



FOR FIRE AND RESCUE FRIENDS AND FAMILY
How to support someone's
mental wellbeing

Blue Light Programme



How to support someone's mental wellbeing

This booklet is for friends and family of fire and rescue service personnel who want to know how to support someone's mental wellbeing. It explains what can affect someone's mental wellbeing, and how you can help someone stay mentally well.



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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
- feel engaged with the world around you
- live and work productively
- cope with the stresses of daily life and manage times of change and uncertainty.

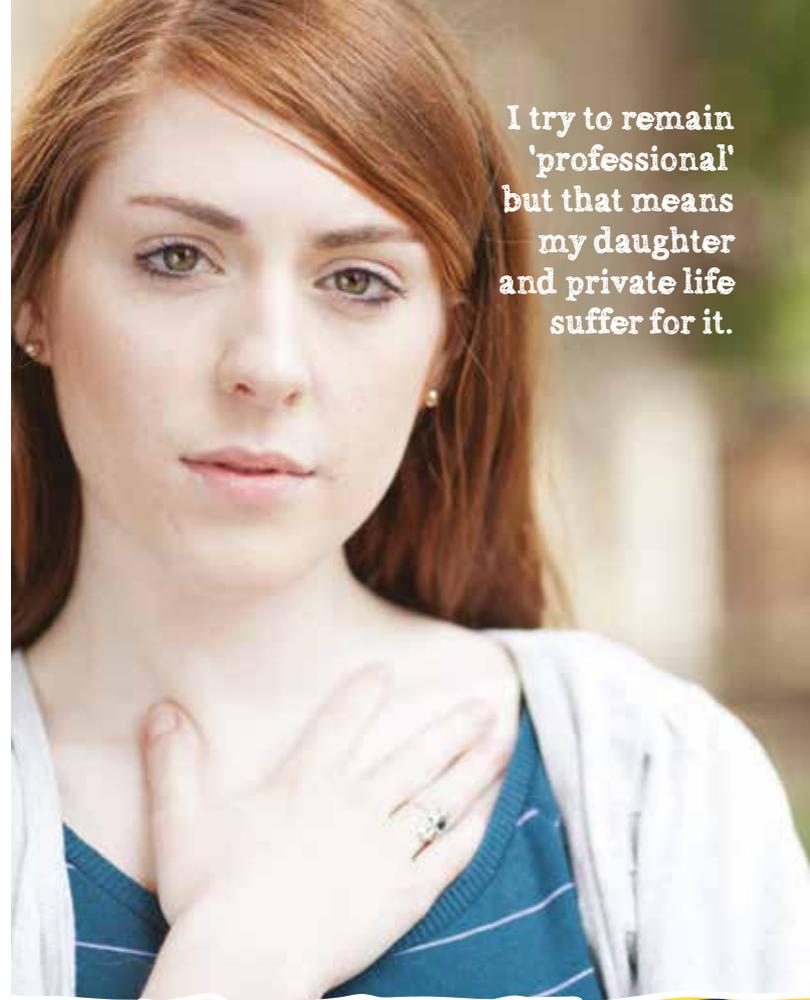


Why is mental wellbeing important for fire and rescue service personnel?

Our research with over 4,000 emergency services staff and volunteers shows that it's particularly important for people in the fire and rescue service to look after their mental wellbeing.

Our research shows:

- Fire and rescue service personnel are more at risk of developing a mental health issue than the general population.
- 85% of fire and rescue personnel have experienced stress and poor mental health at work.
- Fire and rescue service personnel work hard to prevent mental health problems affecting their performance at work, but this can impact relationships with friends and family.



I try to remain 'professional' but that means my daughter and private life suffer for it.

What can affect someone's mental wellbeing?

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

Our research shows that the following factors are triggers of poor mental health for people in the fire and rescue service:

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

The unique challenges of working in the fire and rescue service can make your friend or family member feel isolated or different from those outside of work. This can result in them feeling more reluctant to share their thoughts or feelings with you, which can have a negative effect on their mental wellbeing.

Most of the people in your life outside of work have never seen or been involved in a traumatic event, so this can lead to you feeling alone, different, or isolated from family and friends.

