

PSYCHOLOGY AND SERVICE

Exposed to Stress

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While choosing a profession, most people take into account the level of stress involved. Some people try to avoid a stressful job, while others do the opposite and search for a profession involving challenges and risk, requiring commitment and, often, responsibility for the health and life of other people.

One of the most stressful professions, the profession of a firefighter attracts mainly people from the latter group. They can make use of the stress to increase their motivation and mobilization, while the challenges they face can be a source of satisfaction and the feeling of competence. Nevertheless, this positive aspect of stress can be experienced only if some conditions are met: when stress is not a permanent condition, but appears incidentally, when its intensity is moderate, when the difficulty level of a task does not exceed significantly the

physical and mental powers of the person completing the task. If those conditions are not met, it is highly probable that the impact of stress loses its adaptable nature and starts to influence negatively the functioning of an individual.

When does it appear?

The specific nature of the profession of a firefighter means that those conditions often simply cannot be met. The stress-inducing situations happen not occasionally, but on a daily basis in this profession. According to the research conducted by Koniarek [1] in the Institute of Occupational Medicine in Łódź, out of 469 examined firefighters from fire and rescue units, as many as 82 percent, while performing professional duties, have had at least one traumatic experience, i.e. experience inducing excessive stress which can lead to psychic trauma. In most cases these were fires (53 percent of those asked mentioned such a situation), road accidents (23 percent) and situations involving accidents happening during exercises or while rescuing victims of gas explosions (24 percent in total). Over two thirds of those asked have had more than one such experience.

Moreover, the level of stress appearing in a moment of taking responsibility for human life, risking one's health and seeing human death and suffering can hardly be called a moderate level. Together with the increasing frequency of crisis situations, an individual develops a certain adaptation and the resistance to stress rises, but, at the same time, regularly experienced stress starts to accumulate, often in a barely visible way. The fact that firefighters are accustomed to stressful situations can distract their attention, as the results of the stress accumulation remain imperceptible for some time. Time can help persons experiencing high stress incidentally, but firefighters hardly ever can count on the healing influence of time, as before they manage to get over one difficult situation, they have to face another one.

For firefighters stress at work does not necessarily involve their participation in rescue actions. It can concern also the institutional aspect of their work, its organization and conditions of work, e.g. relations with their superiors and colleagues, work overload, lack of rewards, the feeling of being underestimated or lack of proper equipment.

It is necessary to bear in mind that stress can appear also as a result of a conflict of own beliefs or values and the professional duties, e.g. when it is necessary to administer aid to someone who led to an accident hurting not only himself, but also other innocent people. In this case, a rescuer

has to deal with the feeling of unfairness (often it is not the person causing the accident, but other people to bear the highest costs), or, sometimes, with anger towards the perpetrator because of his irresponsibility, carelessness or, simply, stupidity which turned out to have so tragic consequences. Sometimes a rescuer is unaware of the negative emotions he experiences, or he denies them to himself as he believes such emotions are inappropriate. Such situations can be dangerous, as those emotions, even if the rescuer is unaware of them or denies them, still have an influence on his activity and, for instance, can determine the way the rescuer treats the accident perpetrator.

The kind and level of experienced stress depend on many factors. Senior staff experiences stress typical for this group, resulting, among other things, from bearing responsibility for their subordinates. Performing specific functions or duties does not necessarily mean that they would automatically become a source of stress. This is determined by individual features of a given person, such as personality or professional experience. In the same situation, one employee will experience stress, while another one will not feel it. This may seem obvious but, in practice, it is often forgotten, as we are inclined to treat other people like we treat ourselves and to assume that they think and feel in a similar way. Without thinking about this, we assume that stress has the same influence on other people as it has on us. Hence, it is very easy to believe that if something does not induce stress in us, it should not be stressful for other people. Such a way of thinking can be a source of disagreements, like lack of understanding for employees working for a shorter time presented by their superiors and more experienced colleagues who have already become resistant to the situations which can induce very high stress in the case of the former (e.g. the view of heavily injured people).

Life With Stress

What happens when stress ceases to play a mobilizing role and its negative influence starts to prevail? The answer on this question depends on many factors; the most important include the duration of stress experience, its level, support received or lack of support and individual features of an employee (e.g. resistance to stress, features of character).

