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Reset



Firefighter and Family Members'
Reintegration Guide

Reset: Firefighter and Family Members' Reintegration Guide

A companion document to "A Preparedness Guide for Firefighters and Their Families"

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Crew members taking a much-needed break. USDA Forest Service photo by Kari Greer.

RESET: FIREFIGHTER AND FAMILY MEMBERS' REINTEGRATION GUIDE

“Fire season.” For thousands of responders, it means days, weeks, or months on the road. Our common goal of protecting communities and resources requests an all-in dedication and a job that is unique to wildland fire. The sacrifices you make, which affect you, your family, and your friendships, are appreciated. The transition away from an all-encompassing job is not easy.

Whether it is a day, a week, or a month away, it can be difficult to return to your lifestyle after an assignment.

This guide provides information about the reintegration process. It includes information you can use as you embark on the road to reintegration, including support tools to help you reunite successfully with your family, friends, and local communities.

This guide does not set any standards or mandates; rather, it is intended to provide helpful and relatable information.

The process of reunion and reintegration is an initial whirlwind of change followed by a longer period of adjustments. You may be transitioning from a high-functioning, close-knit environment to a less-structured environment. You may need to approach decisions from a different perspective and accept there will be an adjustment period.

PART ONE: RESET AFTER AN ASSIGNMENT

Transitioning from Work Life to "Real" Life

YOU HAVE BEEN A PART OF A SUCCESSFUL, high-functioning team. You live, work, and play together. There often aren't words to explain this connection and experience. The transition from "team" to "home" often starts well before the end of your assignment. To facilitate a smooth transition, consider completing work tasks before the chaos of the last day of an assignment.

A few days before the end of your assignment, it is recommended that you:

- Get a start on administrative duties. Working proactively on time and travel, task book closeouts, and evaluations can minimize the rush to get out of the door at the end of the assignment. Plan ahead so the majority of the work is complete before you get to the home unit.
- Take time to reflect on lessons learned and valuable experiences. Write down ideas you can apply to the next assignment.
- Collect contact information from your peers to aid in networking after the assignment.
- Consider designating a "buddy" you can check in with when you get home.

After Action Review

At the end of the assignment, conduct an after action review (AAR) with your crew to review and reflect on the experience. Your AAR may differ based on the makeup of your crew and your time together.

Be sure to give your crew time to talk about the pros and cons of the experience. Talk about what happens next. A thorough closeout and opportunity to reflect can assist employees to process their experiences and prepare to reunite with family and friends.

If you have a large group, consider first holding an AAR in smaller groups to encourage everyone to talk. Then bring ideas back to the larger group for discussion.

Encourage your crew to connect with each other after the assignment through a formal or informal "buddy check." If it is the end of a season, consider a coordinated closeout in addition to an AAR.



Smokejumpers ready to deploy. USDA Forest Service photo by Amy Duning.



Outreach Through Personal Connection

The Buddy Check

When you work with your teammates every day, experiencing both fun and tough situations, you get to know their norms. You can tell when something is “off.” You may feel like you know and understand each other better, or at least differently, than your own family members.

But when the module disbands and you don’t see each other as frequently, or maybe not at all, those routine checks are a lot more difficult. That’s when you must become proactive and intentional about buddy checks.

You may have already used buddy checks in different ways. Extend the use of buddy checks by having a battle buddy—a person or people to check in on. Find a trusted battle buddy.

Learn [how the Army uses battle buddies](https://www.wearethemighty.com/mighty-trending/merits-of-battle-buddy-system/) (<https://www.wearethemighty.com/mighty-trending/merits-of-battle-buddy-system/>).

Commit to checking on your battle buddy at least once a month. Choose a date that is meaningful to you that will remind you to connect with your battle buddy.