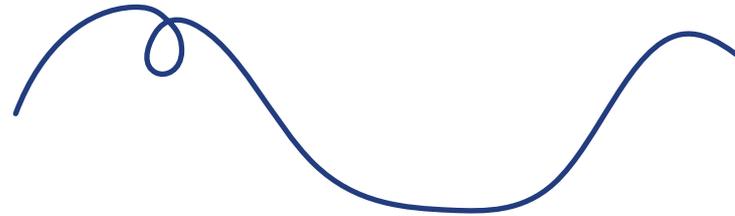
What can I do to help someone stay mentally well?

It's important that people in the fire and rescue service look after their mental wellbeing on a day-to-day basis, and not just after experiencing big, traumatic events. Staying mentally well can reduce their chances of developing mental health problems like depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Here are some things you can do to help your friend or family member stay mentally well.

Listen to how they are feeling

Having a chance to talk openly could help someone to feel calmer and more able to move forward. Just being there for them will probably make a big difference.



Help them reflect on whether they are stressed

Often, people don't notice that some physical symptoms and behaviour (such as not being able to get to sleep, or drinking more than usual) are actually signs of stress. Sometimes you may be able to see it before they recognise it themselves. If you've noticed that someone seems particularly busy, anxious or unwell, you could gently let them know, without judgement, and ask how you can help.

Encourage them to look after their 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.

For example, you could suggest doing some physical activity together. It doesn't matter whether it's gardening, gentle walking or something more active – you will almost always feel better for having done some physical activity.

Help them identify mood triggers

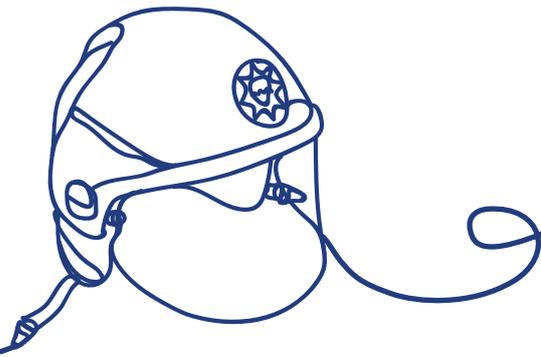
You can be specific about things you've observed, but try to stay open-minded and non-judgemental. Your perspective might be valuable, but your friend or family member could find this conversation stressful, and being patient will help.

Help them learn and practise relaxation techniques

You could help them research good relaxation techniques and find ways to practise them, such as a weekly mindfulness class, or setting aside time for breathing exercises at home. This might become something that you could do together.

Look after yourself

If someone around you is having difficulty with their mental wellbeing, your mental wellbeing might become affected too. If this happens, try to take a step back and look after yourself (see p.24). Being calm and relaxed will make you more able to help someone else.



How can I support someone to seek help?

Most people experiencing a problem with their mental health will speak to a friend or family member before they speak to a health professional, so your support can be really valuable.

What emotional support can I offer?

If someone lets you know that they are experiencing difficult thoughts and feelings, it's common to feel like you don't know what to do or say – but you don't need any special training to show someone you care about them, and often it can be the most valuable help you offer. For example:

- **Listen.** Simply giving someone space to talk and listening to how they're feeling, without judgement or necessarily trying to offer any solutions, can be really helpful in itself. If they're finding it difficult to open up, let them know that you're there when they are ready.

- **Offer reassurance.** Seeking help can feel lonely, and sometimes scary. You can reassure someone by letting them know that they are not alone, and that you will be there to help.
- **Stay calm.** Even though it might be upsetting to hear that someone you care about is distressed, try to stay calm. This will help your friend or family member feel calmer too, and show them that they can talk to you openly without upsetting you.
- **Be patient.** You might want to know more details about their thoughts and feelings, or want them to get help immediately. But it's important to let them set the pace for seeking support themselves.
- **Try not to make assumptions.** Your perspective might be useful to your friend or family member, but try not to assume that you already know what may have caused their feelings, or what will help.
- **Keep social contact.** Part of the emotional support you offer could be to keep things as normal as possible. This could include involving your friend or family member in social events, or chatting about other parts of your lives.

What practical support can I offer?