If the level of stress is so high that it loses its adaptable nature, even a short-term experience of stress can adversely influence the functioning of an individual, decreasing their mental efficiency, distracting them, causing problems with concentration of mind and leading to more

frequent mistakes. Stress experienced continuously for a longer time, so called chronic stress, causes constant mobilization and energetic arousal of organism, which, if not used in direct activities, lead to negative health effects. The consequences of chronic stress include first of all the following health problems: cardiovascular diseases (infarction, stroke, hypertension, ischemic heart disease), digestive diseases (stomach ulcer, duodenal ulcer, constipations), neurological disorders (depression, anxiety neurosis, sleep disorder) and diseases resulting from impairment of the immune system (infectious diseases, cancer, allergies). The experience of chronic stress involves also other negative changes of psychological nature, such as: anxiety, tension, depression, anger, the feeling of worthlessness and confusion, apathy, the feeling of alienation. Persons suffering from stress change their behaviour: may become passive and start to isolate themselves from other people, or, for a change, may start to be aggressive and aim at winning domination over other people.

Usually such persons start also to function differently at work, which is the source of stress: the quality and quantity of work performed by such an employee may decrease. Such a person may also start to avoid working by different means, e.g. being absent more frequently and taking sick leaves. Moreover, stress decreases the motivation to work and influences the way of perceiving the employing organization – under the influence of stress the opinions get more critical. Therefore, although sometimes it is perceived in such a way, it is not true that stress of an employee concerning their work is exclusively their problem, but it is also the problem of the company taking the consequences of poor mental condition of its employees. Treating work-induced stress as an issue which should be dealt with by each employee alone is a short-sighted approach, which is contrary to the interest of an employer. The conducted research [2] has shown that in the case of fire service, the most frequent consequences of work-related stress include: decreased readiness to undertake and perform tasks efficiently, coordination disorder, anxiety, decreased self-esteem, deteriorated interpersonal relationships and health problems. Moreover, officers of the fire service feel the symptoms of professional burnout.

As a result of performing professional duties, especially participating in rescue and extinguishing actions, about 8 percent [3] of firefighters develop Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). It appears in a situation when a person experienced a traumatic incident or was a witness of such an incident involving death, injury or the risk of death or injury of the person or of other people. Of course, the fact that someone experienced such a situation does not have to

lead to the development of PTSD and, in the case of most firefighters and rescuers, it does not do it, although for some time they can experience some symptoms typical for posttraumatic stress. PTSD would be diagnosed when the symptoms are present for at least one month, although they do not have to appear immediately after the incident – sometimes it takes some time to react on the incident. Persons with PTSD cannot relieve themselves from the traumatic incident – it is being experienced over and over again, it comes back in the form of obsessive thoughts, images or dreams. Such persons try to avoid everything which can remind them of the incident, they may feel discomfort seeing places or objects, hearing sounds or even smelling odours bringing back the memory of the incident. PTSD can manifest itself in many ways. Sometimes it is enough to participate just once in a traumatic incident to develop PTSD, but there is interdependence between the frequency of such situations and the probability of developing PTSD. The interdependence concerns also the officers of fire service, for whom the frequent contact with incidents poses the greatest threat, even if these are small-scale incidents (so called routine incidents). The frequency of traumatic incidents is even more important than their scale as it causes the accumulation of stress induced by those incidents (so called cumulative trauma disorder). This effect may be observed also if there is no or little time to work through the traumatic incident as it is soon followed by other incidents. As a result, during such a short break a firefighter is unable to get over the previous experiences and regain balance and the stress reactions get deeper with every subsequent incident. Sometimes it is enough to be aware of the fact that it is necessary to come back to work soon and that it is very probable to experience similar incident in the future to feel additional stress and to disturb the natural process of recovery. The only effective solution in this case is to obtain regular psychological support to reduce the consequences of frequent contact with traumatic situations.

The results of stress are present not only in the professional life of the fire service officers, but also in their private life. Sometimes the stress consequences manifest themselves in private life earlier and are more intense. In the United States the profession of a firefighter is one of the professions with the highest divorce rate [4]. If employer does not provide support helping to deal with stress and if the atmosphere at the workplace does not allow people working there to express stress-related emotions, the emotions are transferred on other spheres of life and it is possible to start to get over the job at home. In the case of firefighters the interdependence between professional and private life can take more subtle forms. One of them is continuous

concern about the safety of the family members, which results from frequent contact of firefighters with injuries and death. Sometimes, a firefighter cannot help thinking that one of his relatives or he himself could have been the victim, and such images intensify, especially if the victim resembles someone close to the firefighter. As a result of such experiences, the firefighters get the belief that human life is very fragile and they lose the sense of indestructibility, which is typical of most people. Their concern about the life and health of their family may seem to be incomprehensible and excessive for persons without similar experiences. The fear for safety of their relatives may take the form of controlling them, which results from the need of constant learning where given persons are and what is happening to them. If the information is unavailable, worst fears can come and transform themselves later into a grudge against the person who, usually unintentionally and involuntarily, has caused the fear. In other words, because of the specific nature of their work, persons working for rescue services have other image of the surrounding world than the rest of the society who has never been confronted with traumatic situations, which can cause misunderstandings and disagreements. It is worthwhile to mention that it is not only the professional life to influence the private life, but this is a two-way process: problems of the private life can deteriorate the quality of the work performed by firefighters, while happy private life, and, especially, received emotional support, is one of the most important factors helping people to deal with stress and to reduce its negative consequences.

