Help Me Help You

How to confront an employee about seeking help for emotional issues

By Dabney Stack & Paul Antonellis

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Considering the constant exposure to trauma, it is normal for firefighters to sometimes feel overwhelmed and possibly even need counseling.

Any fire department's most valuable assets are its employees, and as a supervisor, you should make every effort possible to maintain a healthy and productive workforce. This includes addressing concerns about the mental health of your employees. Although it is not your job to make a diagnosis, it *is* your job to help your employees find support to overcome their problems, especially if these problems affect their work. Few supervisors receive proper training in how to talk to an employee about seeking counseling; with that in mind, this article can help you determine if one of your employees is in need of professional support and confront them about possible mental health issues.

ASSESSING THE PROBLEM

Most people find it uncomfortable to talk about mental health issues. For many firefighters, their first exposure to a mental health professional was during the psychological screening they received to become a firefighter. Following this screening, it is not uncommon for firefighters to avoid discussing mental health issues out of fear they could be removed from service at the slightest sign of a problem.

Additionally, many supervisors choose to avoid discussing their employees' mental health, leaving these issues to the employees' family or friends. However, as a supervisor of first responders, you *must* confront any mental health issues you perceive among your employees. If not addressed in a timely manner, these issues may create a serious disturbance at the department and may even lead to the death or injury of employees or civilians.

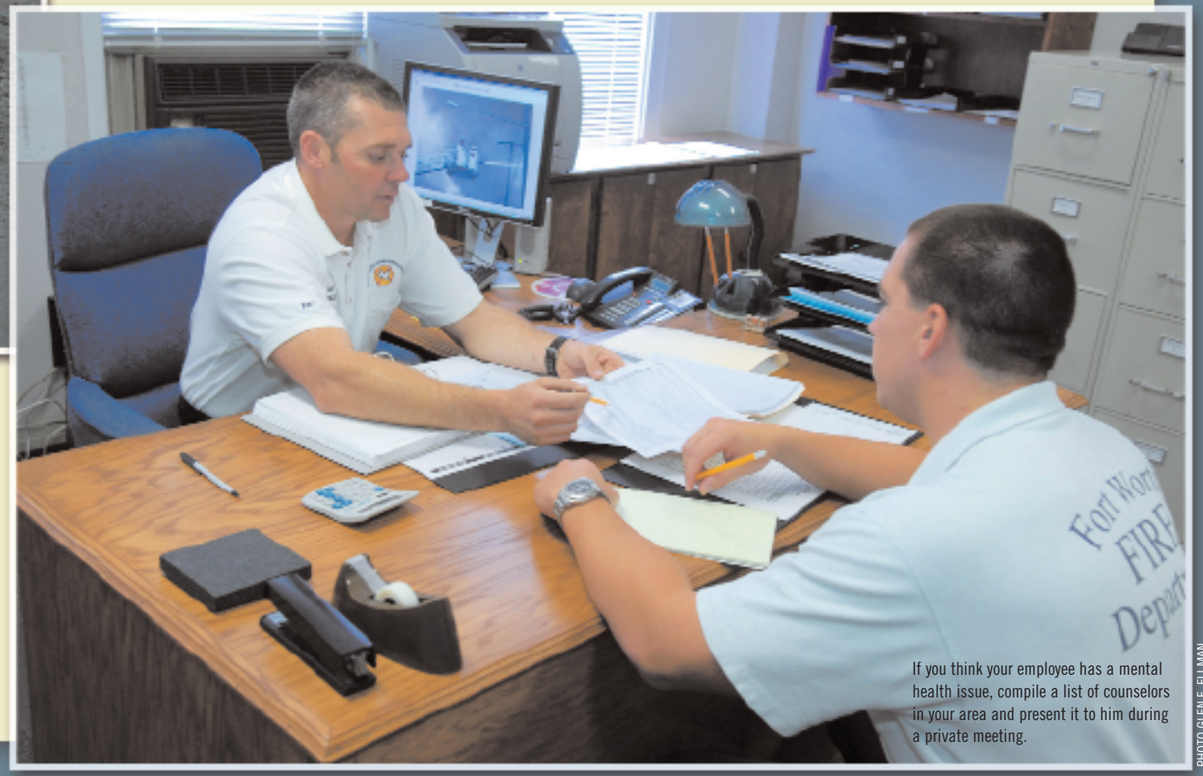
But how do you know if one of your employees needs help? Following are several issues to consider when determining if an employee's behavior warrants a discussion about their emotional health.