There are lots of practical things you can do to support someone who is ready to seek help. For example:

- **Look for information that might be helpful.** Our web pages on seeking help for a mental health problem will give you some ideas on what research you can do, existing support available and ways you can help someone think about what might work for them.
- **Help to write down lists of questions** that the person you're supporting wants to ask their doctor, or help to put points into an order that makes sense (for example, most important point first).
- **Help to organise paperwork**, for example making sure that your friend or family member has somewhere safe to keep their notes, prescriptions and records of appointments.

- **Go to appointments with them**, if they want you to – even just being there in the waiting room can help someone feel reassured.
- **Ask them if there are any specific practical tasks you could help with**, and work on those. For example: offering a lift to their appointment or arranging childcare for them.
- **Learn more about the problem they experience**, to help you think about other ways you could support them. Our website provides lots of information about different types of mental health problems, including pages on what friends and family can do to help in each case.



What can I do if someone doesn't want my help?

If you feel that someone you care about is clearly struggling but can't or won't reach out for help, and won't accept any help you offer, it's understandable to feel frustrated, distressed and powerless. But it's important to accept that they are an individual – not everybody will be open to the help that they are offered, and there are always limits to what you can do to support another person.

You can:

- **Be patient.** You won't always know the full story, and there may be reasons why they are finding it difficult to ask for help.
- **Offer emotional support and reassurance.** Let them know you care about them and you'll be there if they change their mind.
- **Inform them how to seek help when they're ready.** For example, you could show them our web pages on seeking help for a mental health problem.
- **Look after yourself,** and make sure you don't become unwell (see p.24).

You can't:

- **Force someone to talk to you.** It can take time for someone to feel able to talk openly, and putting pressure on them to talk might make them feel less comfortable telling you about their experiences.
- **Force someone to get help** (if they're over 18, and are not posing immediate danger to themselves or someone else). As adults, we are all ultimately responsible for making our own decisions. This includes when – or if – we choose to seek help when we feel unwell.
- **See a health care professional for someone else.** A doctor might give you general information about symptoms or diagnoses, but they won't be able to share any specific advice or details about someone else without their consent.

Mind Blue Light Infoline

If you're worried about someone and are not sure what to do, you can call the Mind Blue Light Infoline. Our Infoline can give you confidential, independent and practical advice to help you support the person you care about.

Call 0300 303 5999*

Text 84999

Email bluelightinfo@mind.org.uk

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

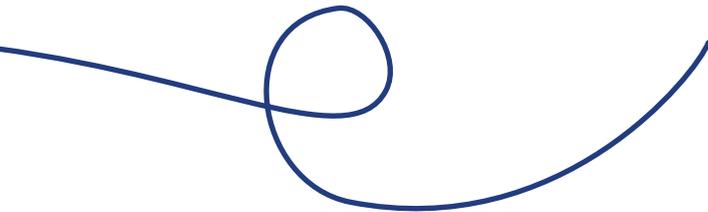


What can I do if it's an emergency?

There may be times when your friend or family member needs to seek help more urgently, such as if they:

- are experiencing suicidal feelings, and feel they may act on them
- are behaving in a way that's putting themselves or someone else at immediate, serious risk of harm.

In this situation, as long as you feel safe to do so, you should stay with them and help them follow the steps opposite.



What's happening	Ways you can get help
you think you may act on suicidal feelings, or you have seriously harmed yourself	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• you can go to any hospital A&E department and ask for help (if you need to, you can call 999 and ask for an ambulance)
you are feeling extremely distressed, or are experiencing suicidal feelings	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• you can contact the Samaritans on 116 123 (they're there to listen)• you can go to Mind's website and click the yellow 'I need urgent help' button at the top of the home page for more options
you need medical help or advice fast, but it's not an emergency	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• you can call NHS 111• you can contact your GP and make an appointment for as soon as possible
you're worried that you might experience a crisis in the future	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• see our web pages on crisis services for information

How can I look after myself?

Supporting the mental wellbeing of someone in the fire and rescue service can have an impact on you, too. Not only can anyone's work-related stress affect their personal lives, but you might hear distressing details about their work that can cause you stress or anxiety. So it's important not to forget to look after your own wellbeing. For example:

Take a break when you need it

If you're feeling overwhelmed by supporting someone or it's taking up a lot of time or energy, taking some time for yourself can help you feel refreshed.