Buddy checks don’t have to be technical or complicated. A funny meme, simple message, or thoughtful note can make the connection. If you’ve learned Stress First Aid, you can use that protocol. But just a call to see how it’s going, what your battle buddy is up to, or if your buddy is facing any challenges, can meet the need.

Then apply the last step in the buddy check protocol: Exchange thumbs-up, “I agree, I am okay.”



Wildland firefighters on the job in Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest (top) and Monongahela National Forest (bottom). USDA Forest Service photos by Cecilio Ricardo and Tanya Flores.



“You would think after 18 fire seasons, the transition after fire season would be easy. However, the fall fight is real. It takes some time to get into the groove of respecting each other’s way of doing things all summer. But I’ve learned to anticipate and understand that it is okay. We give each other a little extra space and eventually we all meld back together.”

—Former smokejumper and spouse of a smokejumper

Relationships and Stress Management

Firefighters

Reuniting with family and friends can be challenging. You might be excited to see your friends and family while also feeling let down from leaving your team behind. Before reengaging in relationships after an assignment, consider these practices:

- Reintegrate slowly. Try to fit into the family routine that has been working in your absence.
- Expect changes in your spouse/partner, children, and loved ones.
- Avoid making important, permanent decisions upon your immediate return.
- Spend maximum time with family to allow for time to establish normal routines.
- Know children adjust in different ways. Go slowly, and let children set the pace in accepting the parent home.

Family Members

Transition can be as difficult for you as it is for your firefighter. You haven’t been through the same experiences as your loved one, and they haven’t been through your experience. It can be difficult to understand where each of you is coming from. It is common to feel:

- Joy or excitement to see your loved one.
- Left out or let down because you can’t relate to your loved one’s experiences.
- Empowered, exhausted, or both if you are taking care of home life on your own for a period of time.
- Bitterness or loss because you have been at home while your loved one travels and has work experiences outside the home.

Phases of Transition

It can be helpful to recognize that both the firefighter and the family are going through a period of change. You can expect to go through several changes while transitioning.

Reunion is the immediate meeting, including a few days after arrival home. This is a time of relearning. Things to expect in this phase are:

- Feeling excited
- Needing time and space
- Sharing pride in accomplishments
- Feeling tired and ready to relax

Disruption is the phase when problems can crop up. Things to expect in this phase are:

- Having control issues
- Having differences in decision making
- Experiencing conflicting routines
- Sharing hard-times stories
- Resurfacing of unresolved problems
- Experiencing a lack of trust

Communication is the phase of renegotiating new routines, redefining roles, and accepting changes to decision-making habits. Things to expect in this phase are:

- Acceptance
- Renegotiating
- Increased trust
- Reconnecting

Normal is the phase when the routines normalize with family and friends. Things to expect in this phase are:

