

In The Hot Seat

Firefighting is an inherently risky occupation - a fact accepted by the individuals who choose to become firefighters. But on top of this, firefighting is also a potentially stressful occupation. Stress at work is the primary cause of ill-health and absenteeism in the UK today, and work-related stress accounts for over a third of all new incidences of ill health. According to the Health and Safety Executive, each case of work-related stress, depression or anxiety related ill health leads to an average of 30.6 working days lost. A total of 13.5 million working days were lost to work-related stress, depression and anxiety in 2007/08.

More Than A Day Off

Apart from the negative effect that stress can have on health, there are also major implications of the effect of stress on fire appliance driving during an emergency call out. At Cranfield University, we wanted to investigate whether the stress of driving may increase the risk of being involved in a crash on the way to an incident. We conducted one-to-one in depth interviews with over 50 emergency fire appliance drivers (EFADs) and the following factors that may increase risk emerged. In our study, we found that EFADs felt that the potential for being involved in a work-related road collision is even more pronounced when having to respond to 'persons reported' incidents involving children, or having to recover bodies in major incidents. Driving on the way to these traumatic events can cause the EFAD to ruminate about what they might have to deal with at the scene, and this can interfere with the primary task of driving, disrupting attention



and the driver's abilities to detect hazards. There is also some evidence that EFADs hold a sense of 'noble cause' to save 'life and limb', and may be vulnerable to 'red mist' (a kind of tunnelling of perception when the emergency services are focused on getting to the scene, rather than being vigilant to hazards). EFADs also expressed concern about the public scrutiny that might occur as a result of a collision, only adding to the general worry when driving an appliance.

The Training

EFADs expressed concern that driver training focuses on hazards rather than driver behaviour on a call, and felt

that the training should consider attitudes and beliefs that might impact on decision making. Some considered that it was almost inevitable that they would be involved in a collision at some stage of their career because of the circumstances in which they are required to drive. Fatigue was highlighted as a major problem for some EFADs, especially when receiving a call in the early hours of the morning. They expressed worries about how other road users behaved in response to a fire appliance on blues and twos, and several of our interviewees reported that risk taking in a fire appliance is common. Topography was also often mentioned as a concern

when on a call, and the lack of familiarity with a location and how to go about gaining access to the site of the emergency all added to the stress of the drive.

Horses For Courses

But the extent to which stress might affect an EFAD's driving performance depends on individual differences - everyone is different and each person has a unique way of evaluating an emergency situation. For example, more hardy people appear to be less vulnerable to stress. There are also situational components involved - for example, the way that an incident is evaluated as the call comes in and as the drive progresses towards the incident, has a major influence on the level of stress experienced. Previous work seems to suggest that how incidents are evaluated, and the way EFADs cope with stress at work, is largely determined by the nature of the work environment for each particular fire service. After doing the job for a while, EFADs appear to adopt similar evaluation and coping styles. Indeed, many emergency service workers refer to their reactions to incidents in terms of 'a job that must be done, and that they must get on with it'. They seem to develop a kind of resilience in the face of the demands placed upon them. This coping style has been referred to as a 'trauma membrane', enabling firefighters to shield themselves from the stress of a traumatic incident for long enough to carry out their duties. The danger here is that this particular coping strategy does not mean that the individuals remain unaffected by the stress of the incident in the longer term. Anecdotally, researchers at Cranfield have observed a general reluctance amongst



emergency service workers to admit to suffering with stress or in seeking support, possibly because of the implications for their career or in their relationships with their peers. Not dealing appropriately with work-related stress can have serious consequences for EFADs, especially when driving to an incident. Telltale signs of stress include a change in sleep and eating patterns, increase in consumption of alcohol, irritability and appearing more withdrawn. These signs are apparent amongst individuals that have not developed effective coping strategies for dealing with work stress or are under pressure

from general life stresses such as financial worries or domestic problems.

Is Coping Good Enough?

EFAD stress and coping is a very complex process, affected by a varied range of factors that include the nature of the incident, organisational issues and self-appraisal. However, the impact of stress on driving behaviour has been well documented, and our studies have shown that increased stress reactions may interfere with hazard monitoring skills, provoke more aggressive driving, increase propensity to take risks, and reduce a driver's ability to cope with the

stresses specific to driving under emergency conditions. Much of the research on the general activities of firefighters around the world has concluded that fire services should provide training to help firefighters to predict and deal with stress. To counteract some of the risk, the fire service provides high quality training in the skills required to deal with incidents, and implements measures to ensure firefighters' safety on the fire ground, but there is little consideration of how to handle EFAD stress. As well as reducing sickness absence costs to a fire station, tackling EFAD stress can have a positive effect on employee

commitment, organisational reputation and well being. More importantly, providing training on how to deal with EFAD stress also has the potential to reduce the chances of being involved in a fire appliance incident.

Look Out

In the wider context, this shows how personal stress, whether domestic or professional, can have a major negative impact on driving ability and hazard awareness, no matter how well qualified a driver is. This is an important factor to bear in mind and make all drivers, old and new, aware of the very real dangers involved. **adi**

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