

Firefighters can ease one another's job stress, but loving spouses may increase it

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Strong same-sex friendships among male firefighters can help cut down on their stress—but loving relationships with their wives may increase anxiety for those who constantly face danger, according to a Baylor

University study.

For firefighters—90% percent of whom are males—the desire to protect wives from awareness of the risks and emotional trauma of their jobs can add apprehension to their already considerable burden, said lead author Mark T. Morman, Ph.D., professor of communication studies at Baylor University.

"The well-known firefighter mandate is to 'leave it at the firehouse,'" Morman said.

The study—"Firefighters' Job Stress and the (Un)Intended Consequences of Relational Quality with Spouses and Firefighter Friends"—is published in the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*.

Those who combat fires—often referred to as "the brotherhood of firefighters"—constantly are exposed to a long list of dangers: exposure to smoke and hazardous chemicals, physical injury, risky rescue and recovery, cardiovascular events and intense emotional stress, Morman said.

"Not only do they deal with people on one of the worst days of their lives, but they also must deal with injuries and death of work colleagues, as well as the threat to their own mortality as they serve the public," he said.

In 2018, 83 firefighters died in the line of duty nationwide, according to the United States Fire Administration (USFA).

Compared with the general population and most other occupations, firefighters face higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder, suicide, alcoholism, depression, anxiety, sleep disorders and tobacco use—and

they also are more likely to resist mental health support, according to data from USFA, the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health and previous studies.

"Ironically, the very characteristics—being protective, other-oriented, stoic and strong—that often draw men into the firefighting profession are the very issues that prevent these men from seeking help with how they process their emotions and mental health," Morman said.

Researchers analyzed data from 428 male firefighters from 12 Texas fire departments of varied sizes, with 77% married and 14% single. Marriages ranged from a month to 40 years; time in firefighting ranged from four months to 41 years. Participants reported close friendships with a co-[firefighter](#) ranging from two months to 45 years.

Researchers found that overall, having close relationships at the fire station and at home is beneficial for overall job satisfaction and quality of work life. Additionally, researchers hypothesized firefighters would have effective buffers against stress if they had good relationships with co-workers and spouses. But while they found some relief from work stress with high-quality work friends, the same was not true with their spouses.

"In a nutshell, the 'marriage effect' was a surprise," Morman said.

Generally, people with stronger emotional support—from a spouse, friend, co-worker or family member—have stronger immune systems, less depression and longer life expectancy. And in general, unmarried men have a 250-% increased mortality risk, compared with married men.

"Married men take fewer personal risks than single or divorced men," Morman said. "Wives promote better health regulation and preventive

behaviors, providing more household maintenance and being a husband's primary—and sometimes only—source of emotional and social support."

But firefighters have an atypical lifestyle—living and working together consecutive days a week in a multi-generational, masculine environment that combines work life and home life: cooking, watching TV, playing games, sleeping, showering, cleaning and maintaining equipment. That side-by-side camaraderie—called "closeness in the doing" by researchers—creates a safe space for help, trust and empathy, he said.

"Often within close friendships between men, there is less criticism, less competition, more self-disclosure and better conflict management," Morman said. "For many men, relating to similar others is more familiar, more comfortable, and frankly, just easier."

But when they return home, firefighters may feel the need to hide or fake emotions—or even try to match the emotion they feel is desired or required by spouses who ask about their jobs. A common expectation is for firefighters to be strong and stoic, but it may be emotionally taxing to maintain that appearance—which in turn may lessen job satisfaction.

Morman noted that future research of a larger geographic and ethnic representation of firefighters would be valuable.

"Given the hyper-masculine nature of most firehouses, researchers also should investigate how partner and friend quality function in similar and different ways for female firefighters," he said.

Despite study limitations, "the investigation provides substantial evidence in support of advocating for stronger marriages and co-worker relationships for these civic heroes," Morman said. "Whether at work or at home, relationship quality has consequences."

More information: Mark T. Morman et al, Firefighters' job stress and the (un)intended consequences of relational quality with spouses and firefighter friends, *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* (2019). DOI: [10.1177/0265407519886355](https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407519886355)

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