

“How do you folks deal with all the difficult things that you see and do on a daily basis?”

I posed this question to fire departments in Kootenai County, seeking responses from those that are “in the field” and respond 24 hours-a-day, 365 days a year. I asked how they can go home to their families and friends after a difficult shift and remain mentally healthy, and continue to do so time and time again. Officers, paramedics, EMT’s, new and seasoned firefighters responded, sharing their coping strategies; a window into their world.

A retired firefighter with over 20 years experience shared that he would go fishing alone. To be with “the Guy upstairs”, many times not even throwing in a line. He felt the need to keep his family secluded from what was happening “out on the streets.” Note: He admitted to not having had the boat out of the garage since his retirement over a year ago.

Several mentioned the need for the camaraderie and humor with those they work with, sometimes even resorting to “dark humor”. One responder noted that this helped depersonalize the situation and allowed them to move on without storing the stress where it might come up at a later date and create problems.

More than one responder mentioned the need to connect in a quiet way with their spouse and/or children. To pull them alongside and hold them as they watch a movie together – not talking but just to spend time together and thank God that they are all safe.

Faith was a common thread in many responses. One officer stated that his faith allowed him to get through any difficult situation, though the heartache is still present.

There was a mix in responses of how much information is shared with families. One responder specifically said that he has become overly cautious with his family and tends to avoid talking about the critical incidents, where another veteran firefighter says it is essential that he share with his family so that they understand what he has seen and done.

Many people mentioned the importance of reviewing the call. Looking at it from all angles. What was the nature of the call? What did we see? What did we do? What was done well? What could have been done better? What did we learn? How can we take this bad situation and gain something positive from it?

Several of those responding mentioned the need to keep “emotionally detached” from the trauma occurring and focus on what they were trained to do. One responder said that he consciously avoids thinking about the loved ones that are waiting for the person to come home. The person who just died in front of his eyes.

Exercise. Strenuous exercise. Exercise to the point of fatigue one responder mentioned. Time for the mind to sort out and process what had just occurred. To release the stress and provide new energy to be with family and friends.

One firefighter, through self-talk, stated that he gets by at times by telling himself that he was not the cause of the situation. That he was there to help those in need. That this may be someone’s absolute worst day of their life and perhaps he can make it just a little less painful.

Recently I joined other responders from several agencies for a Critical Incident Stress debriefing, following a major accident where two children died. These “tough” men and women shared what they saw. What they did. How they were moving on. All processing the experience a little differently but it was very apparent; each of these people cared for those they were helping, in a very deep and personal way.

After leaving the accident scene mentioned above, I know that many of the emergency responders, myself included, immediately contacted loved ones. It was as if we needed to get grounded and to make sure loved ones were safe.

To describe what we do, Gary Mobbs, a Captain with Hauser Fire and one of the trained counselors assisting with the debriefing stated it clearly; “We are just normal people who are expected to respond to non-normal events.” This is done each and every work day.

Be careful and have a safe 2010!

If you have a question about emergency services in your area, please submit your question to “Ask Firefighter Jim” at askffjim@kootenaifire.com. Visit our web page at www.kootenaifire.com for additional information and to read archives of previously answered questions under the link, “Prevention”.