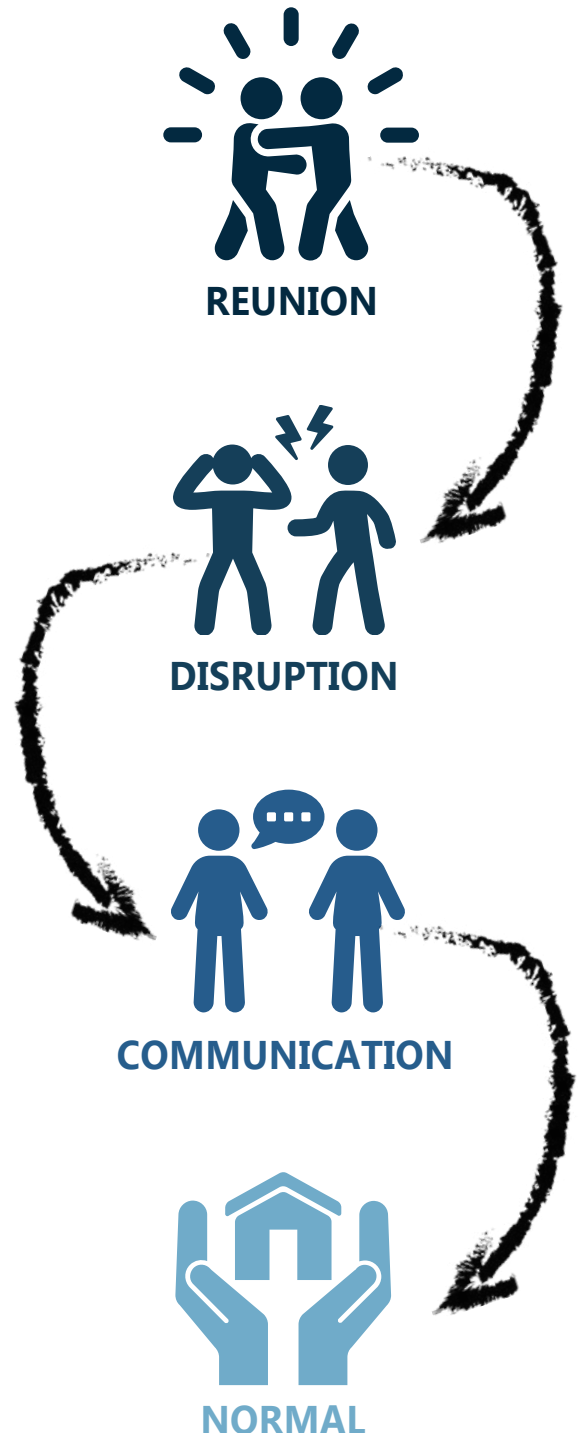
- Establishing routines and roles
- Accepting change
- Personal growth



Wildland firefighters looking forward to transitioning back home. USDA Forest Service photo by Kari Greer.

“Life hasn’t frozen in time while you were gone. There are fires being put out at home, too.”

—USDA Forest Service dispatcher and spouse of a firefighter



Stress Symptoms

NO MATTER HOW SUCCESSFUL A transition from assignment to home, it is common to experience mental and physical symptoms of stress. When these symptoms begin to interfere with personal happiness or well-being, or if they cause problems in personal relationships at home, work, or school, consider getting help and additional support. Common stress symptoms include:

- Inability to concentrate
- Irritability
- Feelings of apathy
- Being afraid or anxious without knowing why
- Feeling or being isolated
- Disruptions in normal sleep
- Increased alcohol or drug use

Alcohol

The use of alcohol and drugs is a common means of self-medicating due to overwhelming stress and chronic exposure to traumatic events. According to the U.S. Fire Administration, substance abuse among firefighters is twice that of the general public due to cumulative and traumatic stress related to the job. Before relying on alcohol for stress relief, consider the immediate and long-term effects of overindulging to your physical and mental well-being.

- Heat illness: Alcohol contributes to dehydration and makes it more difficult for the body to regulate its temperature.
- Tiredness: [Alcohol reduces the quantity and effectiveness of restorative sleep.](#)

Rather than turning to alcohol, focus on the four core components of resilience: adequate sleep, good nutrition, regular physical activity, and focused relaxation.

If you are concerned about your own excessive use of alcohol or that of a coworker, several professional and peer support resources are available (see "Keeping It Real—New Perspective Support Toolbox" on page 11).

