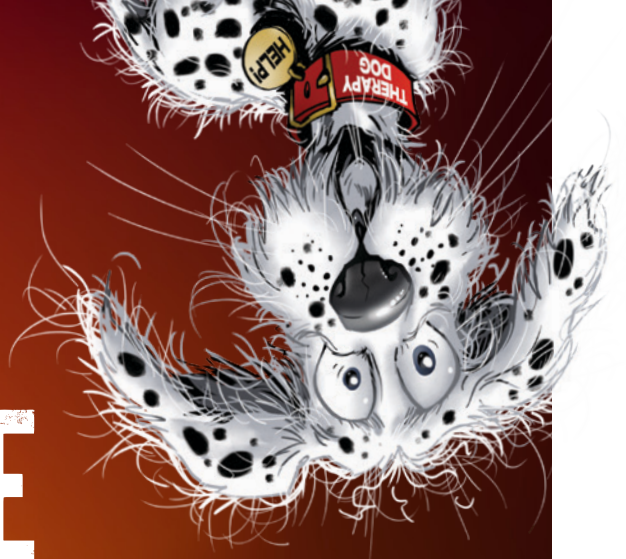
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20 FIREHOUSE PERSONALITIES

By Kory Pearn, Publisher, Editor-In-Chief CRACKYL Magazine
and Melissa Lawlor, MSN, CNM, FNP-C, LC, FF/EMT



A BREAKDOWN
OF THE HUMAN
FORCES THAT
SHAPE THE
STATION LONG
BEFORE SOPs
EVER DO

This is a fun take, but its purpose is legitimate. Firefighting has never had a shared language for the interpersonal side of the work — the patterns, temperaments, humor styles, emotional habits, and cultural imprints that shape who we become inside the station. These behaviors influence every corner of the fire service, regardless of rank, assignment, or patch. Understanding them enables firefighters and leaders to recognize what's happening around them, navigate personality friction, and build healthier stations from the inside out. Understanding them also helps us laugh at ourselves a bit, and that, too, makes the fire service a healthier place.



INSIDE THE CREW DYNAMIC

Every firehouse has the same ingredients: rigs, gear, SOPs, and a mission. What separates a strong crew from a fractured one is not what hangs on the wall or what's parked in the bay. It's who sits at the kitchen table, who rides the back seat, and who sets the emotional temperature of the room without ever saying a word.

Ask any firefighter what shaped their career the most and they will not talk about hose loads or hydrant pressure. **They will talk about people.** The captain who made them feel capable. The senior firefighter who made every shift feel like a test. The probie who disrupted the balance. The crew that felt like home. The crew that made them count the shifts until transfer.

THE FIRE SERVICE IS NOT AN OFFICE. IT'S A CLOSED ECOSYSTEM.

Firefighters live together, eat together, train together, sleep under the same roof, and face high-risk situations side by side. Early on, volunteer recruits may drop off. But once they cross that two- or three-year threshold, they will likely remain into their 60s or 70s. They may not sleep under the same roof, but much of their free time is dedicated to keeping the rigs running and the lights on.

Psychology calls this a high-intensity social environment — one where personalities are amplified, emotional habits are contagious, and unresolved friction never stays small. **Inside a firehouse, temperament matters. Humor styles matter. Emotional maturity matters. So does insecurity, control, ego, avoidance, and the unspoken rules everyone follows but no one names.**

We plan and train relentlessly for the fireground chemistry we want. We passively watch to see what firehouse chemistry we'll get.

Departments invest heavily in tactics, leadership courses, and operational readiness. **What we rarely give firefighters is a shared language for the interpersonal side of the job — the patterns, roles, and personality dynamics that shape culture from shift to shift, from tone to tone.** Instead, we normalize tension. We excuse bad behavior as tradition. We label discomfort as weakness. We hope time fixes things it rarely does.

Culture, after all, is not policy. Culture is behavior — repeated, tolerated, and reinforced. While one person can elevate a crew, another can erode it.

A single personality — through control, sarcasm, withdrawal, or unchecked authority — can change how emotionally safe a station feels. That affects communication, learning, confidence, and performance. **Firefighters who feel psychologically safe ask questions sooner, speak up faster, and recover better. Firefighters who don't, withdraw and/or mask stress, and begin operating in self-protection mode.** Over time, that costs crews trust, cohesion, and longevity.

What follows is not a personality test or a collection of jokes. It's a diagnostic lens — a way to identify the archetypes, habits, and interpersonal roles that repeatedly show up in firehouses across North America. Some are constructive. Some are corrosive. Most are unintentional. And while not jokes, it is funny — because we're firefighters afterall, dammit.

These profiles are mirrors, not accusations. Every firefighter plays a role in the ecosystem. Every crew member contributes something — intentionally or not. Recognizing those patterns brings awareness, which creates choice, then change. **The sooner we learn to read the human terrain inside the station, the better equipped we are to protect not just each other's lives — but each other's careers.**

UNDERSTANDING ARCHETYPES HELPS EXPLAIN:

- Why some personalities thrive together while others combust
- Why a firefighter excels under one officer and struggles under another
- Why certain crews operate like families and others like friction factories
- Why emotional safety is as critical to performance as physical safety
- Why culture rarely collapses all at once — but erodes slowly, then suddenly

**LET'S NAME
WHAT'S ALWAYS
BEEN THERE.
LET'S LOOK AT THE
PERSONALITIES
BEHIND THE
CULTURE.**





A FIELD GUIDE TO FIREHOUSE PERSONALITIES

Firehouse personalities aren't just quirks — they're the architecture of how firefighters learn, cope, communicate, and survive the job. This guide dives into the individual roles that appear in stations and explores why certain combinations work, why others combust, and how these dynamics influence a firefighter's growth, confidence, mental load, and long-term health.

THE FIREHOUSE ARCHETYPE SYSTEM:

Each personality type belongs to a dominant element — the underlying psychological driver that determines how they act, communicate, and bond. These four elements explain why some personalities mesh, why others collide, and why certain crews form a natural rhythm while others run like mismatched machinery.

