

Taking Care of Our Own

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As we come upon the 2010 Fire/EMS Safety, Health and Survival Week, June 20-26, 2010, this is the perfect time to start preparing to provide training on taking care of our own. This week has been set aside by many departments to allow for participation in this nationwide training. The International Association of Fire Chiefs has collected and posted training materials on their website, www.IAFC.org, based around being fit for duty. In addition, they have also developed a PowerPoint presentation that focuses on each of the key issues discussed this year.

Whether your department uses these materials or develops your own, it is vital that we take a step back and reflect upon the injuries and fatalities that have occurred. As we are all aware, cardiac related events are the number one enemy of firefighters accounting for nearly fifty percent of Line-of-Duty-Deaths every year. In order to combat this tragedy and others, I believe that being fit for duty requires us to look at three specific avenues of our well-being. These areas include being not only physically, but mentally and emotionally fit for duty.

Being physically fit simply means being able to handle the rigorous tasks that we are often asked to perform. This can occur whether it's on the fire ground or on an EMS call. Having the strength and endurance to handle these situations is totally dependent upon us being accountable for ourselves. One resource that may be of use for this particular subject is the articles provided by Frank Fire Jr. on Fire Engineering's website. As well, being physically fit also means taking the time to eat a healthy meal. As first responders, we are always on the run (never knowing when the next meal might be), take a few minutes to review the nutritional labels for some of your favorite "Fast Food" places. Often there are very good alternatives to the traditional "grease burger," when you are not able to cook a well balanced meal. As an example, when I am on the road, Zaxby's and McDonalds offer a plain grilled chicken sandwich that is the perfect size.

The next area is being mentally fit. Mentally fit entails being mentally prepared to handle the stress factors that the job demands. Having the ability to come to work with a clear and open mind, with no distractions, has proven to play a big role in situational awareness. Every firefighter's goal is to be well-prepared and to never feel overwhelmed by the calls that we run. One method that has worked well for me and combines the physical aspect, is arriving to work an extra 30 minutes early and going for a easy run around the square. This allows me to clear my

mind and prepare myself for the task of the day. However you chose to relieve your stress, find a method that works for you and allows you that peace of mind. Other examples may include: reading, walking, listening to music, or any hobby. www.webmd.com offers several suggestions.

Emotionally fit has a lot to do with the tragedies that we see. Generally speaking, when we are called it is the worst possible day for some individual. Although some of these calls may not be of the same magnitude for us as it is for the caller, there are times when it is. It is important for first responders to understand and recognize the effects on us with these situations. Every so often, we encounter the call that sticks in our mind and we need to talk about it with our crews. Our crews may seem “tough,” however if it bothers one individual there is probably a second individual with the same feelings. During this week, take the time to sit down with your crews and discuss the importance of letting people know when something is on your mind. As an officer, it is imperative that you allow for an open door environment where all firefighters feel comfortable discussing such situations with you. Doing critiques at the end of highly stressful incidents can help provide the ice breaker to start some of these discussions. Also, departments should discuss how critical incident stress debriefing teams can be activated for their department.

Throughout this week in June, take a second and think about the first responders that have laid down their life or have been injured. Honor these extraordinary individuals by learning from what they encountered and how to improve the situation if you are faced with it. Being fit for duty applies to all of us and we can all take something away from this week.

Train hard, take care and be safe.

Additional Resources:

University of Michigan- <http://www.umich.edu/~exphysio/mvs.240/LecturesHandouts.html>

International Association of Firefighters- <http://www.iaff.org/hs/Well/index.htm>

National Volunteer Fire Council- <http://www.healthy-firefighter.org/files/documents/2005resourceguide.pdf>

Canadian Mental Health Association- http://www.cmha.ca/bins/content_page.asp?cid=2-267-353

International Critical Incident Stress Foundation- <http://www.icisf.org/articles/>

Everyone Goes Home- <http://www.everyonegoeshome.com/>

BIO:



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