

FIREFIGHTER MENTAL TOUGHNESS GUIDE

You challenge yourself with fitness goals, you've built the finesse to succeed, but are you mentally prepared to handle the toughest competition and the fiercest conditions on the job?



There's no denying that firefighters face many dangers on the job. Not only are firefighters tasked with protecting citizens in the line-of duty, they must also protect themselves and fellow colleagues on the scene and at the station.

At Lakeland Fire, we've pulled together fitness resources to help firefighters prepare physically for Scott's Firefighter Combat Challenge and on-the-job demands, but the importance of mental preparation and health for both competition and station-life cannot be overlooked.

In the following pages, you'll see a number of resources that stretch beyond just physical fitness, focusing on the importance of mental preparation and health to help you on the job and on the training course. Information including:

- Why Stress on the Job Matters for Overall Firefighter Health and Well-Being
- Top Mental Skills for Achieving Optimum Performance
- How to Prepare Your Mind By Fueling Your Body: Food, Nutrition, Sleep and Fun
- BONUS - Healthy Sleep Tips
- How Turnout Gear Plays a Role in Preparation and Success
- Real Stories from Firefighters
- Firefighter Mental Health Initiatives

Take a look and please share this resource with your network of first responders to ensure they have tools to improve mental preparation and mental health.

WHY STRESS ON THE JOB MATTERS



**SOME PEOPLE RUN
FROM PROBLEMS,
OTHERS RUN TO
THEM. WE CALL
THEM HEROES.**

– Unknown

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WHY STRESS ON THE JOB MATTERS FOR OVERALL FIREFIGHTER HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

For the past five years, firefighting has been recognized as one of the top three most stressful jobs in the United States. Peaking at the number one spot in 2015, firefighters are faced with job related stress, pressure and physical demands on a daily basis.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, individuals faced with chronic stress are more prone to:

- More frequent and severe viral infections, like colds and influenza
- Heart disease
- High blood pressure
- Depression and anxiety

Even more concerning is that according to the National Fire Protection Association, studies have found that as many as **37 percent of firefighters may exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder**, when the national average is only 6.8 percent.

www.careercast.com

SIGNS OF STRESS

What can you do to help? Be aware of your surroundings and behavior and consider reaching out to fellow colleagues if they exhibit any of the following signs of stress:

- **Physical:** headaches, tiredness, increased sickness and poor health, sleep problems
- **Emotional:** increased anxiety, irritability, sadness, indecisiveness
- **Behavioral:** lack of interest, clumsiness, changes in eating habits, increased use of alcohol
- **On the Job:** change in performance, isolation, tardiness



**TOP MENTAL SKILLS
FOR ACHIEVING
OPTIMUM
PERFORMANCE**

Everyday, individuals face difficult situations and responsibilities that test mental toughness. From job interviews to unexpected scenarios, being mentally prepared when the going gets tough is a vital life skill. As a firefighter, however, you are faced with more challenges, stressful situations and demanding environments than the average person. Are you armed with the right mental skills and tools?

Here are some mental preparation tips that you can try applying as you train for competition and on the job.

“ WHETHER YOU THINK YOU CAN. OR YOU THINK YOU CAN'T. YOU'RE RIGHT.

– Henry Ford

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THE IMPORTANCE OF PRACTICE AND PREPARATION

When it comes to top performing athletes, training and repetition is a key component to improvement. Practicing a skill to the point of perfection and maintaining physical fitness to meet performance goals is essential. Why? Here are a few key reasons:

- Performing drills and training establishes a baseline of muscle and mental memory and allows you to become a creature of habit for certain physical tasks and procedures.
- Natural muscle memory and repetition can improve mental sharpness on the job.
- Repetitive practice prepares you for real-life scenarios by force of habit, allowing your mind and body to assume control because it has been through the motions before.

VISUALIZE THE OUTCOME YOU WANT

In competition, athletes often cite visualization as an important aspect of success.