ARCHETYPE	CONTROL TYPES	STRENGTHS	FALLOUT
CONTROL <i>Structure, rules, responsibility, predictability</i> These personalities maintain order, safety, detail, and consistency. Without them, the firehouse would feel like chaos. With too many of them, the firehouse feels rigid.	• The Micromanager • The Overtimer • The Wanna-Be Chief • The Golden Child • The Baby Firefighter • The Gaslighter	• Keeps crews disciplined • High accountability • Detail-driven • Good on big calls	• Can become overbearing • Creates anxiety in creative personalities • May resist change or flexibility • Limits access
CHAOS <i>Energy, humor, friction, unpredictability, charisma</i> These personalities create movement, creativity, and liveliness — but also tension, mess, and combustion if unchecked.	• The Wisecracker • The Debater • The One-Upper • The Joker • The Automatic Alarm • The Gladiator	• Builds morale • Breaks tension • Energizes a tired shift • Challenging in healthy (or unhealthy) ways	• Poor timing • Escalates stress • Hard to manage if paired with control-heavy leaders • Emotional volatility
TRADITION <i>Legacy, culture, values, identity</i> These personalities anchor the firehouse in meaning, memory, and history — but can resist evolution and new ideas.	• The Gatekeeper • The Golden Child • The Monday Morning Quarterback • The Peacock	• Preserves culture • Mentors others • Creates continuity • Deep loyalty	• Information hoarding behavior • Resistance to modernization • Power struggles with chaos or control types
EMOTION <i>Connection, empathy, conflict, depth</i> These personalities shape the emotional tone of a crew — for better or worse. They feel more, react more, and influence the crew's interpersonal climate.	• The Martyr • The Gossip • The Blamer • The Isolator • The Debater • The Ghost Responder	• High empathy • Good for connection • Sensitive to crew morale • Capable of deep loyalty	• Burnout • Conflict cycles • Avoidance or explosions • Emotional weight on the crew

CREW CULTURE – THE REAL ARCHITECT OF A FIREFIGHTER’S IDENTITY



CULTURE EQUALS VALUES PLUS BEHAVIOR.

Culture does not live in words. It lives in action. It should be written as verbs. Not character – but taking ownership when something goes wrong. Not progress – but choosing a better way instead of hiding behind tradition. Not candor – but speaking up early, before silence turns into damage. These are behaviors. They are visible. They are repeatable. They are teachable.

BECAUSE BEHAVIOR IS WHAT PEOPLE FOLLOW. EVERY FIREHOUSE CULTURE IS THE SUM OF THE FIREFIGHTERS WHO TOLERATE, REINFORCE, OR CHALLENGE IT.

Every firefighter, every company officer, every shift reinforces this truth. Individual actions – small, consistent, often unnoticed – become the standard for how work gets done, how people are treated, and what gets tolerated. Over time, those behaviors harden into culture.

All things are created twice. First, as a picture in the mind. Then, as a reality in the world.

When Disney World was nearing completion, a reporter once asked Walt Disney’s brother, Roy, what Walt would think if he could see it. Roy replied that Walt had seen

it. Long before a single brick was laid, Walt had already built it in his mind. That vision is the only reason anyone else ever got to see it.

Culture works the same way. What individuals imagine, practice, and repeat becomes the environment everyone else is required to work inside.

Firefighters talk a lot about individuality, but identity in this job is shaped more by the people you work beside than the person you arrive as. You walk into the station with your own history, instincts, and values. The moment you step through the bay doors, you enter a living environment that begins shaping how you think, act, and show up. **Firehouses don’t just house crews – they condition them.**

This isn’t just a firefighter phenomenon. It is a human experience. Science knows that key behaviors such as how we exercise, eat and whether or not we smoke and drink is directly influenced by those we spend the most time with. The firehouse concentrates that and amplifies it through the high-stress nature of the job.

Every station develops its own unwritten code. Not just language, but humor, timing, tension, and silence. **Each crew carries emotional rules: what gets supported, what gets dismissed, what gets challenged, and what everyone learns not to touch.** Over time, these patterns influence confidence, communication, stress tolerance, and even whether a firefighter feels comfortable sitting at the kitchen table.

The firehouse is a living organism. It is constantly, almost imperceptibly, creating new cell structures to keep itself alive. New recruits sprinkle in their DNA, altering the culture. Existing members change as they grow, which

adds new cell life. Like absorbing toxins from our environment, some new cell growth hurts the life of the body. Likewise, cells are slowly dying off and their material expelled from the body. Retirees leave; some of their influence on the culture remains, some goes away. And like cancer, bad cells can kill off good ones.

In supportive environments, firefighters expand. They ask questions sooner. They recover faster from mistakes. They build confidence through trust rather than fear. These crews create longevity because belonging forms early and reinforcement is consistent.

Other environments teach adaptation instead of growth. Sarcasm replaces guidance. Avoidance replaces leadership. Firefighters learn to shrink, harden, or withdraw to survive the shift. The damage isn’t loud, it’s cumulative. These firefighters don’t carry scars from calls alone, but from the place meant to steady them.

Some stations fall into emotional neutrality. No conflict, no connection – just work getting done. The environment isn’t toxic, but it isn’t nourishing. Careers plateau. Engagement fades. The crew functions, but nothing grows.

This is why understanding cultural dynamics matters. **The mix of personalities inside a station determines whether firefighters feel valued or invisible, supported or isolated.** Having language for these patterns gives the fire service something it has long lacked: a way to identify the human forces shaping confidence, mental health, and long-term performance.

In the fire service, the environment doesn’t just affect you. It shapes you.

THE FIREHOUSE PERSONALITY INDEX

A field guide to 20 personality types that shape your shift, your culture, and your sanity. This isn't astrology, it's firehouse anthropology. Every crew carries a mix of these types. Most firefighters recognize pieces of themselves in more than one, and the combination determines whether a shift runs smoothly, sideways, or straight into chaos. Read it for insight, for laughs, and for the uncomfortable truth about how personalities shape life on the floor.

1 THE WISECRACKER

You communicate in sarcasm the way others use oxygen. You break tension without thinking, turning rough shifts into something survivable with one perfectly timed comment. Beneath the humor sits a heart that feels deeply and a mind that moves fast. You joke to connect, to protect, and to avoid being truly seen.

FIREHOUSE TRUTH: You care more than you admit.

CLASH ZONE: The Overtimer and The Micromanager.

BEST MATCH: The Baby Firefighter or The Joker — they love your chaos.

2 THE GOSSIP

Everyone else's problems are your jam. You pick up the scent of drama like a bloodhound. While focusing on others, you avoid working on yourself.

FIREHOUSE TRUTH: Solving problems makes you feel safe and valued.

CLASH ZONE: The Isolator — their distance feels like rejection.

BEST MATCH: The Baby Firefighter — guiding them gives you purpose.



3 THE OVERTIMER

You're the engine of the shift — moving, doing, fixing, carrying. Stillness makes you nervous because stillness brings feelings you don't want to deal with. You take on too much, then resent everyone who doesn't.

FIREHOUSE TRUTH: You work to avoid ever feeling helpless.

CLASH ZONE: The Ghost Responder — you feel like they do the bare minimum then pull a disappearing act.

BEST MATCH: Monday Morning Quarterback — you both thrive on all things workplace.



4 THE ISOLATOR

You keep to yourself, not because you don't care — but because closeness carries risk. You show up physically but withdraw emotionally, keeping a comfortable buffer between you and everyone else.

FIREHOUSE TRUTH: You've learned self-protection through distance.

CLASH ZONE: The Debater — their love of conflict scares you.

BEST MATCH: The Ghost Responder — distance is understood without needing to explain it.



5 THE GASLIGHTER

You bend reality to survive it. Whether intentional or instinctive, you shift facts, retell stories, and protect your image fiercely. Admitting faults feels dangerous, so you rewrite the narrative instead.

FIREHOUSE TRUTH: You fear being exposed or judged.

CLASH ZONE: The Gladiator — they call out the distortions instantly.