Talk to someone you trust about how you're feeling

You may want to be careful about how much information you share about the person you're supporting, but talking about your own feelings to a friend can help you feel supported too.

Get support

You can call the Mind Blue Light Infoline (see 'Useful contacts' on p.30) for confidential, independent and practical advice about how to support your own mental wellbeing, as well as information about other organisations that can help you. For example, The Fire Fighters Charity (see 'Useful contacts' on p.31) offers support services for eligible family members of fire and rescue service personnel.

Be realistic about what you can do

Your support is really valuable, but it's up to your partner or family member to seek support for themselves. Remember that small, simple things can help, and that just being there for them is probably helping lots.

For more ideas about how to keep yourself well, see our web pages on how to manage your mental wellbeing.

Derek's story

I've served in fire and rescue for 32 years in all – 18 months in the Air Force fire service, then I was in Cheshire fire and rescue service for just over 30 years. I originally joined for what I saw as an exciting and challenging job, with the opportunity for promotion to a command role. I liked the excitement, danger, risk and responsibility of the role.

Serving as an officer in the fire service is a massive personal undertaking. It ceases to be a job and becomes who you are. This level of dedication can cause personal stress. Also, most of the people in your life outside of work have never seen or been involved in a traumatic event, so this can lead to you feeling alone, different, or isolated from family and friends.

Partners have often commented on feeling 'second to the job', and tried to support me through some difficult times due to work-related stress. This, in my case, has resulted in a number of relationship breakdowns.

In my command roles, I served as a frontline responding officer for over 24 years, dealing with every type of incident, including fires, chemicals, road traffic collisions and explosives incidents. You manage to get through some very traumatic events, only to have to face it again and again.



This all started to have a wearing effect on me, and I eventually developed physical health problems, and then mental health issues around 25 years into my career. I started, without at first noticing, to become very cynical about life, thinking “what’s the point?”. I became more introverted, wanting to spend more time alone. I started drinking more and began to lose interest in my hobbies, friends and partner. I’d sometimes spontaneously recall a traumatic incident, seeing them in my mind, and become upset about it privately.

During the development of my mental health issues, I spoke with my sister and my adult daughter. Their words of support and acceptance of my situation were what guided me to seek professional help.

I eventually saw my GP, though I didn’t feel the NHS really understood my issues. I also didn’t want to raise it at work, as I didn’t want admit what was happening. So I just carried on with my duties.

I attended a particular multiple fatal incident that involved a whole family of six. Following this, my symptoms increased: flashbacks, apprehension, self-doubt, anxiety, sadness, anger, and so on. I started to have physical issues with my lungs, coughing, serious infections and pain. I had to book on non-operational duties for the first time, having never before taken a day sick in my career.

In the end I went to the occupational health unit. I was referred to a doctor who was ex-Royal Navy, with a specialisation in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). He was the one who eventually diagnosed me with PTSD. His procedures, guidance and wise words helped me a lot. For the first time, I trusted someone who understood the nature of an officer’s role – his background in service helped me with that.

For those who experience mental health problems, my advice is to be self-aware, expect ups and downs, and the unpredictable nature of the mind, and help those close to you to try to understand how these symptoms can affect you. Personal fitness has also really helped me cope.

If you’re a friend or family member of someone who experiences a mental health problem, my advice is to try to be aware of their condition, and understand they may have mood swings, changes, and whatever other symptoms they exhibit. You can then try to modify living conditions and events, and otherwise help to manage situations for the best. You can also try to find out more about mental health problems by looking at the guidance on Mind’s website.

Useful contacts

Mind Blue Light Infoline

0300 303 5999 (Monday to Friday 9am to 6pm)

text: 84999

bluelightinfo@mind.org.uk

mind.org.uk/bluelight

The Blue Light Infoline offers confidential, independent and practical support, advice and signposting around mental health and wellbeing. The Infoline is just for emergency service staff, volunteers and their families, to help keep you or those you care about well for work.

NHS 111

Call: 111

Advice in England when you need medical help fast but it's not an emergency.

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.

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

Mind Blue Light Infoline:
0300 303 5999 (Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm,
local rates), or text: 84999

 @MindCharity #mybluelight

 Mind

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