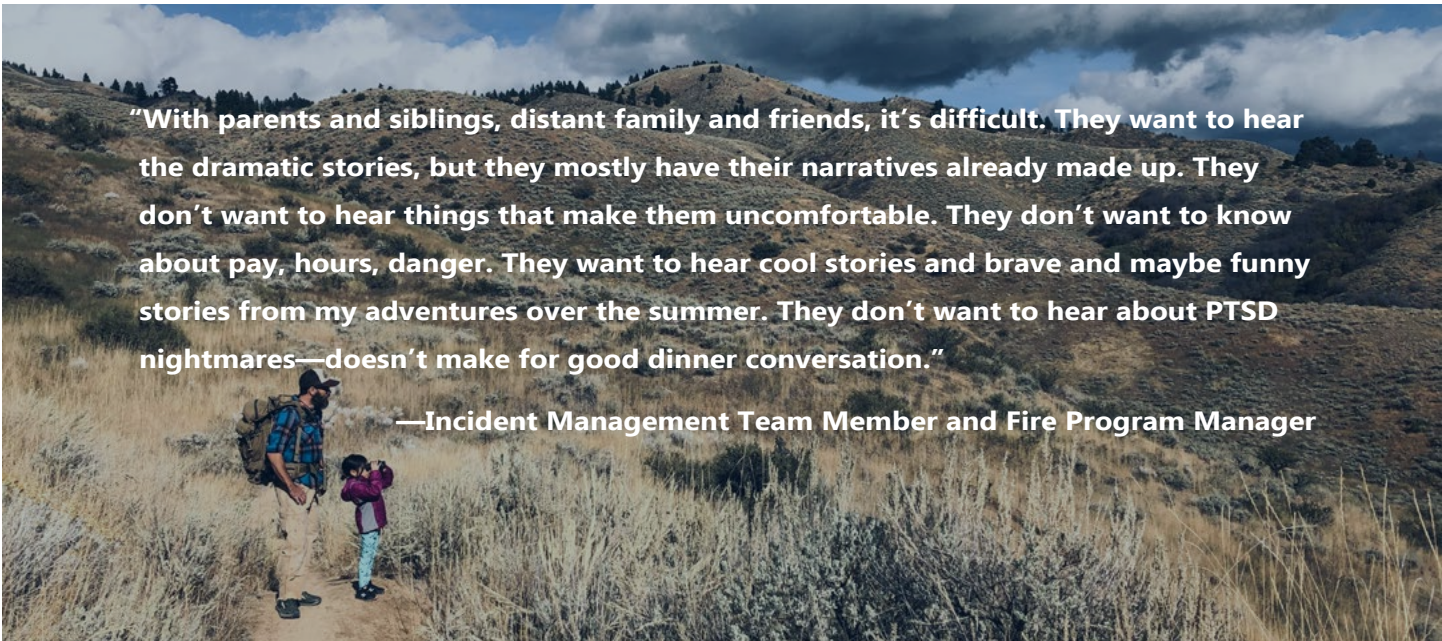
Stress Management Tips

- Take time to adjust.
- Accept that things may be different.
- Curb your desire to take control of decision making at home.
- Talk about your experiences and allow families and friends to talk about theirs.
- Pay attention to diet, sleep, exercise, and general health.
- Use mind-quieting exercises and practice good sleep hygiene.
- Spend quality time with friends and family.
- Do your buddy checks and stay connected.

"I often do a pulse check while I am on assignment...what is my current physical and mental state? This assignment, when I did my check in, I noticed that I felt really numb. The empathy that I usually draw on to navigate situations with my fellow IMT coworkers or the firefighters on the ground just wasn't there. I was tired...and I felt progressively more drained with each assignment. The question is, how can I make sure I tune back in and reengage when I get home?"

—Incident Management Team Member

Firefighters monitor smoke columns near Mendocino National Forest. USDA Forest Service photo by Cecilio Ricardo.



“With parents and siblings, distant family and friends, it’s difficult. They want to hear the dramatic stories, but they mostly have their narratives already made up. They don’t want to hear things that make them uncomfortable. They don’t want to know about pay, hours, danger. They want to hear cool stories and brave and maybe funny stories from my adventures over the summer. They don’t want to hear about PTSD nightmares—doesn’t make for good dinner conversation.”

—Incident Management Team Member and Fire Program Manager

Finding quality time with the family. USDA Forest Service photo by Tess McCarville.