BEST MATCH: The Peacock — performance recognizes performance.



6 THE MARTYR

You do everything and then feel everything. You carry more than you need to, and talk about both. You don't mean to guilt people — it just happens naturally.

FIREHOUSE TRUTH: You want to feel essential and appreciated, but often feel invisible.

CLASH ZONE: The Wisecracker — humor feels dismissive to your struggle.

BEST MATCH: The Wanna-Be Chief — mutual suffering forms a powerful bond.

7 THE MICROMANAGER

You crave structure and precision. You hover, check, correct, and redo because trust feels like a gamble. If something matters, you'd rather do it yourself.

FIREHOUSE TRUTH: Control is your shield against anxiety.

CLASH ZONE: The Wisecracker — unpredictable energy meets tight control.

BEST MATCH: The Debater — someone who can challenge their finite processes.

8 THE AUTOMATIC ALARM

You don't create chaos, you attract it. If something strange, inconvenient, poorly timed, or embarrassing is going to happen on shift, it will happen within arm's reach of you. Gear glitches, uniform issues, awkward timing, and unexpected call sequences seem magnetized to your presence, making everyone around you look squared away by comparison.

FIREHOUSE TRUTH: You don't cause the storm — you conduct it.

CLASH ZONE: The Micromanager — your unpredictability fries their circuits.

BEST MATCH: The Wisecracker — they turn your mishaps into crew-wide morale.



9 THE DEBATER

Debate is your native language. You challenge, question, and dissect everything — not to be difficult, but to feel engaged and respected. You're sharp, quick-thinking, and exhausting.

FIREHOUSE TRUTH: You fight because you want to matter.

CLASH ZONE: The Isolator — they vanish mid-discussion.

BEST MATCH: The Monday Morning Quarterback — endless analysis sessions await.

10 THE JOKER

You live to break tension, flip moods, and pull the crew out of the firehouse fog. Your timing isn't always perfect, but your instinct is: when the room gets heavy, you can't help yourself — you go for the laugh. Beneath the jokes sits someone who feels deeply and reads the room better than most people think. You use humor as a connection, protection, and, occasionally, a distraction, turning the shift into something lighter just by being in it.

FIREHOUSE TRUTH: Your humor is your armor — your way of caring without saying it.

CLASH ZONE: The Gatekeeper — your jokes land as disrespect.

BEST MATCH: The Baby Firefighter — they adore your levity and learn the culture through you.

11 THE GHOST RESPONDER

You're part of the crew — until it counts. You show up, do your job, and stay just visible enough... but when it's time to lean in — after training, around the table, in the moments that actually build the crew — you're already gone. You bounce out early, stay on the edge, or keep just enough distance that no one can really pull you in. It's subtle. It's consistent. And over time, it gets noticed.

FIREHOUSE TRUTH: You don't break the crew — you slowly remove yourself from it.

CLASH ZONE: The Overtimer — they invest in the crew and feel your absence.

BEST MATCH: The Blamer — distance and deflection keep both of you untouched.

12 THE MONDAY MORNING QUARTERBACK

You're the station's unofficial newsfeed. The resilience and reach of your grapevine (aka opinions) is the envy of all vineyard operators. You gather stories, connect dots, and share intel — not always for harm, but for belonging. Information is how you feel included and important.

FIREHOUSE TRUTH: You fear being left out, so you stay plugged into everything.

CLASH ZONE: The Gatekeeper — turf war over information.

BEST MATCH: The Peacock — dramatic synergy at its finest.



13 THE GATEKEEPER

You guard the culture, the unwritten rules, the traditions, and the firehouse lore. You are the institutional knowledge. You've seen things. You've lived the job. And you want it done the right way — your way.

FIREHOUSE TRUTH: Change feels like loss, not progress.

CLASH ZONE: The Gossip — competing kingdoms.

BEST MATCH: The Golden Child — someone who appreciates your stories and has a few of their own.



14 THE BLAMER

Nothing is ever your fault — because blame keeps you safe. Pointing fingers protects you from shame, embarrassment, or being wrong. You draw strength from dwelling on the flaws of others. You build your community by rehashing everything everyone else (not at the table) did wrong: making you and yours better than those you blame, because they failed, not you.

FIREHOUSE TRUTH: Real accountability feels like danger.

CLASH ZONE: The Overtimer and The Baby Firefighter — they resent your disappearing acts.

BEST MATCH: The Gaslighter — they shift the narrative to protect themselves.



15 THE PEACOCK

You love attention, energy, movement, and charm. You light up the room — or take it over. Your confidence is compelling, even when it's covering insecurity.

FIREHOUSE TRUTH: You want to be seen, admired, and remembered.

CLASH ZONE: The Micromanager — structure vs spectacle.

BEST MATCH: The Wisecracker or The Monday Morning Quarterback — performance thrives with an audience.

16 THE WANNA-BE CHIEF

You have ideas for everything: operations, training, leadership, policy, and cleaning schedules. You command without authority, advise without invitation, and lead without the badge.

FIREHOUSE TRUTH: You crave influence because you fear being overlooked.

CLASH ZONE: The Gatekeeper — tradition vs takeover.

BEST MATCH: The Micromanager — united in the holy mission of control.

17 THE ONE-UPPER

Whatever someone did, you've done something bigger, harder, faster, or in worse weather. You don't mean to steal the spotlight — you're just terrified of fading into the background.

FIREHOUSE TRUTH: Comparison is your coping mechanism.

CLASH ZONE: The Gladiator — competitive suffering is a strange sport.

BEST MATCH: The Isolator — someone happy to fade into the background.



18 THE GOLDEN CHILD

Favored by command, respected by most, resented by many. You perform well, stay polished, and uphold the image — but feel constant pressure to stay perfect.

FIREHOUSE TRUTH: Approval equals safety. Anything less feels like failure.

CLASH ZONE: The One-Upper — they attempt to outshine your shine.

BEST MATCH: The Gatekeeper — validation from tradition keeps you grounded.



19 THE BABY FIREFIGHTER

Young, eager, slightly terrified, and trying your hardest not to show it. You learn fast, mimic faster, and absorb the culture around you like a sponge.

FIREHOUSE TRUTH: You desperately want to belong and be respected.

CLASH ZONE: Blamers — you're always afraid you're the reason.

BEST MATCH: Jokers and Wisecrackers — all love shaping the next generation, in their own unique way.

20 THE GLADIATOR

You walk into a room at a 7 and escalate to a 10 without passing through 8 or 9. You're passionate, intense, and unfiltered — sometimes to your own surprise.

FIREHOUSE TRUTH: Conflict is your shield. Fighting feels safer than vulnerability.

CLASH ZONE: The One Upper — unhealthy competition makes for a tense workplace.

BEST MATCH: The Peacock or the Gatekeeper — they speak your language: intensity.

At the end of the day, the goal isn't to make everyone compatible. The goal is to make everyone useful, together. The fire service works because we are not built the same. Some of us bring structure, momentum, tradition, or depth.

That mix is what lets a crew handle chaos on the street and still keep the station running in between calls.

