Love on the Line: 8 Ways Firefighters Can Strengthen Their Relationships During 24-Hour Shifts.

BY LEAH BELSCHES, PSY.D.

The job of a firefighter is inherently demanding. The long hours and unpredictable emergencies take a physical and mental toll. Working 24-hour shifts, often followed by a couple of days off, can be particularly challenging—not just for firefighters themselves but also for their spouses and families. The extended periods away from home can strain relationships, leaving spouses feeling lonely, overwhelmed and disconnected. However, with the right strategies and proactive communication, firefighters can provide meaningful support to their spouses, even when they are physically absent for extended hours.

Below, I offer several practical ways firefighters can support their spouses, emphasizing communication, emotional connection, shared responsibilities and self-care for both partners.

1. Open & Consistent Communication

One of the most effective ways firefighters can support their spouses is through open and consistent communication. Given the nature of their job, firefighters often face stressful and intense situations. Sharing thoughts and experiences, even in brief messages, can help maintain an emotional connection.

Tips for Better Communication:

- Daily check-ins: Even during a 24-hour shift, setting aside a few minutes for a quick text or phone call can make a big difference. A simple, "I'm thinking of you" or, "How was your day?" reassures your spouse that they are on your mind.
- Use technology: Video calls via FaceTime, Zoom or WhatsApp can be invaluable. Seeing each other's faces can help maintain a stronger emotional bond and provide comfort.
- Share the day's highlights: Although sharing every detail of the day might not be feasible, discussing a couple of highlights, whether they are work-related or personal, can help both partners feel involved in each other's lives.

Try This: Establish a habit of sharing one positive thing that happened each day, whether it's a small win at work or a funny moment at home. This keeps the conversation positive and nurturing.

Continued

2. Plan & Prepare Together

The unpredictability of a firefighter's schedule can be challenging for spouses who may have to manage the household alone for long periods. Planning ahead can alleviate some of this stress.

Ideas for Planning Ahead:

- Meal prep together: Before starting a long shift, spend some time cooking and prepping meals together. This not only saves time during the week but also creates a bonding experience.
- Organize a family calendar: Use a shared digital calendar to keep track of appointments, events and important dates. This helps both partners stay informed about what's happening at home and at work.
- Discuss upcoming tasks: Have a brief planning session before the shift begins to discuss upcoming tasks, such as paying bills, grocery shopping, or managing children's activities. Ensuring both partners are on the same page can reduce misunderstandings.

Try This: Consider scheduling important discussions when both partners are relaxed and well-rested. A calm environment can help resolve issues more effectively.

3. Show Appreciation & Acknowledge Each Other's Efforts

Long hours and exhausting shifts can make it easy for firefighters to overlook their spouse's efforts in managing the household. It is crucial to regularly show appreciation for each other's contributions.

Ways to Show Appreciation:

- Leave notes or send messages: Small gestures, like leaving a handwritten note before a shift or sending a thoughtful text during a break, can mean a lot.
- Celebrate small wins: Recognize each other's achievements, whether it's a work milestone for the firefighter or a successful day at home for the spouse.
- Express gratitude verbally: Words of gratitude, like, "Thank you for taking care of things while I'm on shift," can make the spouse feel valued and appreciated.



Try This: Create a routine where you end every phone call or conversation with a positive affirmation, such as, "I appreciate you" or, "I love you." This helps build a habit of expressing gratitude.

4. Prioritize Quality Time Together

After a long shift, it can be tempting to simply rest or engage in solo activities. However, making time for quality interaction is vital for maintaining a strong relationship.

Continued

Suggestions for Quality Time:



- Date nights: Plan regular date nights, even simple activities like watching a movie at home or taking a walk together. The key is to dedicate uninterrupted time to each other.
- Unplug from technology: On days off, limit phone and screen time to focus on being present with your spouse.
- Plan Weekend getaways: If schedules allow, short weekend trips can help both partners reconnect away from the usual environment.

Try This: Create a shared list of activities or experiences you both want to try. This can make planning dates or outings easier and ensures both partners have a say in how time together is spent.

5. Help with Household Responsibilities

The absence of a firefighter during their shift often means that their spouse handles most of the household tasks. Offering to take on certain responsibilities can show support and alleviate stress.

Ways to Contribute:



Take initiative. Help with chores without being asked.