Stigma

According to Erving Goffman, “Stigma originates when an individual, because of some attributes, is disqualified from full social acceptance.”¹

Stigma is a pervasive force that can have powerful consequences. It shames us into silence; it is a barrier to seeking help and support. Compassion, empathy, and understanding are the antidotes.

Wildland fire is full of examples of employees who struggle to fully recover after being involved in a critical incident. Previous generations of firefighters were often told to “suck it up” in order to survive in the culture. That is how most learned to cope with stress. It is a part of the wildland firefighting culture not to talk about issues or express vulnerability, and there is a stigma within the community about asking for assistance. All firefighters are responsible for breaking this trend in the culture and speaking up when help is needed.

Stigma Associated With Seeking Help

“Self-stigma” is internalization of negative public attitudes about behavioral health that can result in decreased esteem, shame, and isolation (e.g., thoughts of being dangerous or crazy, loss of esteem with seeking counseling).

“Public stigma” is the negative stereotype held by the public about individuals with behavioral health conditions.

“Career stigma” is the fear that a behavioral health condition or seeking counseling will impact your career.

Reducing Stigma

- Reject stigma stereotypes through awareness of your attitude and behaviors.
- Know the facts—knowledge defeats discrimination.
- Watch your words.
- Challenge misconceptions.
- Be supportive and inclusive.

Don’t be a part of the culture that supports denial.

¹ (1963. “Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity.” New York: Simon & Schuster.)

Personal and Family Readiness

"A PREPAREDNESS GUIDE FOR Firefighters and Their Families" (a companion to this document) presents critical information describing the realities of this profession. This guide can be used to facilitate discussion about being a wildland firefighter.

The guide's intent is not to scare you, but to ensure that you understand the risks of wildland firefighting and the choices you are making. Utilizing the guide prior to deployment is recommended to help you and your family prepare for the possibility of, or exposure to, serious injury or death.

Preparing yourself and your family for the exciting—and at times dangerous—work of wildland firefighting can be both challenging and rewarding. These discussions can be difficult given the context of what must be shared and decisions that will

need to be made. But it can help you and your family build greater bonds through communication and understanding.

Returning home from a difficult assignment, or the "off-season," is a critical time for the health of our firefighters. Without the camaraderie of colleagues and financial stability from the job, firefighters can struggle.

As firefighters, we ensure preparedness by planning and training for what lies ahead. Upon returning home after a long season or assignment, we are expected to return to "normal" routines without closure of our experiences. Delayed emotional reactions can occur, posing additional challenges.

Closure is as important as preparedness by helping us process experiences and reset for transition back into our personal lives.

"We tend to look at our life having two separate parts: our work life and home life. The reality is, we have one life. Separating the two only leads us to turmoil, stripping away the ability for the most capable people in our lives being able to assist us when things get hard. Include the people you care about in your life so you can grow together, not apart."

—Interagency Hotshot Crew Superintendent



Family members are an integral part of the wildland firefighting community. USDA Forest Service photos by Amy Duning, Amber Adams, and Bryce Claerhout (from top to bottom).

PART TWO: RESET AT THE END OF THE SEASON

Closure

HAVE YOU EVER RETURNED HOME AFTER AN intense experience and felt apathetic, disconnected, or anxious, or questioned your purpose? These feelings are appropriate given the nature of the experiences firefighters face. Sharing success stories and acknowledging difficulties can be the support that helps someone process experiences and transition more smoothly.

The Benefits of an End of Season Closeout

Through a coordinated “no rank” closeout, firefighters may integrate more effectively into their personal lives with family and friends. When facilitating a discussion or a season/ assignment closeout, consider the following steps:

Step 1: Choose a skilled facilitator outside of your core group, crew, or team, but make sure this person has a connection in some way.

Step 2: Create a “family environment” for this discussion. Hold your closeout in a comfortable space where people can sit casually. Consider making food or drink available or having the group bring something to share.