Compatibility matters, but it isn't the standard for respect. No one should be eroded because they think

differently, talk differently, or carry the shift differently. If the legacy of brotherhood and sisterhood is real, it has to outmuscle the small dynamics — the sarcasm, the power games, the silent grudges — and pull the crew back toward something bigger. **C**

A QUICK SELF-CHECK DISGUISED AS A BREAK

GET FIREFIGHTER WELLNESS
ON THE GO. PRIORITIZE YOUR
WELL-BEING BEFORE YOU'RE
FORCED TO REACT TO YOUR
STRESS, FATIGUE, OR BURNOUT.



SCROLL TOWARD A STRONGER YOU
AND START BUILDING THE HABITS
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FIREFIGHTER LIFESTYLE & HEALTH

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BECOMING WHO WE WERE

BUILT

TO BE

By Jim McDonald, CSCS, TSAC-F, Career Firefighter

///

We live in a culture of ease where comfort has become our default setting – and it is slowly killing our capacity, especially in the fire service.

Our profession was built on grit: dragging hoses through smoke, hauling ladders in the rain, sweating in turnout gear at 3 a.m., and then doing it again the next shift. But when we step out of the station and into everyday life, we often live like everyone else

– insulated from struggle, with convenience at every turn. We've started to forget who we are.

WE'RE NOT DESIGNED FOR EASE; WE'RE DESIGNED TO ADAPT, AND TODAY, MOST OF OUR DISCOMFORT IS OPTIONAL.

As firefighters, we see firsthand what chronic comfort does: diabetes, heart disease, joint degeneration,

and the most deadly: cardiac events. Not because people are weak, but because the environment we live in asks nothing of us. We're biologically wired for challenge, yet we spend our lives avoiding it.

THE SOLUTION ISN'T MORE MOTIVATION, IT'S RECONNECTING WITH DISCOMFORT, EFFORT, AND NATURE, BECAUSE IT'S NATIVE TO WHO WE ARE, NOT BECAUSE IT'S TRENDY.

CAPACITY NOT COMPLEXITY

When I train firefighters, I don't chase complexity; I chase capacity. You don't need the newest program or gadget. **You need a hill, a sandbag, and a little intention.**

We have enough screens. We need more dirt. Nature doesn't care about your ego. Out there, it doesn't matter

how expensive your shoes are or what your VO2 max score says.

The trail will humble you. The cold water will shock your system. The steep incline will test your lungs. The world outside the gym has a way of showing you you're capable of more than your comfort allows.

When we train outside, when we deliberately choose the harder path, **we strengthen more than muscle.**

We strengthen resilience, adaptability, and presence – the same qualities we rely on at 3 a.m. when turnout tones drop.

» LIFT HEAVY THINGS

» CARRY AWKWARD LOADS

» MOVE YOUR BODY ACROSS UNEVEN TERRAIN

» SPRINT OCCASIONALLY

» BREATHE HARD

» TOUCH COLD WATER

» FEEL THE SUN, WIND, & GROUND

ANCESTRAL MINDSET

Your ancestors didn't "work out." **They worked.** They climbed, pulled, pushed, lifted, carried, and survived. We can take that mindset into our training:

INSTEAD OF CABLE ROWS



DRAG A WEIGHTED SLED OR HOSE

INSTEAD OF SITTING ON A MACHINE



PUT 70 POUNDS ON YOUR BACK AND CLIMB STAIRS

INSTEAD OF ANOTHER BICEP PUMP



THROW WEIGHT ON YOUR SHOULDERS AND WALK

ONCE A DAY / WEEK / MONTH

Firefighting is not done in perfect posture with controlled breathing. **It's done under stress, heat, chaos, and noise.**

Choose the hard thing on purpose but acknowledge injuries are real. Know your fitness boundaries – and if you don't, get professional advice. When your mind says,

"THIS IS UNCOMFORTABLE,"

your response should be, "Good." That's where growth happens. We don't need to become someone new; we need to return to who we already are. **C**



ONCE A DAY, **EARN YOUR COMFORT.** BEFORE YOU SIT – MOVE.



ONCE A WEEK, **DO SOMETHING UNCOMFORTABLE IN NATURE.** HIKE. TRAIL RUN. HILL SPRINTS. TRAIN OUTSIDE IN BAD WEATHER.



ONCE A MONTH, **PUSH YOUR THRESHOLD.** A LONG RUCK. A COLD PLUNGE. A BRUTAL ENDURANCE SESSION.

2 OUT OF 3

FIREFIGHTERS BATTLING FIRES TODAY, WILL BE BATTLING **CANCER AT SOME POINT IN THE FUTURE.***



Our fire heroes face significant risks from cancer-causing chemicals in everyday building materials. When these materials burn, they release toxic fumes like vinyl chloride from PVC piping, posing long-term health threats.



GET THE FACTS.



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*Source: International Association of Fire Fighters research cites that cancer caused 66 percent of the career firefighter line-of-duty deaths from 2002 to 2019.

CHILDHOOD TRAUMA

THAT STILL CONTROLS YOUR ADULT LIFE



ADULT REACTION

Anxiety, defensive behavior, and avoidance

WHY?

When someone disagrees with us, it can feel dangerous

ORIGIN

You might have grown up with caregivers who argued, yelled, or were violent, supercharging your nervous system to fear conflict at an early age



ADULT REACTION

The need to agree, apologize, and treat another's feelings better than your own

WHY?

Approval feels safe, fulfilling, and avoids conflicts

ORIGIN

A potentially traumatic childhood where survival and meeting the expectations of others superseded your needs



ADULT REACTION

Simply put: criticism feels like rejection

WHY?

When someone disagrees with us, it can feel dangerous

ORIGIN

You were judged harshly as a child or constantly criticized, making you feel like you'd never be good enough



ADULT REACTION

Sensations of feeling unimportant, unseen, and unheard

WHY?

As a child, silence and dismissive behavior created a feeling of invisibility

ORIGIN

Maybe your needs were not met, and emotions were often unvalidated, creating a sense of unworthiness



ADULT REACTION

Automatic insecurity, doubt, and a near-constant imposter syndrome

WHY?

As a child, you might have been told you were not enough, compared to another, or made to feel small about your efforts and abilities

ORIGIN

Being compared or told you were good enough in your youth, creating deep insecurities

How firefighters think about money

By Firefighters First Credit Union

At Firefighters First Credit Union, we've spent more than nine decades serving those who serve others – and we've learned that in the fire service, money isn't just math. It's emotional, cultural, and often tied to identity.

The long shifts, adrenaline, pride, and sacrifice of this job shape how firefighters think about earning, spending, and saving. That's not good or bad, it's human. Understanding the why behind financial decisions can help you find balance between providing, enjoying, and planning for what's next.

Here are a few common money mindsets we see in the fire service, and how small shifts can create lasting stability without losing what makes this career (and community) unique.