- Seeing yourself complete a task or achieving a specific desired result can help train your mind and build in a sense of mental preparation for success.
- When it comes to on-the-job challenges and high-demand situations, visualize the outcome you want to help stay positive and maintain calmness under pressure.

MAINTAIN SELF-MOTIVATION

One of the hardest aspects of training and preparation is finding a way to stay motivated.

- If you can, build a community of support at your station house to maintain motivation, but also consider the importance of self-motivation.
- Be aware that building and improving mental preparation and mental health are a direct result of the effort you put forth.

STICK WITH ROUTINES AND PLANS

Following the concept of practice and preparation, routines and plans can help you feel mentally prepared even when thrown in unexpected circumstances.

- You know what should be done and you know how to do it.
- Routines and plans as you prepare for athletic competitions or even on the job are created to give you confidence in your performance and in your role in any given situation.

POSITIVE ATTITUDE AND SELF-TALK

You Can Do It. How you talk to yourself can make the difference between success and failure in competition and at the station.

- Even when faced with challenges, maintain a positive attitude and positive self-talk to see yourself through difficult situations.
- It can be easy to give up and think negatively, but if you practice positivity, it can help pull you through even the most difficult circumstances.

DEVELOP REFOCUSING STRATEGIES

Like anything in life, even with the greatest preparation and training, you may find yourself losing focus on the task at hand. Luckily, you can prepare your mind and your body for such scenarios.

- When you see yourself losing focus or concentration, develop a strategy that works for you to regain control of the situation.
- In competition, that may mean re-setting, starting over, or performing a specific physical movement to snap yourself back into ready-mode.
- On the job, perhaps it is positive self-talk or walking away to take a deep breath, and returning to the task with improved clarity and focus.



Preparing for competition is one arena where mental health is essential for performance. But applying that mental preparation on the job can be beneficial, too. Consider the benefits of mental preparation training to help you reach optimal performance.

**PREPARE
YOUR MIND BY
FUELING YOUR
BODY**

PREPARE YOUR MIND BY FUELING YOUR BODY

Improving mental health requires the mind and body to work together. Even with optimal mental preparation and focused mental health training, you still need to fuel your body the right ways to achieve success.

This includes maintaining a baseline of:

- Appropriate physical fitness
- Proper nutrition
- Healthy sleep
- Laughter and fun





FUEL YOUR MIND WITH FITNESS

Many studies in recent years have shown a correlation between physical fitness and improvements in mental health. In fact, according to the American Psychological Association, “The exercise mood boost ... offers near-instant gratification.”

Whether it is just a walk around the block or a regimented workout program, exercise has been linked to improved mood, decreased feelings of anxiety and depression and a general improvement in overall mental health.

**“ LIFE IS ONLY AS GOOD
AS YOUR MINDSET.**

– Unknown

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HERE ARE SOME REASONS WHY YOU MIGHT CONSIDER FUELING YOUR MIND WITH FITNESS:

- Reduce stress. Exercise has been shown to help improve stress levels.
- Exercise releases endorphins. Endorphins are chemicals that help improve feelings of happiness and positivity.
- Improve self-confidence. Being physically active can help improve your feelings of self-image and help improve self-talk, both important components of mental health.
- Sharpen your mind. Aerobic exercise has been linked with improving memory and increasing brain development and performance.
- Increase productivity. Studies have shown that workers who exercise regularly have increased productivity, energy and mental focus.

Sources:

www.apa.org/monitor/2011/12/exercise.aspx

www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21282661

www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21722657



FUEL YOUR MIND WITH NUTRITIOUS FOODS

Harvard Health Publication put it best with this analogy: **“Like an expensive car, your brain functions best when it gets only premium fuel.”** In fact, multiple studies show a link between poor diet and a reduction in mental processing, mental performance and mood disorders.