Step 3: Start the closeout by acknowledging the collective experience of the group. Each person will experience hardships, successes, stressors, and difficult experiences. Let people talk about these experiences without judgment. Acknowledge that individuals may have very different responses to the same experience. Remember these things as you facilitate the discussion:

- Tone is important.
- Let the group direct discussion.
- Each person’s experience is valid.
- Individuals should not place blame on others.

Step 4: As the closeout progresses, the facilitator can steer the discussion to include applicable topics such as:

- Realities of reintegrating with family, friends, and daily routines.
- Systems and tools for support and help.
- Buddy checks after the season ends.
- Other topics of importance to the group.

Step 5: Draw the discussion to a close. Allow plenty of time, but don’t let the closeout drag on past its natural conclusion.



Eldorado Interagency Hotshot Crew Family Day 2018. USDA Forest Service photo by Armanado Perez.

Support Single Resource Personnel

Single resource personnel, such as dispatchers, fire prevention techs, and fire management officers, face the same challenges, but without the built-in support structure of a module. The freedom of being in one of these support positions also comes with some pitfalls. When working solo, it isn't unusual to feel some guilt coming home from an assignment when others are still there, isolation after a traumatic event, or lack of belonging.

All the resources and recommendations in this guide also apply to single resource personnel, but you may need to be more deliberate in building a support network for you and your family.

- Find a battle buddy for during and after the season.
- Build a network of several trusted colleagues. Have at least one “2 a.m. friend”—that person you can call anytime you need to.
- Make sure your family has the name and contact information for a trusted point of contact from your home unit.
- When the need and opportunity arise, participate in social events, AARs, and critical incident stress management (CISM) sessions.
- Be aware and proactive in looking out for your well-being since the external prompts might not be as prevalent for single resource personnel.

The End-of-Season Gathering

A very important step with transitioning from fire season to the “off-season” can be an end of the year gathering that includes friends and family.

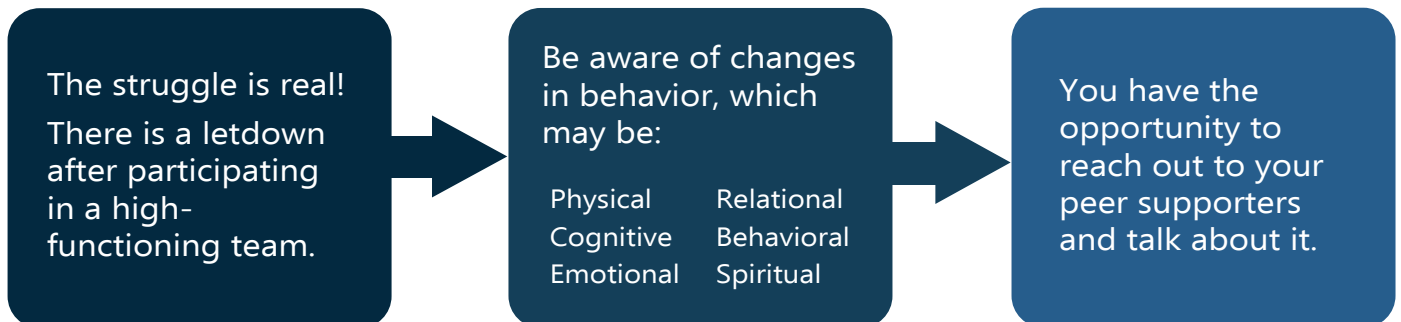
This gathering is much more than an opportunity to have fun and blow off steam after a long assignment or summer. It is just as important as critical training is at the beginning of the season. End of the season gatherings bring closure to the summer and recognizes all that you, your crew, and your family and friends have experienced and accomplished.

Remember two important considerations for this gathering:

1. Including family and friends is critical to provide closure for them as well as you, your crew members, and colleagues. Friends and family should be invited and encouraged to attend, as this is often the only opportunity for everyone to meet each other.
2. Set aside time near the beginning of the event for awards, speeches, individual recognition, and sharing of photos and videos. Deliberately recognize family, friends, and colleagues at home who run the households and manage real life. Acknowledge those who deserve to be recognized and appreciated by all.