UNDERSTANDING THE PSYCHOLOGY BEHIND SPENDING, SAVING, AND SELF-WORTH IN THE FIRE SERVICE

1 The Payday Illusion:

WHEN MORE MONEY DOESN'T EQUAL MORE FREEDOM

Overtime can be both a lifeline and a trap. It feels good to earn more, but that extra income can expand your lifestyle instead of your freedom. We call that the payday illusion: the belief that higher pay automatically means financial progress. Sometimes, it just means higher expenses and more shifts to sustain them.

Try this:

- Track your income and spending for three months – see if extra work is improving your quality of life
- Define what enough looks like for you and your family – so comparison doesn't define it for you
- Remember: freedom comes from needing less, not earning more



2

The Scarcity Reflex:

SAVING LIKE THERE'S A RECESSION, THEN SPENDING LIKE THERE ISN'T

Firefighters live in extremes – calm, then chaos. That rhythm shows up in money habits, too. One month, you're saving every penny; the next, you're splurging on something that feels like a well-deserved release. We call this the scarcity reflex. It's your brain reacting to stress and uncertainty, the same instinct that keeps you sharp on a call. But financially, it can create an exhausting cycle of feast and famine.

Try this:

- Automate your savings so it happens consistently, not just when motivation hits
- Set aside permission money for guilt-free enjoyment – balance builds longevity
- Remember: stability isn't about strict limits, it's about sustainable habits

3

When Money Becomes Armor:

THE EMOTIONAL WEIGHT OF EARNING

In the fire service, value often comes from hard work – hours logged, shifts covered, and calls answered. That same drive can make you equate worth with earning. But when money becomes emotional armor – a way to prove reliability or avoid feeling idle – it can start weighing you down. You're not just providing; you're overworking to stay enough.

Try this:

- Separate self-worth from net worth. You're more than your paycheck
- Build identity outside the job – family, hobbies, and community all refill your sense of purpose
- Talk about burnout and financial stress. These conversations are part of wellness, not weakness.

In the End:

YOUR MINDSET IS THE REAL CURRENCY

We've seen that financial strength isn't just about numbers; it's about mindset.

Money can reflect pride, purpose, or even pain. When you understand what drives your financial habits, you can make choices that truly serve your life, not just your paycheck.

Because at the end of the day, the goal isn't to earn more. It's about living better, resting easier, and building the stability you deserve. **C**



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HOW COMPANY OFFICERS DRIVE FIREFIGHTER FITNESS FIREFIGHTER SAFETY STAND DOWN

LEARN MORE
ABOUT THE
FIREFIGHTER
SAFETY STAND
DOWN



By Deputy Fire Chief Darin Wallentine, Sarasota County Fire Department, Sarasota, FL IAFC Safety, Health, and Survival Section Vice-Chair

Every firefighter safety initiative eventually ends up at the firehouse kitchen table. Policies may be written at headquarters and priorities may be set by the fire chief, **but culture is enforced, reinforced, or undermined at the company level.** That is why the company officer plays the most critical role in the success of the Firefighter Safety Stand Down, especially as the fire service turns its focus in 2026 to firefighter fitness.

The Firefighter Safety Stand Down is intended to pause the noise, slow the tempo, and create space for focusing on a theme designed to prevent firefighter injury or death. Firefighter fitness fits squarely within that intent. **Whether those conversations are meaningful or superficial depends almost entirely on the captain or lieutenant leading the crew.** Firefighters do not experience the Stand Down as a national campaign or a theme, they experience it through the tone, authenticity, and leadership of their company officer.

Company officers are the daily translators of organizational intent. They take abstract values, like safety, wellness, and fitness, and turn them into real-world expectations at the station. **When officers treat firefighter fitness as optional, or secondary to operations, crews notice and will follow that complacent lead.** When officers frame fitness as an operational requirement tied directly to survival, performance, and longevity, crews will respond no differently to receiving an order for pulling lines or effecting a rescue.

Trust lives at the company level. Firefighters are far more likely to speak honestly about fatigue, sleep deprivation, nutrition, stress, or declining fitness when the officer has established trust and authenticity long

before Stand Down week begins. The Safety Stand Down does not create that trust, but it reveals whether it exists.

This is particularly important with fitness, a topic that can feel personal and, at times, uncomfortable. **The company officer's role is to set an example, recognize the crew's strengths and weaknesses, and to normalize the conversation.** Fitness is not about aesthetics or competition; it is about being physically capable and prepared to deliver when the tones drop, surviving a dangerous career, and doing everything possible to ensure everyone goes home.

FROM ANNUAL THEME TO DAILY REALITY

One of the greatest strengths of the Safety Stand Down is its flexibility. The 2026 firefighter fitness theme provides direction, but the company officer provides relevance. **Connecting fitness to recent calls, difficult rescues, cardiac close calls, injuries, or long shifts makes the Stand Down message real.** Firefighters engage when they understand fitness is not a gym issue, it is a survival issue.

Company officers should not feel pressured or compelled to have all the answers. In fact, admitting uncertainty often strengthens credibility. Statements like, "I am working on this, too" or "I am trying to be better for the job and for my family" go a long way. The Firefighter Safety Stand Down works best when it feels like a shared commitment rather than a compliance exercise or another assignment on vector solutions.

Perhaps the most overlooked aspect of the company officer's role during the Safety Stand Down is **initiating.** No different than

having an intentional plan or daily routine of drills, pre-plans, and truck checks. Crews watch what officers do far more than what they say. Officers who prioritize sleep and hydration, engage in physical training, and speak openly and frankly about stress send a powerful message without ever giving a speech.

This intentional approach to firefighter fitness must extend beyond Stand Down week. The true value of the firefighter fitness theme is realized in the days, weeks, months, and even years that follow. **Company officers are uniquely positioned to sustain momentum by encouraging realistic and functional fitness routines,** protecting time for training when possible, and reinforcing the mindset that asking for help is a sign of professionalism, not weakness.

WHERE LEADERSHIP AND IMPACT INTERSECT

Fire chiefs may light the spark, but company officers keep the fire burning. The success of the Firefighter Safety Stand Down and the firefighter fitness theme, is not measured by workouts logged or checklists completed. It is measured at the intersection where healthier firefighters thrive, preventable injuries are avoided, and longer careers become a reality. **Careers that develop a fitness lifestyle extend well past retirement.**

If we want firefighter fitness to be more than a theme, we must invest in the officers who make it real. When company officers lead with intention, authenticity, and humility, the Safety Stand Down stops being an annual event and starts becoming part of who we are. That is where fitness, safety, and survival move from slogans to a healthy lifestyle with a firm foundation in fitness. **C**

TIRED OF BEING TIRED?

By Dr. David Hupp, DrBA

///
THREE TYPES OF
FATIGUE YOU CAN
ATTACK INSTEAD
OF ENDURE

Winded, worn out, gassed, exhausted, lethargic, tired, drained – these are all synonyms for fatigue. Fatigue, however, is **more complex**.

FATIGUE

The extreme and persistent lack of energy that isn't fixed with simple rest, due to repeated stress.

Challenging calls, sleep loss/interruption, and high stakes all contribute to fatigue in the fire service. To conquer fatigue, a better understanding can **help you see light at the end of the tunnel**.

