

Is Alcohol Tearing Your Firefighting Family Apart?

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ALCOHOL ABUSE

AND THE FIRE SERVICE

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Most of us keep a pretty regular schedule. We go to sleep and wake up at pretty much the same time every day. We have our weekday routine and our weekend routine. Our bodies are keeping track of our routines as well—physically and mentally. So many of our bodily systems are compromised when our natural wake and sleep cycles are disrupted. Firefighters don't have the luxury of a Monday-Friday, 9-5 schedule. They often work 36-hour shifts, catching a few hours' sleep between calls.

The firefighter schedule, by its very nature, throws the body's natural rhythms into turmoil.

Adding to that, a firefighter sees more trauma in a week, than most people see in a lifetime. A firefighter continually struggles to find some balance between work, family life, and taking care of

himself, among the long and rotating schedules, sleep deprivation, and exposure to trauma.

While most people are moderately aware that the life of a firefighter is more than just sliding down poles and cooking chili, it's difficult to comprehend the full impact of the stress that impacts firefighters until you read "[21 Days on the Path to a Sober Firefighter](#)." It's the story of how a firefighter became an alcoholic and his fight to become sober. Day by day, his journal tells the tale of the daily stressors that firefighters face and how it affects them physically, mentally, and emotionally. It's the story of a firefighter who seeks to replace alcohol with exercise, healthy relaxation, and communication as a means for dealing with the internal battle to reach for a bottle of whiskey. It's in reading about his daily struggles that outsiders come to terms with the enormity of his journey.

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No one becomes an alcoholic overnight.

It occurs gradually over time, which is just one of many reasons that alcohol abuse can get out of control before it's noticed. [Mayo Clinic](#) offers a list of signs and symptoms of alcoholism:

- Being unable to limit the amount of alcohol you drink
- Wanting to cut down on how much you drink or making unsuccessful attempts to do so
- Spending a lot of time drinking, getting alcohol or recovering from alcohol use
- Feeling a strong craving or urge to drink alcohol
- Failing to fulfill major obligations at work, school or home due to repeated alcohol use
- Continuing to drink alcohol even though you know it's causing physical, social or interpersonal problems
- Giving up or reducing social and work activities and hobbies
- Using alcohol in situations where it's not safe, such as when driving or swimming
- Developing a tolerance to alcohol so you need more to feel its effect or you have a reduced effect
- from the same amount
- Experiencing withdrawal symptoms — such as nausea, sweating and shaking — when you don't

- drink, or drinking to avoid these symptoms

Recognizing the signs and symptoms of alcoholism can help firefighters understand if they have a drinking problem and lead them to a road of recovery. The grueling schedule of a firefighter can cause spouses and partners to seek alcohol as a means for dealing with the demands of being a firefighter partner.

Firefighters Who Become Alcoholics: What to Do

Drinking alcohol is an accepted way for the brotherhood of firefighters to deal with the 24/7 demands of their occupation. Knowing that the risks of alcoholism are high within the profession, don't wait until it's a full-fledged problem before seeking help for yourself. You don't have to bottom out before seeking help.

After recognizing that you have a drinking problem, the next step is making a commitment to recovery.

While it sounds like a simple step, you may initially waiver on your commitment or delay taking action because of how difficult the path before you will be. It helps to weigh the costs and benefits to drinking. Put them on a chart, if you need to. It will quickly become clear that the benefits to stopping drinking far outweigh the benefits of continuing to drink.

Set some goals for yourself and commit to sticking to them. Be specific about your goals—such as no drinking on the weekends, or no drinking before 5pm. Give your body some time to acclimate to the reduction of alcohol, then set another goal, such as a 3-month goal to reduce your drinking even further.

Be realistic about whether you can recover on your own, or whether you need medical help, such as residential recovery program. Improve your chances of staying sober by participating in a group like Alcoholics Anonymous. Replace your drinking times with healthier activities—they are a great distraction from the temptation to drink. Eat right and get plenty of sleep. Start a new exercise regime. Exercise releases endorphins, relieves stress, and promotes emotional health. Reinvigorate old sports or hobbies or get out and do some volunteering. Practice relaxation techniques, such as meditating or doing breathing exercise.

Be willing to accept support from family and friends who can help you stay on track.

Communicate with them about the kind of support that you need.

Spouse/Partners of Firefighters Who Become Alcoholics: What to Do

The key to addressing your spouse or partner's problem with alcohol begins with honest communication. Alcoholism carries a lot of shame and embarrassment with it. Recognize that your partner prefers the feeling of being under the influence more than any negative experiences that they face the morning after.

Be supportive without being enabling.

Hoping the behavior will stop won't change anything, so pick a good time to have an honest communication about it. Try to pick a time when your partner is in a good head space and will be free of distractions. Tell your partner that you are worried about him or her drinking too much and that you will be supportive. Be prepared that your partner may deny or be defensive about the problem. It may take a series of conversations before your partner can get out of the denial phase. Use a tone that is non-judgmental and sincere.

There is strength in numbers, so ask a family member or trusted friend to help you address the issue with your partner. Avoid making judgments, rather focus on situations where each of you was affected by your partner's intoxication. Urge your partner to make a commitment to getting into a formal treatment program and let him or her know that you'll be following up as a means of support. You may need to have more than one intervention because your partner has to make his or her own decision to stop drinking.

Recognize that recovery is a process and relapses may occur along the way.

Educate yourself about options and programs in your community, so that when your partner is ready, you can guide him or her towards effective programs.

Get help for yourself.

Seek a counselor for yourself if you are feeling stressed or depressed. Seek out an Al-Anon program, which is a 12-step program for friends and family members of alcoholics.

Interventions for Alcoholics

Don't delay treatment because you think you can't afford it. There are many different types of **treatment programs** available and many of them accept insurance plans. Call a treatment provider to get an assessment and learn about your treatment options which include:

- Outpatient treatment

- Intensive Outpatient Program (IOP) 3-5 days per week with an average of 3-4 hours of treatment per day
- Partial hospitalization-507 days per week for 6-8 hours of treatment per day
- Ambulatory Detox-outpatient treatment with medical care for withdrawal
- Inpatient Care-24-hour care for those who require supervision for safety or for those who have medically complex needs
- Inpatient Acute Care-short term care for patients who need 24-hour care
- Inpatient Residential Care-for people who don't need medical care, but need intensive help with recovery.

Alcoholism is prevalent among firefighters and their family members, but it doesn't have to tear your family apart.

Recovery is possible and treatment options are available. Take the first step by recognizing the risks that come with being a firefighter family. Learn about warning signs and symptoms and be willing to have an ongoing, honest discussion about it.

Seek treatment when the symptoms of alcoholism have a negative impact on your life.



We would like to thank Mark Lamplugh (pictured above with his fiancee, Ulyana), the Chief Executive Officer of [360 Wellness](#), for writing this article and sharing it with [24-7 Commitment](#). Mark Lamplugh is a fourth-generation firefighter and former captain with the Lower Chichester (PA) Fire Company. He is the Chief Executive Officer with 360 Wellness Inc. (www.360wellness.org) and a consultant with Sprout Health Group (www.sprouthealthgroup.com). Lamplugh is also nationally recognized in Crisis Stress Intervention through the American Academy of Experts in

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24-7 Commitment and 360 Wellness are committed to fostering healthy, loving fire families.