SO HOW, EXACTLY, DOES GOOD FOOD FUEL OUR MINDS? HERE ARE SOME EXAMPLES:

- 95% of the body's serotonin is produced in your gastrointestinal tract. Serotonin helps regular sleep, mood and pain. What you eat directly affects the amount of serotonin your body produces and sends on to fuel your brain.
- Healthy foods improve brain processes. What we eat each day acts as the building blocks for how the brain functions and how information is transferred between various parts of the brain and body.
- Vitamins and nutrients can help with specific disorders. B vitamins have been linked to improved mood; Omega-3's have been shown to improve thinking and memory; and Zinc has been correlated to how the body controls stress levels.

Before you switch up your diet too dramatically, talk to you doctor about the best choices for your body and your particular nutritional needs. You may find that an adjustment in your diet is just the thing to help your improve mental preparation and mental health.

Sources:

www.health.harvard.edu/blog/nutritional-psychiatry-your-brain-on-food

www.webmd.com/mental-health/news/20150820/food-mental-health



FUEL YOUR MIND WITH REST

We have all been told that sleep allows our bodies to rest and recover and can help improve mood, productivity and cognitive functioning.

HERE ARE SOME ADDITIONAL FACTS YOU MAY NOT KNOW ABOUT SLEEP:

- You can learn a task better if you are well rested.
- Sleep is required to form new learning and memory pathways in the brain, but more importantly, sleep helps those pathways perform better.
- Sleep is a powerful regulator of appetite, energy use and weight control.
- Healthy sleep gives your heart and vascular system a chance to rest.
- During sleep, your body creates hormones which help the immune system fight infection and sickness.
- Healthy sleep allows for the growth and repair of cells.
- Lack of sleep causes thinking processes to slow down, reduces focus and attention and increases confusion.
- Lack of sleep has also been linked to poor decision-making and more risk taking.
- Lack of sleep may trigger an increase in adrenaline, cortisol and other stress hormones during the day.

HEALTHY SLEEP TIPS

1. While it may be hard on the job, try to stick to a consistent sleep schedule where you go to bed and wake up at the same time.
2. Incorporate exercise into your daily routine but avoid exercise right before bedtime.
3. Try to avoid caffeine products late in the day, this includes coffee, tea and chocolate, amongst others.
4. Try to avoid large meals right before bedtime, because indigestion can interrupt sleep quality.
5. Naps can actually be very beneficial to help boost performance and mental health. But try to avoid naps longer than 30 minutes and naps after 3pm.
6. Sleep routines can be very helpful to aid in the process of falling asleep and help you stay asleep. Relax before bedtime and follow the same routine each night to prepare your body for a restful night.
7. If you find yourself wide awake in the middle of the night, don't wait it out for more than 20 minutes. Instead, get up and do something relaxing until you feel sleepy again.



FUEL YOUR MIND WITH FUN

One of the key things we heard from real firefighters was that fun played a big part in their overall mood and happiness at work. Whether it is laughing around the station after hours or cracking jokes between calls, laughter and fun were said to help relieve stress.

HERE ARE SOME REASONS WHY LAUGHTER TRULY IS THE BEST MEDICINE:

- Laughter eases muscle tension and promotes relaxation. In fact, one study shows that a good dose of laughter can improve muscle tension for nearly 45 minutes.
- It can reduce pain receptors and boost the immune system.
- Laughing reduces levels of stress hormones, like cortisol and adrenaline.
- Laughter increases levels of health-enhancing hormones, like endorphins.
- Fake laughing is good for you, too, because the brain is not able to tell the difference between a real laugh and a fake one.
- Laughter protects the heart by improving the function of blood vessels and increasing overall blood flow, protecting against heart attack and other cardiovascular health risks.

