

# Firefighters with PTSD are likely to have relationship problems

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For firefighters, every day can be an emergency, rushing into flames and disasters as others can only hope to rush out. And make no mistake, it takes a toll. Exposure to such traumatic events throughout their careers places these first responders at heightened risk for the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and new research from the University of Houston First Responder Program indicates that PTSD means trouble for their intimate relationships.

"Individuals experiencing PTSD symptoms often experience interpersonal problems and relationship stress, and this may be due to emotion regulation difficulties," reports Anka Vujanovic, associate professor of psychology and director of the UH First Responder Program and the Trauma and Stress Studies Center in the *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*. "Negative alterations in cognition and mood were especially relevant to emotion regulation difficulties and relationship satisfaction." The paper's lead author is Donald A. Godfrey, a doctoral student in the lab of Julia Babcock, professor of psychology and co-director of the Center for Couples Therapy at UH. The

study examined the association between PTSD symptoms, couple relationship satisfaction and emotion regulation difficulties among 188 firefighters who completed an online questionnaire.

"To our knowledge, no prior research has examined the role of emotion regulation difficulties in the association between PTSD symptoms and relationship satisfaction," said Godfrey. "This study was the first to identify these associations among firefighters."

Difficulty regulating emotion also appears to have [negative effects](#) on couple intimacy, as individuals who report heightened emotion regulation difficulties demonstrated heightened fear of being controlled by their partners and avoidance of closeness. Their partners reported decreased perception that they would be open to emotional dialogue.

"Results indicated that PTSD symptom severity was negatively associated with [relationship satisfaction](#) and positively associated with emotion regulation difficulties," wrote Godfrey.

The findings highlight the importance of understanding associations between PTSD and interpersonal functioning among firefighters.

"Emotion regulation difficulties may offer a path for clinically targeting PTSD symptoms and relationship functioning among firefighters," said Babcock.

**More information:** Donald A. Godfrey et al, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Relationship Satisfaction among Firefighters: The Role of Emotion Regulation Difficulties, *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/10926771.2022.2043973](https://doi.org/10.1080/10926771.2022.2043973)

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