



FIRE AND RESCUE

How to manage your mental wellbeing

Blue Light Programme





How to manage your mental wellbeing

This booklet is for anyone in the fire and rescue service who wants to improve and maintain their mental wellbeing. It explains what can affect your mental health and gives practical suggestions about how to build resilience.

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What is mental wellbeing?

Mental wellbeing describes your mental state – how you are feeling and how well you can cope with day-to-day life. Our mental wellbeing can change, from day to day, month to month or year to year.

If you have good mental wellbeing (or good mental health), you are able to:

- feel relatively confident in yourself
- feel and express a range of emotions
- build and maintain positive relationships with other people
- live and work productively
- cope with the stresses of daily life and manage times of change and uncertainty.

Mental wellbeing is just as important as physical wellbeing, and maintaining both is an important part of staying fit and healthy.

Everybody has mental health as well as physical health, and sometimes you're well and sometimes you're not well.

If you work in the fire and rescue service, it's especially important for you to look after your mental wellbeing.

Our research shows:

- ❖ 85% of fire and rescue staff and volunteers have experienced stress and poor mental health at work.
- ❖ Emergency services staff and volunteers are more likely to experience a mental health problem than the general workforce, but you are less likely to take time off work as a result.
- ❖ Staff and volunteers work hard to prevent mental health problems affecting your performance at work, but this can come at a large personal cost, impacting relationships and physical health.



What can affect my mental wellbeing?

We all have times when we have low mental wellbeing – when we feel sad or stressed, or find it difficult to cope.

Your mental wellbeing can be affected by work-related factors like:

- repeated exposure to traumatic events
- impact of physical injuries
- workload pressures.

I think as an individual you need to stop working yourself into the ground, be aware of when you're getting these little warning signs.



Your mental wellbeing can also be affected by other things in your life, for example, if you:

- suffer some sort of loss
- experience loneliness
- have relationships problems
- are worried about money.

Sometimes, there is no clear reason why we experience a period of poor mental wellbeing.

Staying mentally well

It's important to look after your mental wellbeing on a day-to-day basis, and not just after experiencing big, traumatic events. Staying mentally well by building resilience can reduce your chances of developing mental health problems like depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Mental wellbeing checklist

Because of the demands of working in the fire and rescue service, it's important to make sure you manage your mental wellbeing in order to stay fit and healthy.



You can use the checklist below to identify factors that are affecting your mental wellbeing.

- ☐ I have someone I can talk to about my feelings.
- ☐ I have good friends I can trust.
- ☐ I sleep well most of the time.
- ☐ I eat healthily most of the time.
- ☐ I do some physical activity regularly.
- ☐ I make time for the things I enjoy.
- ☐ I do things to help other people.
- ☐ I feel I achieve things.
- ☐ I know how to relax.
- ☐ I know what affects my moods.
- ☐ I am kind to myself about who I am.
- ☐ I look after myself during difficult times.

If you were not able to tick many of these statements, you may want to look at what you can do to build resilience (see p.12) or get support (see p.21).

What can I do to build resilience?

There may be times or situations in your life that are more difficult than others. The capacity to stay mentally well during those times is called 'resilience'. Here are some ways you might be able to develop and strengthen your resilience.

Talk about the way you feel

If you are facing a difficult time, talking about the way you feel with someone you know and trust can often help.

Your colleagues, friends or family may be able to offer you practical help or advice and give you another perspective on what is causing your problems. Even if they can't help, often just talking something through and feeling that there is someone to listen and understand you can make you feel much better.



Build healthy relationships with people

Building and maintaining constructive relationships with people is an important part of staying mentally well. If you spend time around positive and supportive people, you are more likely to have a better self-image, be more confident and feel able to face difficult times.

If you do not have the social contact you feel you need, or experience feelings of loneliness because of your work patterns or for any other reason, this can also have a negative impact on your mental wellbeing.



Look after your physical health

If you have good physical health, you are more likely to have good mental health. Sleep patterns, diet and physical activity all have an impact on your mental wellbeing.

Sometimes it can be difficult, or even impossible, to maintain regular sleep, diet and exercise patterns because of work. If this is the case, try to establish as much regularity as you can, or set time aside to look after your physical health after busy or stressful periods.

Do something you enjoy

Doing something you enjoy can improve your confidence and help you stay well. Make time to do things you like, whether it's cooking, seeing your friends or doing DIY.

Learning something new, or taking up a new hobby, can also boost your confidence and occupies your mind in a positive and active way. If you want to try a new hobby, think about what you are good at, or things that you have always wanted to try. You can find information about volunteering organisations and local groups, clubs or classes at your local library, in local newspapers or magazines, or online.

Set yourself a challenge

Set yourself a challenge that you can realistically achieve. This doesn't have to be anything particularly large but should have meaning for you. For example, you might decide you are going to write a letter to your local paper or start going to a regular exercise class. You will feel satisfied and proud of yourself when you achieve your goal, and feel more positive about yourself as a result.