IN THE FIRE SERVICE, FATIGUE CAN BE
CLASSIFIED INTO THREE GROUPS:



MORAL FATIGUE



OPERATIONAL FATIGUE



ORGANIZATIONAL
CULTURAL FATIGUE



MORAL FATIGUE

The emotional exhaustion that occurs from one's personal values repeatedly conflicting with organizational expectations.

This mismatch over time depletes emotional energy and erodes both morale and engagement.

It is defined as an ethical dissonance, meaning a direct conflict or a disconnect in ethics. Essentially,

you become drained **from being asked to do things you do not feel are right**, and from not being able to voice and influence decisions you feel are right.

Promotions based on politics or loyalty rather than merit, leaders preaching

accountability while avoiding it themselves, and zero-tolerance policies that are tolerated for certain people are all examples of organizational moral fatigue causes.



OPERATIONAL FATIGUE

A decline in physical, emotional, and cognitive performance resulting from sustained high-level workloads.

This type of fatigue can lead to suboptimal decision-making, a lack of situational awareness, and an increased risk of accidents.

To combat operational fatigue, instead of just treating the symptoms, the focus should be on addressing the root cause: **inefficiency**. Boosting efficiency lightens the overall workload. According to a 2025 study by the MIT Sloan School of Management, **41% of a public sector employee's time is spent on non-value-added activities**. Furthermore, their research indicates that 75% of employees feel overwhelmed by work intensification, which includes **"too many tasks, too much red tape, and emotional labor."**

The gold standard for driving efficiency is **Lean improvement**, championed by Toyota, which looks to eliminate waste in a process, **which is defined**

as any activity that doesn't add value to the customer. It classifies waste into the following categories: defects, waiting, transportation, inventory, overproduction, overprocessing, motion, and human capital.

If you want to reduce operational fatigue, trim the failures so energy and effort aren't wasted.

- **DEFECTS** are errors, such as positioning the apparatus in the wrong spot and having to reposition it.
- **WAITING** is anything that involves a line, like standing in line at the hospital emergency department.
- **TRANSPORTATION** is the unnecessary movement of materials or patients.
- **INVENTORY** is having too much material or spoilage, like drugs that

have passed their expiration date on the ambulance.

- **OVERPRODUCTION** is producing something before it is ready or producing too much, like pulling a 400-foot line for a car fire only 50 feet away.
- **OVERPROCESSING** is being too detailed, like talking too much on the radio.
- **MOTION** is the unnecessary motion of people, like not bringing a saw for commercial forcible entry on the Charlie side, and having to run back to get one.
- **HUMAN CAPITAL WASTE** is the underutilization or misalignment of people's talent and skills, such as placing personnel in leadership roles without proper training.



ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURAL FATIGUE

Comes from constantly shifting priorities, excessive change, and conflicting subcultures (cliques) that drain energy.

The constant realignment that an individual has to do to "get on board" can be exhausting over time.

The Center for Creative Leadership reports that staff willingness to support change has dropped from 74% in 2016 to 43% in 2022, which is attributed to constant changes, leadership pushing

change without changing themselves, and a lack of communication regarding the reason why (Pasmore et al., 2025).

Alleviate organizational cultural fatigue by creating and using a strategic plan for the department. A strategic plan contains a mission for what the department does,

a vision for where it would like to go, core values that it holds in high regard, a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis to get information on internal and external conditions, and goals that leverage a strength, fix a weakness, exploit an opportunity, and protect against a threat.

Fatigue can have a detrimental impact on overall wellness, especially when chronic. While certain situations must be endured and, by extension, are associated with coping strategies, **fatigue can also be mitigated proactively by addressing its root causes.**

Defining where the fatigue is coming from is half the battle, either morally, operationally, or from the organizational culture.

Once identified, targeted solutions can reduce the severity and frequency of fatiguing events at their source, just

like locating and attacking the seat of a fire. **Make the push for your personal wellness, and reduce fatigue with tactical precision.** [C](#)

PALM TREES AND POTCAKES

By Liz Fleming, Host of Liz Fleming Travels, iHeart Radio

"We don't start matching walkers and dogs until about 9 a.m.," the young women at Potcake Place K9 Rescue explains, bending down to pat the wriggling dogs.

"BUT PEOPLE START LINING UP AROUND 7 A.M. TO MAKE SURE THEY GET ONE."

You'd think your first morning activity on the sunny, perfect island of Providenciales in the Turks and Caicos Islands might be basking in the sun or enjoying a leisurely breakfast overlooking the ocean. The island, commonly known as Provo, **is the gateway to the archipelago of 40 coral islands in the Atlantic Ocean**, a British Overseas Territory southeast of the Bahamas.

If you wanted to indulge yourself completely, you might check into the chic South Bank Resort, **where every minute of your time could be spent lolling under a palm tree beside a horizon pool, enjoying a private villa, sinking your toes in silky smooth white sands**, or perhaps snorkelling or scuba diving on the barrier reefs.

MAYBE YOU'D CHOOSE TO FLY TO SOUTH CAICOS ISLAND, WHERE WILD DONKEYS OUTNUMBER THE FEW LUCKY LOCALS WHO LIVE THERE, AND PAMPER YOURSELF AT SALTERRA RESORT.

Or perhaps you'd take things right over the top and head to Ambergris Cay, an exclusive island of luxe villas accessible only by private plane. Here, you could spend your time sipping something tall and tropical at a middle-of-the-ocean tiki bar **or wandering through the shallow waves looking for stunning starfish.**

But if you're an animal lover, chances are good that one morning you'd find yourself

on Provo in Grace Bay, lining up with other tourists, cruise ship guests and locals to **walk a potcake pup.**

AND THE CHANCES ARE EVEN BETTER THAT THE PUP YOU WALKED MIGHT END UP GOING HOME WITH YOU.

It's a program so popular there sometimes aren't enough "walkees" for all the walkers who show up looking for a match.

POTCAKE PLACE K9 RESCUE GATHERS, FEEDS AND CARES FOR YOUNG, MIXED-BREED DOGS AND THEN MATCHES THEM WITH THOSE WHO'D LIKE A FURRY FRIEND WITH WHOM TO STROLL AROUND THE BEAUTIFUL DOWNTOWN STREETS OF A LUSH CARIBBEAN DESTINATION.

The one thing Potcake Place K9 Rescue doesn't do is put dogs down – **theirs is a no-kill shelter.**

Why are they called potcake pups? The answer lies in an old island tradition of cooking rice **and feeding the crusty bits from the bottom – called potcakes – to the dogs that hung around the kitchen.**

"Lots of people from cruise ships and resorts come in to walk a pup just for fun," the caregivers explain, "and end up falling in love."



"WHEN THAT HAPPENS, WE CAN HELP THEM MAKE THE ARRANGEMENTS TO GET THEIR DOG HOME."

One look at the huge brown eyes that gaze up at you as you clip on their leash is all it takes to have you planning just how to tell your family that a new pet is on the way.

