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The Experiences of Being a Full-Time Firefighter: A Qualitative Study

Ruth L. Markham

Cedarville University, rlmarkham@cedarville.edu

Nicole M. Tiffan

Cedarville University, ntiffan@cedarville.edu

Lauren A. Kuhlwein

Cedarville University, lkuhlwein@cedarville.edu

Heidi M. Gibbs

Cedarville University, heidigibbs@cedarville.edu

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The Experiences of Being a Full-Time Firefighter: A Qualitative Study

Ruth L. Markham, Ed. D.

Nikki Tiffan

Lauren Kuhlwein

Heidi Gibbs

Introduction

- Firefighters are exposed to stress **both physically and psychologically** on a regular basis. This stress can have a profound effect on the emotional and physical well-being of firefighters.
- The National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) conducted a survey of about 800 firefighters and found that **nearly 25%** of interviewed full-time firefighters had **contemplated suicide** throughout the course of their career. (Carpenter et al., 2015)
- Avsec, Novac, & Bajec (2012) claim that “[The] main sources of stress among professional firemen represent long-lasting and continuous exposure to **sleep disturbances**, reactions to **alarm signals, tragedies** and **organizational stress**.”
- Wagner and O’Neill (2012) found that firefighters **were more** likely to view their jobs as **important**.

Goals

- To **understand** in more depth what it is like to be a full-time firefighter
- To **prove** or **disprove** the above findings
- To **add** to the existing research about stress in the lives of public employees
- To **give a voice** to this group of public employees

Research Procedure

- **Semi-Structured Interviews** of full-time male firefighters, which are standard for the qualitative method. Interviews lasted approximately 30-45 minutes, and were recorded and transcribed for later coding.
- Questions were asked about issues such as **motivation** for choosing the career, **expectations** for the career versus the **reality** situation, **stressors** inherent in the job, **effects** on **family** and other relationships, and **effects** on **daily life**.
- **Data analysis** (coding) revealed consistent themes among the individuals, and the findings represent the **consensus** among all research team members.
- Internal validity was enhanced through data audit and member checking.

Results

- Among the several themes that emerged, we identified **3 primary themes** which were consistently mentioned throughout the transcribed interviews.
- **Sleep Issues:** The lack of sleep, disrupted sleep, and poor quality of sleep affects performance, mood, relationships and overall health.
 - Low hours and poor quality of sleep both at work and at home
 - “Even on nights that I’m not at work **I don’t get 8 hours.**”
 - *I don’t really sleep much...hahaha...for a long time, I was maybe getting an **hour or two of sleep a night.**”*
 - *“We sleep at the firehouse okay, but we absolutely **do not rest at the firehouse.**”*
 - *“The only time I sleep very well is if I’m on **vacation** and I’m away and you know, **I know I’m not going to get called in.**”*
 - Effect of sleep issues
 - *“Also the lack of sleep and long hours tend to take a **mental toll** on you.”*
 - *“(Referring to adjusting after years of sleep deprivation). . . as **unhealthy** as it is, if I get three hours of sleep at work I’m pretty functional the next day. **I mean I’m tired, but I’m functional.**”*
- **Calloused Emotional Responses:** Repeated exposure to tough situations causes first responders to become more cynical and less emotionally sensitive.
 - Lack of emotional empathy with family and friends
 - *“I’ve become **extremely cold-hearted**. I find I have to be. . . . Yeah, when people dying becomes a bit **normal** in your life, it has an effect.”*
 - *“You get **pretty numb** to it, you know? You can’t hold on to that. You can’t hold on to every dead body, or messed up call that you take. You can’t hold onto it or else **you’ll never survive**”*
 - *“Yeah, I’m a lot **meaner**. I’m **more cold** toward situations.”*
 - An appreciation of Gallows Humor among comrades
 - *“Gallows Humor. Aw man if we were heard outside of the firehouse we would be . . . it’s a **very dark sense of humor** about things, but humor gets you through a lot of things. Um, and to people on the outside it’s very sort of **calloused and cold-hearted** of us, but if we can’t . . . if I store it all up and take it home...jeez...you know?”*
 - *“But, you know, this would be the hardest thing for an outsider to come in and understand: that **we make jokes about everything**....so take a dead body, we go back to the firehouse and we crack jokes.”*
- **Interactions with the public:** While often positive, the public interactions that stand out can be negative including verbal abuse and physical abuse.
 - Abusing the system
 - *“Um I guess another big negative is um sometimes feeling whether it’s **misused or abused** by someone calling... we’ve been called to set up someone’s box fan that’s been knocked over or people with a cough...with a cold.”*

Results (continued)

- *“Some people really need our help, most people don’t have an understanding of what 911 is for, and so **we get a lot of calls where it’s like this is not an emergency**...just a whole kind of mess. So, yesterday, I took a lady for a cat bite. Not really an emergency compared to overdoses, shootings and car wrecks...that type of thing.”*
- Verbal abuse
 - *“So we’re on duty for 24 hours right? There are people that will literally see our trucks parked at the grocery store and will call our headquarters and **complain to the chief**...But we need to eat.”*
 - *“Sometimes it can get, it can get frustrating if people are...you know, **people can be pretty short and rude** sometimes and that’s kind of hard to take . . . when we showed up because they called.”*
 - *“Being screamed at...cussed at.”*
- Physical abuse
 - *“Sometimes like I said you’ll **have to fight them or they’ll try to attack you** so usually we’ll have **one person that’s just assigned to kind of stand back and watch family members and bystanders** to make sure, you know, that they’re not going for a gun or coming to attack you with a baseball bat.”*

Implications

- **Firefighters**
 - Firefighters may be able to understand themselves better. Knowing that the stress that they are feeling is also felt by others may provide some comfort.
- **Community**
 - The community may not understand some of the stressors that their firefighters are feeling. This could help them to identify behaviors that are causing undue stress on these public service men and women. It would be good for each of us to become more informed about appropriate uses of this service.
- **Students Looking to Become Firefighters**
 - Some adolescents and/or young adults may be considering this career path for themselves. It would be good for young adults to understand both the stressors and the positive motivations for entering the profession, so that they are able to make an informed decision about choosing this important career.
- **Spouses and Family Members of Firefighters**
 - Similar to the community, spouses and family members may not understand the full weight of the profession. It may help to hear what these participants have said about their stress and how they would most like to be supported.
- **Implications for Future Research**
 - Areas for future research include more in-depth understanding of the mental health effects of this profession, including risk of suicide, depression, and divorce.