Sources:

www.ccpa-accp.ca/the-benefits-of-laughter

www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/stress-relief/art-20044456

www.helpguide.org/articles/emotional-health/laughter-is-the-best-medicine.htm

THOUGHTS FROM CAREER FIREFIGHTERS

**WE TALKED WITH HARDWORKING FIREFIGHTERS FROM TEAM
LAKELAND TO GET A PERSPECTIVE ON STRESS IN THE WORKPLACE,
MENTAL PREPARATION AND HOW THEY STAY POSITIVE.**

RYAN FITZGERALD – MANKATO, MINNESOTA FIRE DEPARTMENT

“Stress plays a major role for firefighters on the job, with a large part of it being eustress. Eustress is a positive stress for firefighters. It’s the stress and excitement we experience while responding to a high priority call and trying to find a solution. Training, whether it is physical conditioning or job-related skill training, greatly reduces distress from the job. When I feel very comfortable with my physical conditioning and skill level, my stress is greatly reduced because I feel confident in my ability to effectively handle any task presented to me.”

“As with the challenge, it is common to mentally prepare for a large variety of situations and tasks that a firefighter can face on a day to day basis. While responding to a call, especially a fatal accident or severe trauma, I prepare myself for what I will see and how I will handle it.”



SEAN SULLIVAN – FRANKFORT, KENTUCKY FIRE DEPARTMENT

“Your physical health helps you deal with stress better. Stress is such a destructive force in the body. It leads to stroke, heart attacks, depression, anxiety, substance abuse and many other health conditions. Staying focused on a healthy body can often help the body and mind deal with stress before any of the damaging effects can take place.”

“Stress is simply a fact of life in a career field like this. We see people during the worst possible events of their lives. Death, destruction and split second life and death decisions are all part being a firefighter. Food, workouts and joking back at the station play a big part in the stress relief process for many of us. We are all professionals on the scene, but we will make fun of each other for years if a mistake is made once we leave that scene. That helps dissipate the stress from the environment.”

“Training takes a lot of discipline and perseverance. You have to will yourself to get up at 5am to workout before going on shift. It’s easy to stop after the fourth set but it’s sets 5 and 6 that make you better on the course and on the job. Training is where the mental toughness and belief in yourself occur.”



**HOW TURNOUT
GEAR PLAYS A ROLE
IN PREPARATION
AND SUCCESS**

Your turnout gear is designed to protect you in the line of duty, but it should also provide you with a sense of confidence that you will be protected, no matter what type of emergency situation you face.

- Does your current turnout gear give you confidence in your ability and offer the flexibility and maneuverability to perform at your best?
- Which flaws in your turnout gear design slow you down and reduce your efficiency?

HERE'S WHAT TEAM LAKELAND REPRESENTATIVES SEAN AND RYAN HAD TO SAY ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF TURNOUT GEAR IN THEIR CONFIDENCE AND STRESS ON THE JOB.

“Understanding your gear, how it works and why it works helps to build confidence on the scene of an emergency.”

– Sean Sullivan

“Protective gear plays a role in stress reduction by gaining a firefighter’s confidence that it will perform as designed. We have a very short timeframe to don all of our gear before responding to a call, and it has to be fitted correctly and perform as required. It adds stress and distraction when suspenders and other accessories are twisted and not fitting right underneath your coat.” – Ryan Fitzgerald

Flip the page to view the high-performance blueprint of Lakeland Fire Stealth turnout gear and see the difference that advanced ergonomics and attention to detail can make in your mental preparation and on-the-job performance.



LAKELAND FIRE PREMIUM TURNOUT GEAR

Performance Driven Design



LAZERMAX TRIM™

Our patented silver reflective seam on the arm and around the shoulder of the jacket allows for increased visibility. LazerMax Trim™ is also located on the pants around the 1-piece knee seam, for increased visibility.

CINCHING LOWER-BACK DRAWSTRING CORD

This feature means extra coat material can gather in the back of the jacket, behind the SBCA, leaving the front of the jacket straight for increased movement.

NAPOLEON POCKET

Located under the storm flap, the napoleon pocket is an advanced design feature intended to help you keep items close at hand and easily accessible. Pocket contents stay dry, and away from dirt and debris.

FLEXIBLE SHOULDER CONSTRUCTION

A properly constructed jacket shoulder should include both back pleats and underarm gussets to allow for maximum movement. In addition, placing the shoulder seam closer to the neck allows for even weight distribution and less coat rise.

