

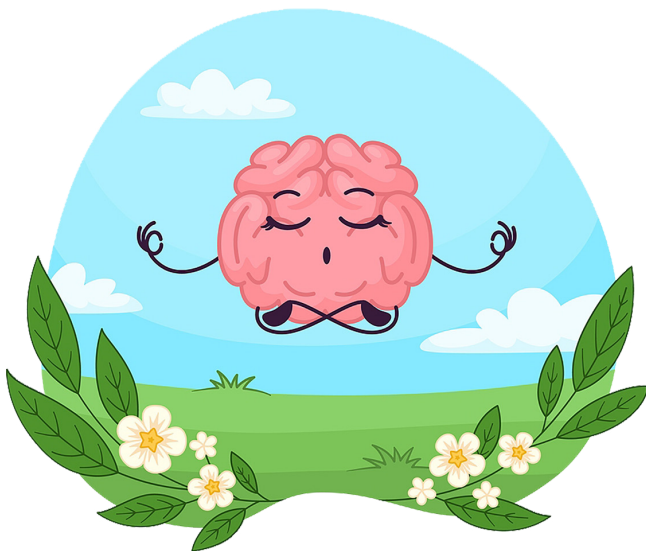
GUEST EDITORIAL

The Mindful Firefighter

Learn how developing a mindfulness practice can bolster mental health & resilience.

BY AMANDA J. WEATHERS-MEYER, PH.D., M.ED.

Improving the mental fitness of firefighters is gaining traction in both the fire service and scientific community. With this forward momentum comes innovative ways to improve one's mental health. *Mindfulness* provides a training framework to build mental fitness, encouraging mental strength, flexibility and endurance. Simply put, mindfulness involves intentionally attending to the present moment in a non-judgmental manner. What a nice thought. But what does this have to do with firefighters, and how does mindfulness relate to mental fitness? To answer these questions, we will draw upon scientific research and translate the findings into plain language. Here are the *whys* and *hows* of mindfulness for firefighters.



No. 1: Mindfulness Training Strengthens Psychological Resilience in Firefighters.

Denkova and colleagues (2020) found that firefighters who participated in a four-week mindfulness training program reported greater psychological

resilience compared to firefighters who received relaxation training or no training at all. Psychological resilience is similar to mental endurance. It means you can rise to the occasion despite pressure while maintaining focus and clarity. In this study, firefighters experienced greater resilience after learning about and practicing the core aspects of mindfulness: concentration, body awareness, observation and connection.

No. 2: Mindfulness Moderates the Association between Sleep Disturbances & Suicide Risk.

Serrano and colleagues (2020) showed that firefighters with greater sleep disturbances were at increased risk of suicide. In this study, greater levels of mindfulness reduced the strength of the relationship between sleep disturbances and suicide risk. Many firefighters work 24-hour shifts; therefore, sleep disturbances are common and inevitable. The results from this study suggest that acting with awareness and nonjudging of inner experience (two components of mindfulness) may offer firefighters a way to reduce suicide risk. The take-home message here: Firefighters may not control the number of calls throughout the night, but they might be able to combat the associated effects of sleep disturbances, such as suicide risk, by building mindfulness skills.

No. 3: Mindfulness Reduces Symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress, Depression & Alcohol Problems.

Smith and colleagues (2011) surveyed 124 firefighters and found that greater mindfulness had an inverse relationship with post-traumatic stress, depression and alcohol problems. Translation: As levels of mindfulness increased, levels of post-traumatic stress, depression and alcohol consumption decreased. While one cannot say that mindfulness caused a decrease in adverse mental health outcomes, the results of this study suggest that building

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mindfulness skills is worth consideration and may serve as a buffer to mental health concerns common among firefighters.

The Elements of Mindfulness Explained

The information provided above beings to explain why mindfulness training may benefit the fire service. Now we will unpack how mindfulness works. You were promised plain language. So, what do terms like acting with awareness, nonjudging of inner experience, body awareness and observation mean? Acting with awareness means paying attention to the task at hand without being distracted. In other words, awareness involves staying focused in the present while resisting distractions. Nonjudging of inner experience can be described as allowing oneself to experience ideas, thoughts and emotions without evaluation. The phrase “it is what it is” applies here. Body awareness involves attending to body sensations by simply observing what arises. Lastly, observation plays a crucial role in mindfulness training and teaches firefighters how to step back and participate in an experience from an outside perspective.

Building the ability to act with awareness, attend to the present moment, observe and respond in a non-judgmental manner requires training. Fortunately, training is low-cost, portable and comes in many forms. If you prefer movement to sitting still, yoga and tai-chi offer a way to cultivate body awareness and attention to the present moment. Progressive muscle relaxation also incorporates movement and mindfulness by asking one to progressively tense and release muscle groups from head to toe. Body scans, mindful walking, guided meditation and breathing exercises are additional examples of formal mindfulness practice, and all are accessible to firefighters.

When I meet with clients, all of whom work in the fire service, I ask, “What are you doing to de-scale?” Firefighters are at increased risk of suicide, experiencing symptoms of post-traumatic stress, substance-use disorders and disordered sleep. The scales accrue. My question to you as the reader is the same for my clients: What are you doing to de-scale? Do you see mindfulness playing a role in your de-scaling process? **BS**

References

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Amanda J. Weathers-Meyer is a researcher-practitioner and Director of Wellness for St. George Fire, located in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Her area of focus involves improving the mental fitness of firefighters through bodily movement, mindfulness, and facilitating a greater mind-body connection. Dr. Weathers has conducted several studies with fire departments located throughout Louisiana. Her studies have investigated the effects of mindfulness-based physical activity on mental health outcomes in firefighters. She has also piloted mind-body tactical training programs for firefighters to promote psychological resilience and improved stress management. Her clinical work focuses on culturally competent counseling practices within the fire service. Dr. Weathers-Meyer holds a Ph.D. in Kinesiology with an emphasis in psychological sciences and an M.Ed. in Clinical Mental Health Counseling. She is a PLPC in the State of Louisiana and a National Certified Counselor.

Met Dr. Weathers-Meyer at the Blue Card Health & Safety Workshop Jan. 12–13 at the AVB Command Training Center in Phoenix. Visit bshifter.com to register!