And to think you were just planning to get a T-shirt or a key chain! C



HEADING TO PROVIDENCIALES ISLAND? YOU'LL FIND THE POTCAKE PUPS AT 40 SALTMILLS PLAZA, GRACE BAY

When individual things are intrinsically connected, is it better to break them into their individual parts and address them or approach them as an entire unit? That's a complicated question, and one firefighter wellness researchers are taking on.

Consider this: your internal combustion engine needs a battery, a starter and a fuel pump to start. If it won't start when you flip the switch, you isolate the problem to one of those three. Fixing, say, a faulty battery should do the trick.

Humans are more complex. That nagging shoulder injury you've ignored for a year, or so, is now causing neck and back pain. Fixing the shoulder is just a start — you are a system, not a collection of components. And the mind is even more complicated. Which, of course, is where our researchers turned their attention.

Often, firefighters experience insomnia, nightmares and PTSD together — like a system. Yet, these conditions are for the most part treated as components. Think isolating the temperamental starter and hoping that solves the wonky fuel injector.

CLINICAL HOPE FOR HAUNTED FIREFIGHTERS

By Rick Markley, Executive Editor,
CRACKYL Magazine



"To our knowledge, no prior research has tested the effects of accelerated treatment for PTSD, insomnia, and nightmares in firefighters or any other population," the authors wrote in their paper published by the American Psychological Association.

Accelerated therapy is a key term here. Previous researchers found that the longer firefighters had to stay in a therapy program, the greater the chances they would drop out before completion. In this study, everyone who started the program finished it.

Here's how the study shook out. Researchers did outreach efforts to find firefighters who suffered from all three disorders. The qualified firefighters spent four days at a therapy retreat in small groups. They stayed in a rented house and lived much like they would in a career firehouse. They cooked and ate together. They unwound together with cards or whatever — alcohol, however, was forbidden. And they trained together in the form of group therapy exercises.

They had an individual tele-therapy session before arriving on site, as well as a follow up session one week after. The in-person therapy consisted of Written Exposure Therapy for trauma with Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for insomnia and nightmares. Participants completed five structured trauma-writing sessions, following the WET protocol — writing about their worst experiences in detail.

OVER 75%

NO LONGER MEETING DIAGNOSTIC CRITERIA FOR PTSD ONE MONTH LATER

Again, despite the limitations and it being a maiden voyage, the results were pretty damn good.

PTSD symptoms showed large improvements, with more than 75% no longer meeting diagnostic criteria one month later. Insomnia severity dropped sharply. Nightmare frequency fell by nearly half. Depressive symptoms improved, too.

Researchers checked with the participants one and three months after their sessions to see if the results stuck. Even three months out, the gains held.

"We are so excited about these results," says Sara Jahnke, one of the researchers on the project and head of Science to the Station. "But keep in mind, this is a start, not a finish. We have so much more to do and to learn. This study showed us what we need to do to improve future research and improve this accelerated therapy. And the positive results we got from this study tell us we absolutely have to push forward on both these fronts."

Some of the early lessons learned were making it easier for participants to get to the workshops. Four days doesn't seem like a lot, but tack on travel and it became

a burden to some. Of the 49 qualified participants, only 34 could make it to the in-person workshops. Again, those who showed up all finished.

"This suggests that enrollment and retention might be higher if the program were available in more geographic locations and participants could select the group dates that fit their schedule," the research team wrote. "An individual treatment format would have fewer logistical challenges but may have lower acceptability."

Being away from home, researchers said, likely limited the distractions and helped the firefighters focus on the program.

The study also found that group size mattered. When the group size was as small as two or three, or so large that the group was split into two living quarters, the firefighters reported less satisfaction. The researchers said a minimum of four participants would be ideal.

Researchers also recommend relying less on self-reporting tools like sleep diaries and engaging more technology — such as wearables that monitor sleep quantity and quality.

"The best part about this was that we saw not only what worked well, but what can work better," Jahnke says. "We just can't wait to start applying what we learned here to help more firefighters." **C**

AN INSIDER'S LOOK

RETIRED FIREFIGHTER AND FIRE SERVICE PROGRAM MANAGER RICK BEST PARTICIPATED IN THIS STUDY AND OFFERED HIS EXPERIENCES AND LESSONS FROM ATTENDING "BRAIN CAMP".

READ ABOUT IT IN OUR SPRING 2025 EDITION HERE:



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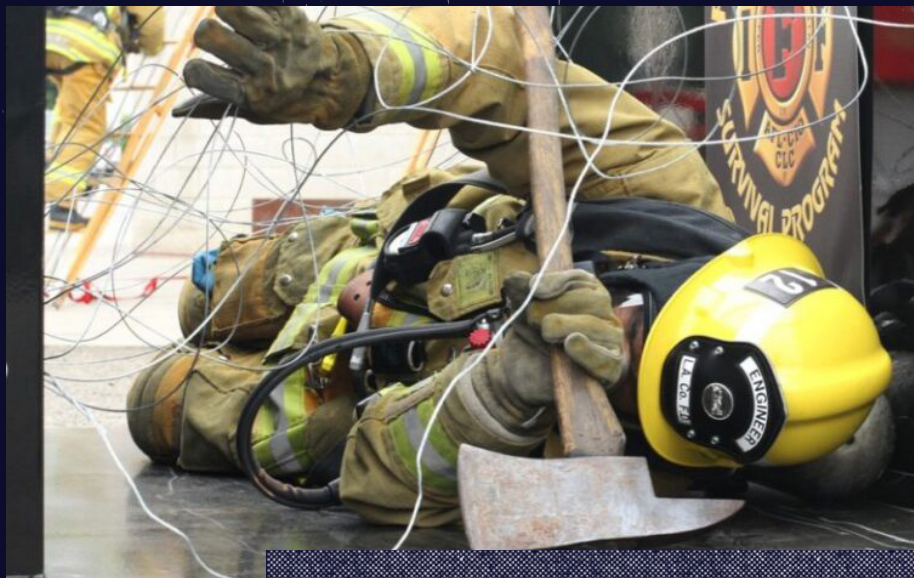
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THE ART OF THE DIP



