

BEHAVIORAL HEALTH FOR FIRE FIGHTERS DIAGNOSED WITH CANCER



This factsheet was developed by the International Association of Fire Fighters and the Firefighter Cancer Support Network.

Cancer affects multiple aspects of a fire fighter's life, including mental, physical, emotional, and social elements. Navigating these challenges requires a proactive approach to behavioral health.

Fire fighters may face unique stressors, such as concerns about occupational exposures and balancing the demands of their role with treatment and recovery. Access to behavioral health resources ensures that fire fighters receive support during all stages of their cancer journey.

It is important to understand that every fire fighter may be affected by and handle their diagnosis in different ways.

RECOGNIZING EMOTIONAL RESPONSES

Fire fighters experiencing cancer often have a wide range of emotions, including shock, anger, fear, and sadness. Common reactions can include:

- Feeling overwhelmed, shocked, angry, sad, numb; experiencing disbelief and fear.
- Thoughts such as: *"Why me?" "I can't handle this" "How will my family respond?" "Will I lose my job?" "Am I going to die?"*
- Difficulty sleeping, changes in appetite, or isolating self from friends and family.

To monitor levels of distress throughout your or a brother or sister's cancer journey, you can utilize IAFF's guide on [Distress Screening for Cancer Patients](#), which includes two empirically based self-screening tools. Your screening results can be used for personal reflection or shared with your cancer care team:

- [NCCN Distress Thermometer](#)
- [Patient Health Questionnaire-9 \(PHQ-9\)](#)



- Talk about your feelings, no matter what they are
- Stay active and eat balanced meals
- Treat yourself to things you enjoy: going for a walk, a nap, or a favorite food
- Ask for help with everyday tasks like cooking and cleaning
- Practice meditation, mindfulness, and deep breathing



- Don't try to do it all yourself
- Don't try to force yourself to be "okay"
- Don't try to do too much in one day
- Don't give up healthy habits
- Don't shut out loved ones

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COPING STRATEGIES

Professional counseling, peer mentorship through the Firefighter Cancer Support Network (FCSN), and structured self-care plans are all examples and options demonstrating important resources for fire fighters to manage their mental health and well-being effectively.

KEY RESOURCES

- Fire Fighter Cancer Support Network ([FCSN](#)): 1-on-1 mentorship & free cancer support toolbox. [Request Assistance](#)
- [IAFF Behavioral Health Program](#): Mental health resources tailored for fire fighters.
- [American Cancer Society](#) Helpline: 1-800-227-2345.
- [Suicide and Crisis Hotline](#) (available 24/7): Dial – 988

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Wellness Fitness Initiative (WFI): <https://www.iaff.org/wellness-fitness/>
- [NFPA 1851](#): Standard on Selection, Care, and Maintenance of Protective Ensembles for Structural Fire Fighting and Proximity Fire Fighting
- [NFPA 1582](#): Standard on Comprehensive Occupational Medical Program for Fire Departments Chapter 7 Occupational Medical Evaluation of Members (soon to be consolidated into NFPA 1580).
- IAFF-ACS Collaboration: <https://www.iaff.org/fightcancer/>
- Firefighter Cancer Support Network (FCSN): <https://firefightercancersupport.org/>
- IAFF-FCSN Fire Fighter Cancer Awareness Month: <https://www.iaff.org/cancer-awareness-month/>
- National Firefighter Registry (NFR) for Cancer: <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/firefighters/registry.html>
- IAFF Nutrition Program: <https://www.iaff.org/nutrition/>
- Presumptive Health Initiatives: <https://www.iaff.org/presumptive-health/>
- Patient Resource Website: <https://patientresource.com>