Your Instincts: Do not disregard your instincts. If an employee's behavior has changed, prompting your internal "red flags" to wave, take the time to objectively examine what triggered them.

Behavior Changes: Sudden changes in behavior, especially those that negatively affect job performance, are signs of emotional distress. Such changes may include (but are not limited to) sudden mood swings, irritability, arguing with co-workers, inability to joke around with co-workers, weight gain or loss, insomnia, oversleeping, excessive absences, isolation from friends and family, tardiness, not maintaining personal hygiene, calling in sick excessively, family or marital problems, working all the time (not leaving the station), excessive drinking or hyper-vigilance.

Life Interference: Does the employee's uncharacteristic behavior interfere with job performance and/or his ability to take care of basic human needs (eating properly, maintaining proper hygiene)? Are the problems escalating?

Frequency of Behavior: Make note of the date, time and location of any unacceptable behavior. A single instance of out-of-character behavior generally does not warrant calling an employee into your office. People act out from time to time; however, if the employee exhibits uncharacteristic behavior for at least 3 weeks, this is clearly more than simple "acting out" and should be addressed.



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If you think your employee has a mental health issue, compile a list of counselors in your area and present it to him during a private meeting.

Emotionally Difficult Situations: Has anything happened recently to cause the employee's uncharacteristic behavior? For example, did your employee recently go on a call that involved the death of staff or civilians, or a call that mirrors a more violent call in the past? An employee who recently suffered a personal loss (death of a family member, friend or pet) may be more vulnerable to the effects of difficult work events, even if the event appears to have no connection. (*Note:* Personal loss does not have to be death; it could be a divorce or a difficult breakup.) An example: A firefighter recovers the body of a young child from a drowning incident. Soon after, he confronts a significant health concern involving one of his own children. In each of the incidents, the firefighter feels a lack of control, causing him to act out. Witnessing the death of a child can be particularly disturbing, especially if the firefighter has a child of the same age or gender.

Department Disturbance: Has the employee's behavior made a negative impact on the department? For example, has the employee been involved in conflicts with co-workers? Has he become argumentative with superiors? When it comes to anger issues, keep cultural influences in mind as well. The fire service is a male-dominated profession. From a cultural standpoint, men often do not speak openly about their feelings. They tend to express themselves physically, sometimes in fights, throwing objects or punching a wall. Hence, if an employee becomes especially angry or irritable with co-workers, it may be his way of dealing with an unrelated emotional issue.

After considering the above criteria, you should be able to determine if you must talk with your employee about what has caused this behavior change and what you can do to help.

It is now important to determine if the uncharacteristic behavior warrants that you *require* your employee to seek help or only *suggest* that they seek help. Make this judgment call based on the seriousness of the uncharacteristic behavior. For example, if you've already discussed the employee's uncharacteristic behavior once or twice to no effect, you should require the employee to seek professional help. Or, if you know he's come to work under the influence of drugs or alcohol, you must require him to seek help.

FINDING RESOURCES

If you decide that an employee needs help, determine which support resources are available *before* speaking to him. If your department has an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), contact the group for recommendations on how to best confront an employee and ask for a list of providers and resources.

If your department does not have an EAP, contact your employees' health insurance company to verify what mental health services are covered. Most health insurance companies will provide you with a list of counselors in your area.

It is very important to compile a list of several counselors and their specialized services. Locate counselors who are aware of the high level of trauma to which first responders are exposed. Some of the best referrals come from within the organization and neighboring fire departments. You can also ask around at professional development seminars/classes.

Additionally, get the names of counselors who are not on the insurance panel or who are willing to take direct payment from a client. To protect their privacy, employees often do not want to use work-provided insurance for mental health issues. They may not want to file a claim for fear of policy cancellation or a rate increase.

Although it is important to find counselors with experience working with first responders, do not suggest counselors who work for the department to assess employees for fitness for duty. When you do confront the employee, make it clear to him that there is a difference between seeing a counselor and being assessed for fitness for duty. Many firefighters are extremely suspicious of mental health providers based on their experience with the clinicians the department uses to screen candidates or to recommend an employee be removed from duty.

Volunteer fire department supervisors and administrators face a significant challenge when it comes to mental health issues. Many volunteer departments don't have a mental health professional on retainer or on the job. Therefore, volunteer organizations must be proactive in recruiting mental health professionals; this should be an ongoing process much like their recruitment and retention programs.