Indirect consequences of stress include problems resulting from the fact that people deal with stress improperly or inconveniently. The most important indirect consequences include: alcohol abuse, excessive smoking or risky behaviours (e.g. drink-driving).

Help for Oneself, Help for Other People

Since the inability to deal with stress can have so numerous and serious consequences, it is very important that firefighters and persons working for rescue services should learn the basic strategies in this field. The importance of the psychological competences cannot be overrated, as they do not only minimize the risk of negative consequences of stress for the rescuers themselves, but they also mean many additional advantages for both a rescuer and the person rescued.

Let us start with the latter issue. Apart from the ability to cope with one's own stress, it is very important for the persons working for rescue services to be able to deal with emotions of persons who suffered from a (physical or mental) trauma and to provide them with support. It is not about a firefighter taking over the role of a psychologist. In such a situation, the psychological support aims not only at reducing the suffering of casualties, but, first of all, it has a purely practical aspect: it makes it easier for rescuers to conduct a rescue action. The help in controlling strong negative emotions makes it easier for the victim to function in this situation (e.g. by regaining the sense of control over oneself and one's surroundings) and to cooperate more effectively with the rescue service administering the help. Without such a support, the victims, under the influence of very strong emotions, may unintentionally start to hinder the work of rescuers with their behaviour. Sometimes, the persons working for rescue services have to deal not only with behaviours and emotions of individuals, but also with reaction of a crowd observing the crisis situation. In this case the ability to approach the crowd and control it may significantly influence the course of rescue action.

Dealing effectively with the emotions of other people and influencing their behaviour do not only facilitate the work of a rescuer, but also have many psychological advantages: brings satisfaction and the feeling of own effectiveness. What is important, these are the factors related to the level of stress experienced by a rescuer: the more competent the rescuer feels to be and the greater sense of control over the situation he has, the lower the stress level is. Therefore, providing other people with psychological support, the rescuer helps indirectly himself as well. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to mention that providing someone with effective psychological support and having influence on the behaviour and emotions of other people in crisis situations is very difficult and require special skills. Gaining professional experience, some rescuers develop their own intuitive strategies of administering psychological help, but most rescuers are unable to acquire all the necessary psychological skills and interpersonal abilities without comprehensive trainings and workshops.

Certainly, officers of the fire service have to be able to deal not only with stress of other people, but also with their own stress. On one hand it is necessary to know the mechanisms of the psychological functioning of a human being in difficult situations; on the other hand it is also necessary to have experience. Knowledge allows us first of all to understand what is happening and why do we react in such a way and not differently. Without understanding own reactions,

one can feel strong anxiety and decreasing control over oneself. Moreover, from a perspective of time own behaviour during a crisis situation causes shame or the feeling of guilt, while this could have been a behaviour typical in such circumstances. The feeling of guilt can result from the feeling of helplessness experienced during action, especially if the action failed – a firefighter makes himself believe that if he had done something differently, the result of his work would have been different, although in fact this very act did not have any influence on the course of action (e.g. a victim still would have died, even if the rescuers had chosen other access road and had arrived there a bit earlier). Knowledge about the mechanisms of PTSD is also very important to understand and assess appropriately the behaviour of our colleagues and subordinates showing some symptoms of PTSD – it allows us to avoid unfair and unjustified criticism or accusations and tells us when it is necessary to suggest that such a person should seek professional help. Nevertheless, knowledge is not enough – it is necessary to have practical ability to deal with stress, which can be acquired as a result of trainings. Theoretical education is insufficient here.

Not Only Preventive Measures – British and American Solutions

Despite huge advantages of the preventive measures (appropriate education at fire service schools, workshops and trainings), they are unable to solve all the problems and protect a firefighter from the negative consequences of job-related stress. How to help, when the stress level is too high and the person cannot deal with it by himself? Looking for the answer on this question, it is worthwhile to take a look on British and American solutions, as those countries are ahead of Poland when it comes to the research on work-related stress and to introducing psychological help at the workplace.

