

Things go wrong even when you do everything right!

Surviving a Traumatic Event mentally, physically and as a Department.

I like to think I do things the right way. As a 20 year member of the fire service, I've tried to set myself up for success; not taking short cuts, getting the best education from the Fire Academy/ paramedic school, and continuing to further my education with the best classes in the field by the best instructors. On the job, I try to take the right precautions for my crew and myself, and yet still I found myself involved in an explosion leaving me with second and third degree burns to my hands and face. I was sitting in a Traumatic Burn Center wondering if I would be able to return mentally, physically, and emotionally to the job I love so much.

In this article/class I hope to give some advice on how to possibly avoid these situations, how to respond as an administration/staff, as a coworker, friend, and as a family member. I will also discuss steps to take to help recover from a traumatic event.

I'm a Captain of an engine company. I'm a training officer. I take all training serious. I pass on any education I acquire. I try to stay in good physical and mental shape. I was on hour 7 of 8 on an overtime shift. It was a 95 degree day in July when we received a call to assist a bordering departments engine company on a commercial vehicle fire, in which call notes provided a description of an electric company truck. I immediately started questioning why a second engine company was dispatched. Then, while enroute, I heard the officer at the scene request an ambulance too. I really started questioning the need for our response, the need for an ambulance... maybe there was a little bitching too?? We heard radio reports of involvement and an eventual report of fire out... more reason to question our response right?? . We arrived to a fire that was out, with some smoldering still in the engine compartment. I, in full gear with SCBA, asked the officer what he needed. He stated that they were 'good' and we could probably go back inservice. I then went to ask the truck owner if he would like anything removed from the vehicle and he stated no. Then, for my own piece of mind, I went to evaluate the vehicle. I looked at the engine compartment, then moved to the underside, which was all extinguished. When I stood back up, and a side compartment exploded less than 2 feet from where I was standing. I felt such an intense heat, words cannot describe it. I found myself turned away from the truck with my hands raised... an

automatic response to block my face. As I looked down, my hands were severely burned with skin sloughing off.

I had removed my fire gloves and never went on air once I realized I was not going to be doing any suppression. My crew immediately came to my side. I started questioning the severity of my facial burns at the same time I started feeling pain. I could not see my face, but I could see my hands and I thought the worst. My jumpman and engineer did their best to reassure me that it was not that bad. But I was really nervous, because I didn't have great looks to start with. They showed me a picture on their phone and it was not as bad as I had expected. Luckily, that ambulance that I questioned and felt unnecessary at the time of its request, was arriving to transport me. The paramedics gave me a dose of pain medication that I would have thought was used to tranquilize bears... but the reality was, the dose only took the edge off.

Things happen in our line of work, just as it does for EMS and Police. We constantly put ourselves in unpredictable and uncontrollable situations. We help people that need us, but we also see and experience things that the rest of the world does not want too... but that's why we train! Nature does not make good Firefighters, Paramedics, and Police Officers... our training does.

Try to avoid putting yourself in a bad situation.

Know your capabilities, and those of your crew, and train on the deficiencies. Don't let things get routine. Learn from others especially senior personnel, take classes, teach classes, read good articles like this one. Join organizations, like the FOOLS. Try to understand things from different angles. Even if you don't agree, it will make you more knowledgeable. Keep your body and mind in top physical shape. Most people take better care of their car than they do themselves. Go to a doctor routinely. Get detailed bloodwork. More than the basic workup, sometimes a simple deficiency can be easily corrected. Eat right. Rest. ie getting enough sleep!! Take your mental wellness serious! Watch out for your brothers and sisters too. Suicide has dramatically increased in the fire service. I have three personal friends that have taken their lives while working in the fire service.

Having a notification system in place.

While enroute to the hospital, our department staff had already began to notify my family and had things in motion... who to call and on what number. Who would go to my

home and deliver news of injury. All of this information is kept on a zip drive that the on duty BC carries.

Establish one point of contact.

Once I was stabilized in the hospital there was one point of contact made that would relay any and all info from my side of the hospital bed to administration, staff, visitors. This person was someone I was very comfortable with, who was a huge help in many ways. Among other things, he provided updates on my condition, kept visitors to a minimum when necessary, and helped manage the 2 person bedside rule that the Burn Unit maintained. While I was there this person helped coordinate with local departments, districts and other organizations that wanted to provide meals the entire time I was hospitalized... which was unbelievable.

Allow on duty staff to visit initially if possible.

After a point of contact was made, our administration felt it was good for on duty crews, as well as for myself, to visit briefly. They felt it was good for everyone to put eyes on me. I truly enjoyed the visits, it kept me busy and my mind off the severity of the situation.

After the first day, the realization of my injuries started to set in... that I was not going to be able to return to work for a while and definitely not going on my family vacation to Glacier National Park the next day. My face swelled up to the point I was unrecognizable, the staff was talking about a longer stay than the initial "overnight", and the doctors were talking about a potential need for grafting the skin on my hands. I started questioning what I could have done to prevent this? What did I miss? What did I do wrong? Missouri State Fire Marshal's office investigated the fire and determined that a gas can had melted and leaked into the passenger side compartment until it reached its explosive temperature and exploded, while I was standing 2 feet away.

