

# COVID-19 BEHAVIORAL HEALTH WILDLAND FIREFIGHTERS

## Know the risk factors

The following factors could help identify wildland firefighters who may be at risk for negative behavioral health impacts, like higher rates of depression, PTSD, anxiety, and burnout:

- Long hours or assignments
- Working in unfamiliar or demanding circumstances
- Not having enough job-related information
- Having too many people to supervise
- Having too many, conflicting, or unfamiliar job duties
- Excessive exposure to gory sights or sounds and environmental hazards
- Not having at least one day off each week

Risk factors associated with increased suicidal thoughts and behaviors in firefighters:

- Lower rank
- Fewer years of service
- Membership in an all-volunteer department
- History of professionally responding to a suicide attempt or suicide-related death
- Active duty military status
- Intimate partner problems
- Job problems, such as tensions with a coworker, poor performance reviews, increased work pressure, or fear of being laid off
- Problems with alcohol
- Symptoms of trauma



## Why it matters

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, wildland firefighters may experience greater feelings of isolation, lack of social support, less connectedness with their team, and challenges accessing mental health and medical resources.

Behavioral health refers to the relationship between physical and mental health, wellbeing, and behaviors, including substance use and other behaviors that may impact your health.

You can get more research and support strategies for wildland firefighters here: [doh.wa.gov/covid19/behavioralhealth](https://doh.wa.gov/covid19/behavioralhealth)




Photo credit: S. Cusanelli

## Build resilience

To build resilience, you can:

- Strengthen social supports, such as friends, family, and affinity groups, in order to decrease stigma and shame associated with mental health symptoms. This can also help increase willingness to seek formal support.
- Take care of your physical health to support better mental health.
- Practice healthy sleep routines and optimize sleep environments when possible. Motels provide higher sleep quality over tents or vehicles. Sleep environments that are cool, dark, and quiet can be hard to set up on site, but are still important goals. Using earplugs can help reduce noise.
- Seek information and training on relevant topics, such as compassion fatigue, burnout, symptoms of trauma, and mindfulness techniques.
- Actively engage in practices for building resilience by using the REST model.

## Use the REST model

**Reward** yourself for a job well done. For example, give yourself a break from the patterns and issues you deal with regularly. Take some time off or even just 15 minutes of personal time. Avoid rewards that include alcohol or drug use.

**Establish** healthy boundaries. Focus on keeping work at work and leaving it there.

**Share** your feelings, concerns, and stories. Do not bottle things up. Participate in support and consultation groups. Talk about things that bother you. Make time for connections and activities in your life.

**Trust** your support network and reach out as needed. Trust that others are willing to help. Ask for help in managing family issues. Refer people elsewhere if you are too tired or compromised emotionally to offer support. If the issues seem larger than can be supported by friends or family, reach out for professional consultation help. Keep a referral list of professional resources, such as your EAP and behavioral health professionals that you can access when needed.

# Know the signs of burnout and trauma

There are many signs of burnout and trauma. The symptoms listed below are the most common. Individuals involved in wildland firefighting work are encouraged to watch for these signs in themselves and their peers, and find support before symptoms get worse.

Physical Symptoms	Cognitive Symptoms	Emotional Symptoms	Behavioral Symptoms
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fatigue</li> <li>• Nausea</li> <li>• Rapid heart rate</li> <li>• Chest pain</li> <li>• Difficulty breathing</li> <li>• Dizziness</li> <li>• Headaches</li> <li>• Stomachaches</li> <li>• Fainting</li> <li>• Too hot/too cold</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulty concentrating</li> <li>• Difficulty beginning a task</li> <li>• Forgetfulness</li> <li>• Nightmares</li> <li>• Suspiciousness</li> <li>• Hyper alert</li> <li>• Intrusive thoughts, images, or sounds</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guilt</li> <li>• Shame</li> <li>• Worry</li> <li>• Anxiety</li> <li>• Sadness</li> <li>• Depression</li> <li>• Fear</li> <li>• Irritability</li> <li>• Anger</li> <li>• Panic</li> <li>• Denial</li> <li>• Grief</li> <li>• Overwhelmed</li> <li>• Restless</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anger outbursts</li> <li>• Yelling</li> <li>• Crying</li> <li>• Argumentative</li> <li>• Changes in appetite</li> <li>• Changes in sleep</li> <li>• Withdrawal or isolating behaviors</li> <li>• Increased alcohol or drug use</li> </ul>

## Watch out for compassion fatigue

*Compassion fatigue* is emotional and physical exhaustion leading to a diminished ability to feel compassion for others. To see if you are experiencing compassion fatigue, ask yourself:

- What are the biggest drains on you personally?
- Are you too full (lots of other demands) or too empty (exhausted) to help someone else?
- What are the warning signs or signals that you can tune into (such as feeling irritable, burnt out, exhausted, or drained)?
- What are the risks (job-related, personal, health, etc.) of compassion fatigue?
- What are some things you are doing to take care of yourself?
- Why is it a problem to offer help when you can't or shouldn't?

If you think you may be experiencing compassion fatigue, it's okay to say "no" and refer someone elsewhere for help.



Maintain healthy sleep routines and environments.



Actively engage in practices for building resilience.



Seek training on mental health support and resilience.



Consider using informal support among peers and colleagues.



Use workplace support structures that promote behavioral health. Seek outside help, if needed.



Foster positive relationships with coworkers.



Prioritize maintaining a schedule that allows for recovery from work shifts.



**Anyone can get it.  
Anyone can spread it.  
Everyone can help  
stop COVID-19.**

A person's race/ethnicity or nationality does not put them at greater risk of COVID-19. However, communities of color are being disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. The effects of racism leaves some groups with fewer opportunities to protect themselves and their communities.

**Stigma will not help fight the illness.**  
[doh.wa.gov/covid19/stigma](https://doh.wa.gov/covid19/stigma)

Publication: 821-107

To request this document in another format, call 1-800-525-0127. Deaf or hard of hearing customers, please call 711 (Washington Relay) or email [civil.rights@doh.wa.gov](mailto:civil.rights@doh.wa.gov).



## More information

**WA State Department of Health COVID-19 information**  
[doh.wa.gov/coronavirus](https://doh.wa.gov/coronavirus)

**Mental and emotional wellbeing**  
[coronavirus.wa.gov/wellbeing](https://coronavirus.wa.gov/wellbeing)

### Questions about COVID-19?

Call our hotline: **1-800-525-0127**. For interpretative services, press # when they answer and **say your language**.

### Washington Listens:

If you need someone to talk to about stress due to COVID-19 call Washington Listens at 1-833-681-0211. TTY and interpretive services are available.



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