

# Self-care Techniques for Firefighters

By Jan Spence

There are over 800,000 volunteer firefighters in the United States. These women and men go through rigorous training and unpredictable time demands and selflessly put their lives on the line to help others – for little to no monetary compensation.

As a volunteer firefighter, you belong to a unique breed. While most people are running away from danger, you are running towards it. You've been trained to spot various fire hazards from combustibles being stored with insufficient protection to faulty wiring that can spark a blaze, but what you may not be aware of is a potential danger lurking within yourself. Lack of self-care. That's right, self-care. Many of you are inherently wired to put others before yourself. While that is a noble mindset, continually focusing on others while neglecting yourself can ultimately have dire consequences.

You may be asking, "How can I take time for myself when I'm working 50 hours a week, volunteering for 10 hours, teaching my son to play baseball, trying to spend quality time with my spouse, and trying to take care of everyday "life" things? There's just no time for me."

The simple, yet not so simple, answer is... you must make the time! Studies have found that lack of self-care can lead to burnout, which can result in physical ailments. According to expert Ann Miner, these ailments can include, "constant fatigue, insomnia, frustration, lingering colds, headaches, ulcers, hypertension, and gastrointestinal disturbances, but as self-care increased, burnout decreased. It appears that the variety of ways in which one engages in self-care is less important than is the frequency with which one does this. This suggests that finding forms of self-care that readily fit into one's daily life can be important in maintaining a realistic practice of self-care."<sup>1</sup>

As the old saying goes, you can't pour from an empty cup. In other words, you can't give back when you're running on empty. If you're not taking the steps to take care of yourself, there could be impacts to you, your family, your department, and your community. It's ok to take care of yourself first sometimes.

## Here are three tips for "stressing" the right things:

- 1. Learn to find quiet time to reflect, unwind, and decompress.** Be intentional about carving out time for activities that please YOU! Go fishing, read a book, build a model airplane, work on a puzzle. Find something that helps you relax. Constantly "going, going, going" is not good for us, mentally or physically.
- 2. Learn to say no and set BOUNDARIES!** Sometimes we have to say "no" to "good" in order to say "yes" to the "best." We can't be everywhere, all the time, doing everything for everyone. If you have trouble saying no, practice different techniques of politely declining a perceived obligation.
- 3. Take control and actively manage your TIME.** Delegate tasks that can be delegated. Have your children help more with household chores. Hire an accountant to do your taxes. Have the neighborhood teens mow your lawn.

According to GoodTherapy.org, a mental health and self-care advocacy group,

"Self-care is not a selfish act. Individuals who do not take care of their own emotional and physical needs before attempting to resolve those of others may begin to experience a decline in their own emotional or physical state. Those individuals who care for others, either professionally or in personal life, may find themselves especially drained if they do not devote enough time to self-care. Once they have met their own needs, they may often find themselves better able to assist others in meeting their needs."<sup>2</sup>

Sometimes staying too busy and taking care of everything and everyone else is really a pride issue. When you feel that if you don't do it, it won't get done (or done right), you are attempting to take on the weight of the world. You are acting as if you are a superhero. This syndrome, when over-emphasized, can be detrimental to your mental health. Remember that you are a human being who simply can't do it all. Those around you need to see you as such. You will never be good enough to do it all. Living on the hamster wheel of trying to constantly measure up will keep you striving for more, but going nowhere.

It comes down to this. If you are spread too thin, you can't finish the race strong. You can't shake off the soot as easily without regular self-care.



<sup>1</sup> Miner, Ann. (2010). "Burnout in Mental Health Professionals as Related to Self-Care."

<sup>2</sup> GoodTherapy.org. (n.d.). Self Care. Retrieved from [www.goodtherapy.org/learn-about-therapy/issues/self-care](http://www.goodtherapy.org/learn-about-therapy/issues/self-care)



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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