Whether or not a mistake contributes to the traumatic event, the focus should still be forward. I can say we all make mistakes. We are all imperfect humans. Someone has made the exact decision and had same result or they got away without an issue. That is why we learn from others, educate ourselves as much as possible, but we will never be able to prepare for everything or every situation. At this time I realized I needed to talk to someone. I have several close friends who were involved in traumatic events and are

still really struggling to this day and has ended the career of two of them. I knew from them that I wanted to do as much as possible to move through this!

CISD and EMDR Therapy/Counseling (Physical therapy for your brain!)

First off we need to get rid of the stigma that talking to a counselor or getting therapy means you weak or messed up in the head. Its like physical therapy for the brain. If you get injured on the job, you go physical therapy to rehab the injured area until its better. Your brain requires the same. So no one should look at it any different. The approach should be the same! The administration at SCFD had reached out to our local CISD team and scheduled a debriefing for the event for all personnel involved the very next morning. They invited all on duty crews as well as the ambulance district and bordering fire district that was involved. It is paramount to have this debriefing asap, within 48hrs if possible. The closer its held to the event, the more likely you are to have people attend, and there will be a better chance for effective progress in staff recovery. Administration needs to be ready to do whatever it takes to try and get the personnel there!

While at the hospital we reached out to a counselor we were familiar with who was specially trained in EMDR. EMDR therapy... I've only learned about this in the last year. EMDR. Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing Therapy. This is where the therapist uses tapping finger movements, some sort of right side and left side stimulation while the patient shares the details of the traumatic event. Without getting too technical, it helps the brain to process the event from one side of the brain to the other. EMDR helps when the details of the event get stuck in the amygdala, the part that processes emotion. Once EMDR therapy helps to release and process the memory, it files it away in long term... no longer allowing triggers of the event to produce immediate emotions. EMDR was started before I even left the hospital!

A few weeks after the event, I experienced a trigger. I was watching a youtube video of a car, when suddenly in the video, it exploded. I instantly had a flash back causing me to feel that moment of the explosion and the intense pain. Just watching a video of an explosion created a very real response. I talked through this and other details during counseling and EMDR therapy. I have not had another episode to this date. While I began counseling and EMDR therapy, EMDR can be successful years after the event. It usually requires a lot more sessions and time compared to an acute event with quick response. I just read an article where a police officer used EMDR 13 years after the traumatic event. This gives hope to anyone who still might be struggling to move through a past event. EMDR is a relatively new therapy and is still being testing on its

capabilities. They are performing these trials in Clarksville Tennessee in conjunction with Fort Campbell and are having great success with the trials.

The more our brain experiences events and stressors, and we deal with them appropriately, the more “mental reserve” we build. This building of mental reserve helps us on future events. Your genetic makeup also determines how you process these events as well.

FRIENDS, FAMILY, COWORKERS

There might be some counseling involved for family, friends, coworkers who are close to the individual who experienced the traumatic event. It was long after my event that I realized how much it affected my family and some of my closest friends and coworkers. Someone close needs to be looking out for them too. My Deputy Chief had said he could tell in certain individuals faces that he knew a CISD was going to take place ASAP. Previous events in his career helped him to know how important it was and how important to have it asap. As a administration, it is your job to make sure that all individuals effected get the help needed.

PROGRESS AND REINTRODUCTION BACK INTO THE FIREHOUSE.

While I was getting my mental therapy, I was also doing physical therapy at the same time. At one point, I was 5 days a week for 3 weeks building my grip strength and recovering the motor sensation in my fingers. Once therapy was far enough along, I returned to light duty. 8hrs a day, 5 days a week, and holy shit that was worse than getting burned. After a few weeks of light duty, it was my Duty Chiefs idea to do a few weeks of ride alongs. This helped reassure the department and myself that I was getting close to returning to the engine. I was assigned to our busiest engine company. During that time, I was able to catch a few residential fires... and the horribly dangerous car fires.

CONCLUSION

Some things we can't control. God was looking out for me; I closed my eyes during the explosion, I didn't take a breath, I turned the backs of my hands out and my palms in. Change in any of those would have been career ending or life ending. Having an

ambulance dispatched on a car fire, greatly helped with my care and response time to the appropriate facility. I was the luckiest man in an unlucky situation.

But there were key things that had a positive impact on my recovery, reintroduction, and the betterment of the department; having a notification policy and process in place, having one point of contact/liaison to help with needs and communication, CISD within 24hrs of the event, allowing on duty crews to visit, counseling with EMDR, learning from others through passed on knowledge, articles, and classes, being in good physical and mental shape (I know my mental shape is debatable by my closest peers/family), reintroduction with light duty and ride alongs, and knowing that I'm imperfect and accidents happen. I believe that each of these things can help a person make a full recovery and help the departments well being after a traumatic event.

After teaching a class on this experience and topic, I wasn't prepared for the number of brothers/ sisters that reached out to me for contact information of available counselors. There is incredible support that we can offer from our shared experiences.