No one can do this job without the support of family and friends. Recognition of shared sacrifices is an integral part of the Reset process.

Awareness is the first step towards closure



Keeping It Real—New Perspective Support Toolbox

Ted Talks

Neil Pasricha, “[3 A’s of Awesome](https://www.ted.com/talks/neil_pasricha_the_3_a_s_of_awesome)”
(https://www.ted.com/talks/neil_pasricha_the_3_a_s_of_awesome)

Michele Sullivan, “[Asking for Help is a Strength](https://www.ted.com/talks/michele_l_sullivan_asking_for_help_is_a_strength)”
(https://www.ted.com/talks/michele_l_sullivan_asking_for_help_is_a_strength_not_a_weakness)

Brené Brown, “[Power of Vulnerability](https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_the_power_of_vulnerability)”
(https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_the_power_of_vulnerability)

Ethan Hawke, “[Give Yourself Permission to be Creative](https://www.ted.com/talks/ethan_hawke_give_yourself_permission_to_be_creative)”
(https://www.ted.com/talks/ethan_hawke_give_yourself_permission_to_be_creative)



At times, we all need support. USDA Forest Service photo by Juan Quiroga.

Podcasts

The One You Feed—Practical wisdom for a better life.

Where There’s Smoke—Exploring self-development through the lens of current events, pop culture, and experience.

The School of Greatness—Dream bigger, live better, make an impact.

Invisibilia—A fusion of storytelling and science that will make you see your own life differently.

Work Environment and Performance Office

The Work Environment and Performance Office (WEPO) hosts an [internal website](http://fsweb.wo.fs.fed.us/wepo/) (<http://fsweb.wo.fs.fed.us/wepo/>) that offers a variety of tools and resources for resilience and personal effectiveness, including monthly guided meditation and webinars.

Employee Support Resources

Personal and family problems can diminish your health, happiness, and your ability to be at your best for yourself and your family. With the help of services such as the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), Casualty Assistance Program (CAP), and Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM), you can receive support in resolving these problems.

Find more information about these support resources at the [Roadmap for Accessing Mental Health Support in the Forest Service](https://www.fs.usda.gov/inside-fs/employeeassistance) (or go to <https://www.fs.usda.gov/inside-fs/employeeassistance> for a link to this page).

You can call EAP 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. EAP is:

- A professional service available to you and your family to provide confidential counseling, consultations support, and various tools and resources.
- Designed to help you with any concern or issue.
- Available for you, as a manager and an employee, whether you have a personal issue or a management-related concern.
- Completely confidential in accordance with State and Federal laws for easy access to a wide range of resources, educational materials, self-assessment tools, and specific information on available EAP services.
- Available to temporary employees; also available to former employees up to 6 months after separation.
- Available to family members of current employees.

Counseling services:

EAP counseling is a short-term model with a licensed clinician. It provides up to six sessions for clinical intervention and goal setting. Counselors can also provide referrals to community resources based on client needs, health insurance coverage, and financial resources.

Financial and legal services:

EAP includes free consultation with financial experts and licensed attorneys to provide assistance with your legal and financial questions. Services include help with living will and healthcare power of attorney, housing or real estate matters, retirement and estate planning, education funding, and investment strategies.

Other Resources

Numerous external organizations also offer resources for information and peer support for first responders and for wildland firefighters specifically. Examples of available services include professional counseling, peer support, and referral to substance abuse programs.