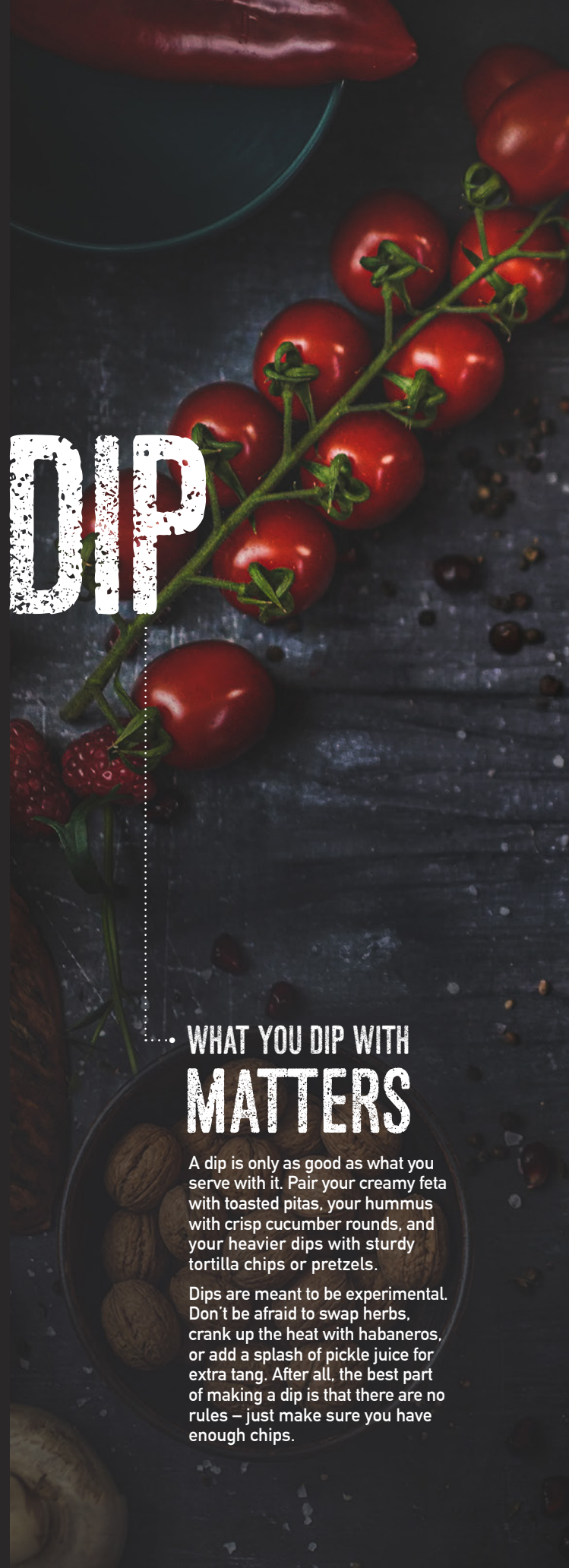
In the world of appetizers, **the dip is the champion of social gatherings**. Whether it's a high-stakes Super Bowl party, a casual backyard barbecue, or a sophisticated cocktail hour, a bowl of something creamy, spicy, or zesty surrounded by chips, crackers or crunchy vegetables is a universal sign of hospitality.

But what makes a dip truly great? It's the balance of texture, acidity, and scoopability. A dip must be sturdy enough to cling to a chip but light enough not to shatter it. From the ancient roots of hummus in the Middle East to the post-war American obsession with onion dip (a brilliant marketing move by a powdered soup company in the 1950s), these bowls tell a story of global flavors condensed into a single bite. **And in case you were wondering, guacamole was part of the Aztec diet going back at least to the 16th century.**

WHAT YOU DIP WITH MATTERS

A dip is only as good as what you serve with it. Pair your creamy feta with toasted pitas, your hummus with crisp cucumber rounds, and your heavier dips with sturdy tortilla chips or pretzels.

Dips are meant to be experimental. Don't be afraid to swap herbs, crank up the heat with habaneros, or add a splash of pickle juice for extra tang. After all, the best part of making a dip is that there are no rules — just make sure you have enough chips.



THE 3 TYPES OF DIPS

You'll notice a dip tends to fall into one of these categories, each with its own character.



1

THE PLANT-BASED POWERHOUSES

Think guacamole or hummus. These rely on the natural fats of avocados or the protein-rich density of legumes.

2

THE CREAMY CLASSICS

Usually based on sour cream, cream cheese, or Greek yogurt. These are the comfort foods of the dip world.



3

THE CHUNKY SALSAS

These focus on fresh produce, acidity (lime or vinegar), and heat. They provide a refreshing contrast to heavier, fried snacks.



Ready to try making one of your own? You're in luck – check out the easy recipes on the next page.

THE BETTER-THAN
-STORE-BOUGHT

ROASTED GARLIC HUMMUS

The secret to silky hummus isn't just the ingredients; it's the way you bring them together.

INGREDIENTS

- 1 can (15 oz) chickpeas, drained and rinsed
- 1/4 cup fresh lemon juice
- 1/4 cup well-stirred tahini
- 1 small roasted garlic clove, minced
- 2 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
- 1/2 tsp ground cumin
- Salt to taste
- 2–3 tbsp ice water (the secret to fluffiness!)

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Process the tahini and lemon juice in a food processor for 1 min until whipped and creamy.
2. Add olive oil, garlic, cumin, and salt. Process for another 30 seconds.
3. Add half the chickpeas, process for 1 min, then add the remaining chickpeas and process until thick.
4. While the motor is running, drizzle in the ice water. This aerates the mixture, turning it from a paste into a light mousse.

Inspired by Middle Eastern Muhammara, this dip is earthy, slightly sweet, and boasts a stunning magenta hue that pops on any table.

INGREDIENTS

- 2 medium beets, roasted and peeled (or pre-cooked vacuum-packed beets for a shortcut)
- 1/2 cup toasted walnuts
- 1/4 cup Greek yogurt or labneh
- 1 tbsp balsamic glaze or pomegranate molasses
- 1 tsp ground cumin
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Optional: Toasted sesame seeds for garnish

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Roughly chop the roasted beets and place them in the food processor with the walnuts.
2. Pulse until the walnuts are finely ground and the beets are broken down.
3. Add the yogurt, balsamic glaze, and cumin. Blend until smooth but still retaining a slight nuttiness in texture.
4. Taste and adjust with salt and pepper. Serve chilled with pita chips or cucumber slices.

ROASTED BEET + WALNUT DIP



WHIPPED FETA + HOT HONEY

This dip plays with the sweet and spicy trend and is impressive for how little effort it requires.

INGREDIENTS

- 8 oz feta cheese, crumbled
- 1/2 cup Greek yogurt
- 1 garlic clove, grated
- Zest of 1 lemon
- 2 tbsp honey mixed with
- 1 tsp chili flakes (warmed)

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Place the feta, yogurt, garlic, and lemon zest in a blender or food processor.
2. Blend until completely smooth.
3. Spread onto a shallow plate; create swirls with the back of a spoon.
4. Drizzle the warm hot honey over the top and garnish with fresh thyme or cracked black pepper.



This is ranch's cool cousin. It's smoky, bright, and perfect for dipping charred veggies or salty tortilla chips.

INGREDIENTS

- 1 bunch scallions (about 6 to 8)
- 1 cup sour cream or Mexican Crema
- Juice and zest of 1 lime
- 1/4 cup fresh cilantro (leaves and stems)
- 1/2 tsp smoked paprika
- A pinch of flaky sea salt

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Toss your scallions in a tiny bit of oil and sear them in a hot cast-iron pan (or under the broiler) for 3 to 4 minutes, until they are wilted and have dark charred spots.
2. Roughly chop the charred scallions and toss them into the food processor.
3. Add the sour cream, lime juice, zest, cilantro, and smoked paprika.
4. Pulse until the scallions are finely flecked throughout the cream. The result should be a pale green dip with smoky black specks.

SMOKY CHARRED SCALLION + LIME CREMA





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