- Divide chores equitably: Discuss and decide on a fair division of household chores based on each partner's schedule and preferences. Even if one partner is away for a shift, knowing the other will handle specific tasks when they return can be reassuring.
- Take initiative: Instead of waiting to be asked, look for opportunities to help with chores, whether it's doing the dishes, taking out the trash or running errands.
- Hire help if needed: If managing everything becomes overwhelming, consider hiring help for tasks like cleaning or lawn care. This can be a practical way to reduce stress and free up time for quality moments together.

Try This: Implement a weekly check-in to discuss household needs and any help required. Keeping the lines of communication open prevents resentment from building up.

6. Practice Self-Care & Encourage It for Your Spouse

Supporting a spouse isn't just about what you do for them; it's also about taking care of yourself to be a better partner. Due to the physical and emotional demands of their jobs, firefighters must prioritize their well-being.

Continued

Self-Care Strategies for Firefighters:

- Stay physically active: Regular exercise can help manage stress and improve mental health.
- Seek emotional support: Talking to peers and counselors or joining support groups can help process the traumatic experiences encountered on the job.
- Ensure adequate rest: After a shift, prioritize getting enough sleep to recover fully and be more present for your spouse.

Support your partner's hobbies. Having time to step away from household stress helps them refresh and recharge.

Encouraging Your Spouse's Self-Care:

- Give time for their hobbies: When off-duty, support your spouse in taking time for their hobbies and interests. It helps them recharge and feel fulfilled.
- Share relaxation activities: Engage in calming activities together, such as yoga, meditation or going for a nature walk.
- Provide Emotional Support: Be a listening ear and offer comfort when your spouse needs to talk about their challenges and stresses.

Try This: Establish a mental health check-in routine where both partners share their emotional state and discuss any stressors. It's a proactive way to support each other's mental well-being.

7. Establish a Routine for Reconnecting After Shifts

Transitioning from a 24-hour shift back to home life can be challenging for firefighters. Establishing a routine for reconnecting can help bridge the gap and strengthen the relationship.

Steps for a Smooth Transition:

- Create a post-shift ritual: Develop a ritual that signals the transition from work mode to home mode. This could be a cup of coffee together, a walk around the neighborhood, or a moment to decompress quietly.
- Communicate your needs: Let your spouse know if you need a few moments to rest before engaging in conversation. Similarly, ask your spouse what they need when you return from a shift.
- Debrief about the day: Set aside some time to catch up on each other's day. This helps re-establish the connection after time apart.

Try This: Keep a journal where both partners can write down thoughts or updates. This can be read and shared when time allows, providing insight into each other's days.

8. Seek Professional Support if Needed

Despite best efforts, maintaining a strong relationship during long shifts can be difficult. Professional support, such as couples therapy or counseling, can be helpful in navigating these challenges.

Continued

Benefits of Professional Support:

- Provides tools for effective communication: Therapists can offer strategies for improving communication and resolving conflicts.
- Offers a neutral space for discussion: Counseling sessions provide a safe environment to express feelings and concerns without judgment.
- Helps manage stress and anxiety: Both partners can learn coping mechanisms to deal with the stresses associated with the firefighter's job.

Try This: Even if things are going well, attending a few sessions can be a proactive step in strengthening the relationship and ensuring both partners feel supported.

Maintaining a strong relationship while working 24-hour shifts as a firefighter requires effort, understanding and a commitment to nurturing the partnership. By prioritizing communication, planning together, sharing responsibilities and focusing on quality time, firefighters can offer substantial support to their spouses. In turn, this strengthens the bond between them, creating a resilient and loving partnership that can withstand the unique challenges of the firefighting profession. Investing time and energy into these practices not only provides emotional support to the spouse but also ensures that the firefighter has a loving, supportive home to return to after every shift. With mutual respect, appreciation and shared effort, both partners can thrive despite the demanding nature of the job. BS



Dr. Leah Belsches (nee Saulter) has worked for the Houston Fire Department for the past two years, where she serves first responders through therapy and crisis response. Dr. Belsches grew up in Canton, Ohio. She completed her undergraduate education at Ohio State University, where she majored in psychology and spent several years working with at-risk youth. She received her Master of Science from Virginia State University and holds a doctorate in clinical psychology from Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio. Dr. Belsches is a licensed psychologist in the state of Texas with extensive experience in trauma-focused therapy, suicidal ideation, self-harm, crisis intervention, and group therapy. She enjoys traveling (particularly internationally) and has visited several countries, including Zambia, Dubai, Bulgaria and China. Dr. Belsches continues to reside in Houston with her family.