Relax

It's important to make time to relax, even if you don't feel under stress. This may mean going away for the weekend, spending an evening doing something you like, or even just taking a five-minute break to look out of the window. Learning a relaxation technique, such as breathing exercises, yoga or meditation, can also help you relax and reduce stress levels.

Identify mood triggers

Knowing what affects your moods can help you take steps to avoid or change the situations that have a negative impact on you. Even if you can't change the situation, knowing your triggers can help you remember to take extra care of yourself during difficult times.

For example, you may realise that eating certain foods or seeing a certain person has an effect on your mood. Or you may tend to experience a particular mood at a particular time, such as in winter.

Keeping track of your moods in a mood diary can help you work out what affects your mental wellbeing and recognise changes in your mood that would be difficult to spot otherwise. You can create your own mood diary, or there are lots to choose from on the internet (see 'Useful contacts' on p.31 for some examples).



Look after yourself during difficult times

Everyone has times when they face challenging situations and find it difficult to cope. If you are experiencing a difficult time, or are unwell, it's important to look after yourself and try and get through.

Be careful not to put too much pressure on yourself to carry on as normal. You may need to take a break from your usual responsibilities, for example reducing your social activities or workload. Take small steps and don't expect too much of yourself. Try to get enough sleep and eat regularly. If you are finding it difficult to cope on your own, don't be afraid to ask for help. For example, you may need time off work or help with day-to-day tasks, such as cleaning or childcare.

Stay safe. If your feelings become overwhelming, and you have suicidal thoughts or you think you may self harm, remember that you can pick up the phone at any time of night or day and talk to the Samaritans (see 'Useful contacts' on p.31).

Learn to accept yourself

One of the most important steps in maintaining mental wellbeing is to learn to accept yourself. If you value yourself, you are more likely to have positive relationships with other people and find it easier to cope with difficult times in your life.

Here are some tips to help you increase your self-esteem:

- Try not to compare yourself to other people.
- Don't strive for perfection.
- Acknowledge your positive qualities and things you are good at.
- Learn to identify and challenge unhelpful thinking patterns.
- Use self-help books and websites to help you change your beliefs.
- Spend time with supportive people.
- Be assertive – don't allow people to treat you with a lack of respect.
- Engage in hobbies that you enjoy.





What support is available?

You may find that, despite your best efforts, you are unable to maintain your mental wellbeing on your own. In this case, you might want to seek professional help to address whatever is affecting you.

Mind Blue Light Infoline

We have a confidential Blue Light Infoline for emergency service staff, volunteers and their families. Our team can look for details of help and support in your area.

Call 0300 303 5999*

Text 84999

Email bluelightinfo@mind.org.uk

*9am–6pm, Mon to Fri,
calls charged at local rates



Employer support

Find out if your service has any specialist support services, for example:

- occupational health unit
- Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD)
- multi-faith chaplaincy
- peer support
- specialist counselling and support.

Specialist organisations

There are a number of specialist organisations that support the wellbeing of people in the fire and rescue service:

- The Fire Fighters Charity
- Big White Wall
- Blue Lamp Foundation
- associations for minority groups like Women in the Fire Service UK
- local benevolent charities.

See 'Useful contacts' on p.31 for details on how to contact these organisations, as well as information on other organisations that might be able to help you.



Practical help

If there is a particular situation that is affecting your mental wellbeing, the best thing to do is to seek specialist practical help to resolve the problem. Having someone professional who is familiar with your type of situation can see it objectively and usually get to the root of the problem more quickly. For example, if:

- someone close to you has died and you are struggling to cope, you may want to talk to a bereavement counsellor, or contact an organisation like Cruse Bereavement Care
- you have legal, money or housing problems that are causing you stress or anxiety, you may find it useful to talk to your local Citizens Advice.

See 'Useful contacts' on p.31 for organisations that may be able to help.

Peer support

Peer support means talking to people who have been through similar experiences, for example, in a support group, online forum or website. Your service may already have peer support groups set up specifically for this.

You can get details of peer support groups that might be relevant to you by contacting the Mind Blue Light Infoline. (See 'Useful contacts' on p.31.)

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a way of paying attention to the present moment, using techniques like meditation, breathing exercises and yoga. It has been shown to help people become more aware of their thoughts and feelings, so that instead of being overwhelmed by them, it is easier to manage them. Be Mindful has more information and details of local classes around the UK. (See 'Useful contacts' on p.31.)

Talking treatments

If you are facing problems that are affecting your mental wellbeing, and you can't resolve these yourself, you may find a talking treatment helpful.

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is a form of therapy that aims to identify connections between your thoughts, feelings and behaviour, and to help you develop practical skills to manage them. It has been shown to be particularly effective for low self-esteem and anxiety-based conditions.

If your problems stem from early life experiences you might find that other talking treatments, such as person-centred therapy, psychodynamic therapy or interpersonal psychotherapy (IPT), can help you address these experiences more thoroughly.