Examples of external resources include:

- [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org) (<https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org>): 1-800-273-TALK (8255).
- [Crisis Text Line](https://www.crisistextline.org/) (<https://www.crisistextline.org/>). Text HOME to 741741 for free, human support via text message. A discreet outlet for support without the danger of being overheard. Facebook messenger works for this resource.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ([CDC](https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/suicide/index.html)) [Suicide Prevention](https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/suicide/index.html) (<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/suicide/index.html>).
- [National Institute for Mental Health](https://www.nimh.nih.gov) (<https://www.nimh.nih.gov>).
- [Self-Compassion](https://selfcompassion.org/) (<https://selfcompassion.org/>). Many resources, including free guided exercises.
- [AARP grief programs](http://www.aarp.org/family/lifeafterloss/) (<http://www.aarp.org/family/lifeafterloss/>). State by State, support groups for widows and widowers.
- [Practice Guide for “Living with Worry and Anxiety Amidst Global Uncertainty”](https://www.psychologytools.com/assets/covid19/guide_to_living_with_worry_and_anxiety_amidst_global_uncertainty_en-us.pdf) (https://www.psychologytools.com/assets/covid19/guide_to_living_with_worry_and_anxiety_amidst_global_uncertainty_en-us.pdf).
- [Helping Children Learn to Cope](https://www.cdc.gov/childrenindisasters/helping-childrencope.html) (<https://www.cdc.gov/childrenindisasters/helping-childrencope.html>).
- [United Way 211 Service](http://211.org) (<http://211.org>). Connects employees to needed resources in their community.
- [American Addiction Centers](https://americanaddictioncenters.org/firefighters-first-responders) (<https://americanaddictioncenters.org/firefighters-first-responders>), substance abuse support for firefighters and first responders.
- [Specialized First Responder Treatment Services](https://www.acadiahealthcare.com/programming-treatment/first-responders/) (<https://www.acadiahealthcare.com/programming-treatment/first-responders/>).
- Support for veterans and their families through Veterans Affairs, including the [REACH program](http://www.reach.gov) (www.reach.gov) and the [Coaching Into Care program](https://www.mirecc.va.gov/coaching/) (<https://www.mirecc.va.gov/coaching/>).



Desiderata

by Max Ehrmann, 1927

Go placidly amid the noise and haste,
and remember what peace there may be in silence.
As far as possible without surrender
be on good terms with all persons.
Speak your truth quietly and clearly;
and listen to others,
even the dull and the ignorant;
they too have their story.

Avoid loud and aggressive persons,
they are vexations to the spirit.
If you compare yourself with others,
you may become vain and bitter;
for always there will be greater and lesser persons than
yourself.
Enjoy your achievements as well as your plans.

Keep interested in your own career, however humble;
it is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time.
Exercise caution in your business affairs;
for the world is full of trickery.
But let this not blind you to what virtue there is;
many persons strive for high ideals;
and everywhere life is full of heroism.

Be yourself.
Especially, do not feign affection.
Neither be cynical about love;
for in the face of all aridity and disenchantment
it is as perennial as the grass.

Take kindly the counsel of the years,
gracefully surrendering the things of youth.
Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden
misfortune.
But do not distress yourself with dark imaginings.
Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness.
Beyond a wholesome discipline,
be gentle with yourself.

You are a child of the universe,
no less than the trees and the stars;
you have a right to be here.
And whether or not it is clear to you,
no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.

Therefore be at peace with God,
whatever you conceive Him to be,
and whatever your labors and aspirations,
in the noisy confusion of life keep peace with your soul.

With all its sham, drudgery, and broken dreams,
it is still a beautiful world.
Be cheerful.
Strive to be happy.

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To file a program discrimination complaint, complete the USDA Program Discrimination Complaint Form, AD-3027, found online at [How to File a Program Discrimination Complaint](#) and at any USDA office or write a letter addressed to USDA and provide in the letter all of the information requested in the form. To request a copy of the complaint form, call (866) 632-9992. Submit your completed form or letter to USDA by: (1) mail: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, D.C. 20250-9410; (2) fax: (202) 690-7442; or (3) email: program.intake@usda.gov.

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