



CAMPUS FIRE SAFETY CODE TALK

Campus Fire Safety e-NewZone

Suicide Prevention: Awareness Programs Needed

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Data has become a significant component and integral part of the fire service. It is used to justify and promote, develop a basis for technical reasoning, and it helps to substantiate discussion and mediate.

Data can tell a disturbing side of life that many of us may not be willing to deal with. It's only recently that data has been collected on fire fighter suicide. There are some agencies and a few organizations that are attempting to collect information on fire fighter suicide. But it's only begun to scratch the surface on this dilemma for a couple of reasons. Perhaps the reason is the nature of the topic—it is difficult topic and one that may still be considered a social "taboo".

So, why am I writing an article for a college campus fire newsletter? Two reasons: 1) to see if there are students willing to assist in data collection and research studies and 2) to raise awareness to you as college students that your stresses may cause coping issues with mental wellness and emotional and behavioral care.

The first reason is relatively easy to address. Contact the NFPA Research Foundation at www.research@nfpa.org and drop a note stating your interest in getting involved in research related to suicide prevention for the fire service. Research, data and analysis are areas that NFPA is constantly improving on.

To a greater aspect, the fire service is beginning to understand that suicide rate among first responders (law enforcement, emergency medical services and the fire service) is concerning. We are not sure if we are dealing with an epidemic or is it just a matter of finally recognizing that in our culture, the pressures we impose on ourselves can lead mental, emotional and behavioral issues that could evoke suicidal thoughts and tendencies.



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Which leads me to another area—college student suicide. If I could speculate college students have a great deal of pressure to be successful and achieve much the same as fire fighters. So, perhaps not correlative, maybe analogous tendencies.

Enviably, our paths cross. Whether it's our response to campus fire alarm activations, fire protection sprinkler activations, sports injuries, general first aid or serious injury, automobile accidents, or drug- or alcohol-related situations requiring medical attention, we'll meet. Unfortunately you may be aware of a circumstance that the first responder community answered the call for a student who died as a result of suicide. Sad for all, but true.

College students and fire fighters are human. We are subject to pressures and frailties—yes fire fighters put on a “macho” mentality, but we have our fragile moments too. So, how can we handle the situations surrounding suicide? I'm not just talking about responding to an incident where someone has committed suicide. I'm looking at it from a self-wellness care as well as for those who are around us and it starts with education.

We need to educate ourselves to identify the signs and symptoms of emotional and behavioral health distress including but not limited to depression, addiction, anxiety/trauma, and difficult transitions. We have to respond to those concerns through problem-solving, peer support, professional mental health services or crisis care. We need to realize how mental health practices fit into overall health and will value preventative mental health self-care that can help ensure peak performance including, but are not limited to sleep hygiene, stress management, resilience, emotional intelligence, and conflict resolution. I didn't say it is going to be easy. This is not an easy topic, but this is the starting point.

There needs to be policies and procedures to initiate awareness level education programs on emotional and behavioral health distress, so that the issue is recognized, confidentiality is maintained, communication is open, non-judgmental awareness is retained. Fire departments, university or college supported programs, or community-based programs need to be accessible, assistance-based, and specifically appropriate.



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Student assistance programs, employee assistance programs, community mental health programs, campus and fire service chaplains, and National Suicide Prevention Lifeline should be designated to help an individual when emotional or behavioral health distress is noticed and the knowledge of how to access these programs and professionals who can listen and know when to offer help.

Mental wellness and proactive emotional and behavioral care when under distress is fundamental to a student's well-being in much the same way to that of a fire fighter. Neither of us has to do it alone.



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