BEVELED HEM DESIGN

Shorter in the front, longer in the back means increased maneuverability and safety on the job.

Lakeland Stealth firefighter turnout gear adheres to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) standards but exceeds performance expectations when it comes to maneuverability, comfort and functionality.

Are you ready to #GearUp?

Take the next step and contact Lakeland Fire to request a consultation or product demonstration of Lakeland's premium turnout gear.

LIGHTWEIGHT MATERIAL

Lightweight turnout gear can be the difference between finesse and fatigue in the line of duty.

MULTI-ADJUST SUSPENDER SYSTEM

Stealth's patented Black-Ops™ suspender system is a step above the competition and stays put through even the most rigorous tasks.

BELT LOOP/PANT GRIP HANDLES

Pants designed with belt loops that tactically extend into pant grip pull-up handles make it seconds faster to pull on your gear in an emergency.

TWO-TONED TURNOUT PANT

No other turnout pant is ergonomically cut and designed with athletic movement in mind. As a result, our unique construction means we can offer a two-toned pant. The pants also feature large angled expansion pockets with pocket flap pull-tabs.

DYNAMIC KNEE CONSTRUCTION

With a pleat located above the knee reinforcement, this critical design feature allows for increased flexibility and movement. No more bulky, knocking knees and extra fabric to pull up; instead, a turnout pant designed with maneuverability in mind.

ONE-PIECE LOWER LEG CONSTRUCTION

Designed specifically to increase mobility, our unique turnout pant contours around the lower leg and is comprised of a singular lower panel with no side seams. With only a rear seam, there is no side-seam abrasion or uncomfortable rubbing.

**FIREFIGHTER
MENTAL HEALTH
INITIATIVES**

With a growing body of evidence on the importance of mental health initiatives on the job, there are a number of resources available for firefighters. While not all departments offer ongoing mental health support and training, here are some options you may consider looking into for yourself, your colleagues or your department.

FIREFIGHTER LIFE SAFETY INITIATIVE 13 – “Everyone Goes Home”

In 2004, the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation created Firefighter Life Safety Initiative 13, designed to help prepare firefighters for the line of duty and outline methods to support firefighters through training, education and support. The initiative was part of a comprehensive plan taking state-of-the-art research and best practices that were used at the time in military and other high-risk professions.

The final result was 16 Firefighter Life Safety Initiatives addressing the issues of mental health on the job and outlining a network of support and mental health development for firefighters and their families. Moreover, Initiative 13 was created as a means to ensure that firefighters and EMS professionals and their families would have the resources to deal with job-related pressure and complications, especially issues regarding emotional and psychological stress.

To view more about this initiative, visit this website link:
www.everyonegoeshome.com/16-initiatives/13-psychological-support/

**FIREFIGHTERS
AND THEIR
FAMILIES MUST
HAVE ACCESS TO
COUNSELING AND
PSYCHOLOGICAL
SUPPORT.**

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NATIONAL FIRE PROTECTION ASSOCIATION 1500 STANDARD ON FIREFIGHTER HEALTH AND SAFETY

The National Fire Protection Association 1500 Standard on Firefighter Health and Safety requires that assistance programs are made available to support the mental health of firefighters.

More information on this program and its mandates are available through your department or by following this link: www.nfpa.org/codes-and-standards/all-codes-and-standards/list-of-codes-and-standards

FIRE SERVICE JOINT MANAGEMENT WELLNESS-FITNESS TASK FORCE

In 2014, the International Association of Fire Fighters, International Association for Fire Chiefs and 10 pairs of local unions and their municipalities joined together to form the Fire Service Joint Labor Management Wellness-Fitness Task Force. The Task Force was created to develop a holistic, positive rehabilitating and educational approach to wellness and fitness programs in the fire service.

More information and educational resources can be found on the task force website: <http://client.prod.iaff.org>



Take the first step toward outfitting your team with elite performance turnout gear. Contact Lakeland Fire today to learn more about Stealth Premium Turnout Gear and to request a consultation or a product catalog.

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