If you want to try a talking treatment, your GP can provide information and refer you to a local service. However, waiting lists for talking treatments on the NHS can be long, so you may prefer to seek therapy or counselling privately. Private therapists will charge a fee, but some offer a reduced rate for people on a limited income. (See BACP, BABCP and UKCP in 'Useful contacts' on p.31 for a list of accredited private therapists.)



Medication

If you are unable to resolve any difficulties you are having yourself, and your feelings develop into a mental health problem, such as PTSD, anxiety or depression, you may be offered prescription medication by your GP. These drugs don't cure mental health problems, but aim to ease the most distressing symptoms.

Your GP should talk you through the potential advantages and disadvantages of taking any psychiatric medication and discuss possible alternative treatments.

What helps me is being honest with how well I'm coping and getting support when I need it.





Graham's story

I've primarily been a fireman all my life. I've loved every single minute of it. The 14 years I spent on one watch at Sheffield was probably the best time of my life. However, towards the end of that period, bits and bobs of my family life were affecting me. I don't know if it was these family issues or my own propensity for this type of thinking that led me to fall ill.

One day I went to a car crash. It was the first incident I'd come across where I just couldn't bear to look at the scene. This was really unusual for me, as there was nothing there that I hadn't seen before.

Later I chatted to the occupational nurse about it, and it sort of went away, but it was always in the back of my mind that I still wasn't well.

Then things started to dip again for no apparent reason. I wasn't acting the same at work, I wasn't engaging with people. It was really powerful this time around. I remember needing to buy a pair of shorts, but I couldn't get myself in to the shop because I couldn't bear to face people - I just wanted to be on my own.

Things built up and I ended up going off sick for three or four months because of depression.

I went to a rehabilitation centre run by the Fire Fighters Charity. The two weeks there were really a shining light for me. It switched a light bulb on that I have to make the effort to make myself better, to drive it out of myself by talking to people, which is why I now volunteer at work to do talks on this topic.

I joined the fire service in 1989, so it was still a very macho, 'suck it up and get on with it' culture. But it's been my experience that the more I've spoken to colleagues about how I'm feeling, the better I feel. And they don't have to be trained professionals; a lot of the conversations I'd had round stations and on headquarters have been between me and co-workers, without having an occupational health therapist involved.

So my message would be that you're not alone, you just need to voice your concerns and how you're feeling and you'll be amazed how many people are actually feeling the same, and how many people want to support you through that.

Useful contacts

Mind Blue Light Infoline

0300 303 5999

(Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm, local rates)

text: 84999

bluelightinfo@mind.org.uk

mind.org.uk/bluelight

Confidential Infoline for emergency service staff, volunteers and their families. Our team can look for details of help and support in your area.

Be Mindful

bemindful.co.uk

Information, and details of local mindfulness courses and therapists.

Bereavement Advice Centre

0800 634 9494

bereavementadvice.org

Support for people who have been bereaved.

Big White Wall

bigwhitewall.com

Online community and forum overseen by trained advisers.

Blue Lamp Foundation

0871 2345 999

bluelamp-foundation.org

Financial aid to emergency service workers injured in the course of duty.

British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP)

0161 705 4304

babcp.com

Lists accredited therapists.

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

01455 883 300

itsgoodtotalk.org.uk

Practitioners in your area.

Citizens Advice

03444 111 444 (England); 0344 477 2020 (Wales)
citizensadvice.org.uk

Confidential advice on a range of issues.

Cruse Bereavement Care

0844 477 9400 (national helpline)

helpline@cruse.org.uk

cruse.org.uk

Bereavement charity offering online, telephone and face-to-face support.

Direct.gov.uk

direct.gov.uk/en/employment

Information about employment rights and services, and career advice.

Mood diaries

moodpanda.com

moodscope.com

medhelp.org/land/mood-tracker

mappiness.org.uk

Some examples to try. There are many more available.

Samaritans

Freepost RSRB-KKBY-CYJK
Chris, PO Box 90 90
Stirling, FK8 2SA
24-hour helpline: 08457 90 90 90
jo@samaritans.org
samaritans.org

Emotional support for anyone in distress.

The Fire Fighters Charity

0800 389 8820
info@firefighterscharity.org.uk
firefighterscharity.org.uk

The Fire Fighters Charity provides services that enhance quality of life for serving and retired firefighters, fire personnel and their families.

United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP)

020 7014 9955
psychotherapy.org.uk

List of registered practitioners.

Women in the Fire Service UK

01366 381 237
nwfs.net

Voluntary organisation aimed at supporting women in the fire service and promoting gender equality.

This is a shortened version of the original text.
For the full online version, visit mind.org.uk/BlueLightBooklets

Give us your feedback

Email bluelight@mind.org.uk if you have any feedback on this booklet.

References available on request

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We're Mind,
the mental health charity.

We won't give up until everyone
experiencing a mental health problem
gets both support and respect.

mind.org.uk/BlueLight

bluelight@mind.org.uk

 @MindCharity #mybluelight

 Mind

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