Researchers dealing with these issues noticed that in the case of rescue services there is a high potential of providing psychological support within the organization and it is not limited only to professional psychologists. The potential is in the people working there and is all the more important as receiving help from professional psychologists can meet with difficulties. The first problem is the fact that access to the help may be difficult, especially when a psychologist is not employed in the same unit where the person needing support works. In the case of psychological support, sometimes the moment of receiving the support is very important and any delay may decrease its effectiveness. Another problem concerns mentality and the cultural stereotypes of psychologists and firefighters. The stereotypes get more harmful when psychologists are

incorrectly identified with psychiatrists and the firefighters identify themselves with the stereotype of a *macho*. Hesitation about seeking psychological support may result from the pressure of colleagues and superiors, who may imply that a person with psychological problems should cope with them on their own and who may react negatively, when such problems are revealed.

In such case it is a good solution to rely on psychological support provided by colleagues, who have been trained to do this. Persons working for rescue services can make use of the knowledge they have acquired to provide psychological support to victims. The knowledge, completed with different trainings, may be used to provide colleagues at work with basic forms of support. Research has shown that persons working for rescue services appreciate the help received from their colleagues and try to support each other. This mutual support is easier because of so called community of experience – a kind of special understanding resulting from common or similar experiences. Firefighters experiencing the symptoms of PTSD often fear that someone, who has not been in a traumatic situation would be unable to understand them fully. Therefore, sometimes they do not believe that the support received from professional psychologists can be effective, as those psychologists have never participated in rescue and extinguishing actions. When it comes to their colleagues, there is no such a concern. This form of support has also another advantage – it is easily available and can be received immediately wherever it is necessary. Its two most important aspects include simply being with colleagues who have experienced a traumatic situation and observing them with regard to the need of obtaining further psychological support.

In the United Kingdom and the United States so called psychology consultants constitute the middle level between officers of rescue services and professional psychologists. Psychology consultants are not professional psychologists, but employees chosen to provide their colleagues with psychological support. Such a person should be selected (by professional psychologists) with regard to very strict procedures, have appropriate predispositions (e.g. cannot have any symptoms of PTSD) and qualifications acquired during specialist trainings. Such persons are monitored and supervised by experts, and providing psychological support is one of their professional duties. Of course, this does not mean that psychology consultants should replace professional psychologists – they help only if they are able to deal with a given case on their own and they identify persons who require specialist support.

Support of the superiors is another important element of an efficient system of psychological support. To have an efficiently operating system, the superiors need to have proper knowledge about stress and its mechanisms and they have to apply this knowledge actively in their management style. What does this mean in practice? First of all, admitting that one's subordinates require psychological support and providing them with it. Employees need to feel that receiving psychological support is approved by their superiors; otherwise they would give it up afraid that this could change their relations with their superiors and harm their careers. They also need to feel that the difficult emotions they experience are allowed; otherwise they would suppress the emotions and hide their problems from their superiors for fear of their reaction. Other important elements of psychological support provided by one's superiors include first of all the ability to listen to the employees and pay attention to them, appreciating them and criticizing them tactfully.

Finally, it is worthwhile to mention that introducing a formal system of psychological support entails some threats. This should not lead to a situation when an office of a psychologist or a psychology consultant is the only place where employees can express their emotions concerning job and count on understanding. This should not be a reason for an employer to stop feeling responsible for the level of stress his employees are exposed to and for reducing the level of stress to the possible extent, as the fact that employees can be "sent to a psychologist" if necessary cannot be an excuse. It is all not about appearances of support, but about real support.

[1] Koniarek, J. "Występowanie zespołu zaburzeń po stresie urazowym – problem dla medycyny pracy" [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder – Problem for Occupational Medicine], *Medycyna Pracy* 3/2000, p. 269-276.

[2] Czarnecka, A. – Dobrodziej, C., "Zespół zaburzeń po stresie urazowym w służbach ratowniczych" [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Rescue Services], *Fire Review* 6/1998, p. 20-21.

[3] Based on the research conducted by the Institute of Occupational Medicine in Łódź: Dudek, B. – Koniarek, J., *Zespół zaburzeń po stresie urazowym (PTSD) wśród funkcjonariuszy PSP – uwarunkowania i skutki. Opracowanie systemu zapobiegania i ograniczania negatywnych konsekwencji tego zespołu* [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder among the officers of the State Fire Service – conditions and consequences. Developing a system of prevention and reducing negative consequences of PTSD], Institute of Occupational Medicine, Łódź 2000.

[4] http://firechief.com/leadership/management-dministration/firefighting_dont_divorce_yourself/

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