CONFRONTING THE EMPLOYEE

Now that you've gathered the necessary information about mental health resources, find an appropriate time and place to speak with the individual privately. Do *not* let colleagues know you're meeting with the employee.

First and most importantly: Be direct but kind. Get to the point, and do not use derogatory terms. Do not use the words "crazy," "insane" or any of the myriad words used to describe people suffering from emotional difficulties.

Explain what behaviors triggered your concerns, citing only the facts. Acknowledge that the problem is not a character flaw or weakness. Identify the unacceptable behavior as observed and noted. The employee may become defensive at this point, which is normal. Again, keep to the facts!

If the employee wishes to argue or defend himself, let him speak his mind, but do not let him continue if he becomes agitated. If you want him to calm down, simply hold up your hand; this usually does the trick.

Now present the employee with the list of counselors you compiled. Let the employee choose who he wants to see. Make sure he knows the importance of establishing a trusting relationship with the counselor; he must feel he can be open and honest with the counselor. Also, let him know that if he doesn't "click" with the counselor after the first couple sessions, he can switch to a new counselor. This underscores the importance of providing the employee with a list of several providers.

Explain that maintaining emotional health is as important as maintaining equipment and is considered a part of the job. Further explain that, considering the constant exposure to trauma, it is normal for anyone, no matter how tough, to become overwhelmed. Make clear that it is rare for mental health issues dealt with early to end a first responder's career, and that counseling sessions are not necessarily a long-term commitment.

If you believe the behavior is serious enough to require the employee to seek help, tell him this isn't a debatable topic and you expect confirmation that he has made an appointment. If possible, have him make the appointment during this meeting. Assure him that although you will need to know that he has sought help, you do *not* need to know what is discussed in the session(s).

Explain to the employee that the contents of the counseling sessions will not be reported to anyone. Private providers do not disclose the content of sessions; confidentiality is required under federal law. The only exception: if there is eminent danger of suicide or homicide, and a client has a specific plan and access to weapons or tools to complete this plan.

If possible, do not make any changes to the employee's schedule or duties unless he requests it. It is common for employees to want to make some "life changes" (i.e., buying

a new house, changing professions) when faced with a mental health challenge. However, recommend that he implement these changes slowly. Sudden changes can compound the current problem. For example, the employee may get defensive and quit on the spot, but do not take these words at face value. Let him know that he's under a great deal of stress, and making major changes in his life is not advisable at this time. Remind him that he can always make major life changes later, after he's had time to process his situation.

Tell the employee what changes you expect to see. For example, if he has acted moody and irritable, let him know you expect to see appropriate interaction with staff; if he's been tardy, you expect timeliness, etc. Tell them you need to observe the corrected behavior for at least 12 weeks. Do not leave the employee uncertain of your expectations. If you fail to give him specific goals, you're setting him up for frustration and failure, possibly escalating an already bad situation.

Make it very clear to the employee that he has your full support. Additionally, although mental health issues should remain confidential, it is not uncommon for information to leak about the employee and his difficult time. If this happens, remind all supervisors and fellow employees to be supportive and not question the employee about the situation. Give the employee space, and let him discuss it at his own pace.

The employee may be resentful about the entire situation at first, but he will ultimately benefit from the early intervention. You have outlined a specific set of steps he can follow to reach a goal; this gives him control over what has likely been some overwhelming and unmanageable emotions.

On a final note: If you must order counseling for an employee who resists it, first seek guidance from the labor agreement and legal department. If the employee is covered under the Americans With Disabilities Act, you could quickly find yourself in the middle of a legal battle. Additionally, a poorly handled intervention may prolong the employee's recovery. The employee may choose to focus all his energy on fighting the intervention and may seek legal action in an effort to avoid dealing with his issue.

To read sample dialogue of a supervisor confronting an employee about seeking help for a possible mental health issue, go to www.firerescue1.com/.

MOVING FORWARD

For firefighters, exposure to mental health services is limited; many may not understand how easily job-related stress can impact their lives. But if a supervisor can step in, help the employee see the connection and offer support, the road to recovery will be far less arduous. Given some time and space to work with a knowledgeable counselor, the employee should begin to feel relief from the issue(s) that caused their change in behavior. In the end, a good supervisor must be sensitive and understand the importance of proper mental health for each and every employee.

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