

Huge increase in UK firefighters with mental health problems

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*The pain of such tragedy
The waste of such life
The death of a husband, his children, and wife.
The stairs were too many
My breaths were too few
My body exhausted. Now mentally too*

It is difficult to sum up just how anyone could feel, after having entered Grenfell Tower on that fateful night, battling terrible conditions, desperately trying to save residents lives, against insurmountable odds. But Ricky Nuttall, one of the firefighters who was part of the Grenfell rescue effort, wrote a moving poem, “The Firefighter,” a part of which is quoted above. It says that the tragedy has “left a hole in my soul that will never repair.” The poem ends with the lines:

*My lips wet with tears. I am lost. There is no plan.
Emotionally ruined. One broken man.*

The poem was read out on BBC Radio 5 live during a discussion on the impact of trauma on the mental health of fire crews. Nuttall, a firefighter for 13 years stationed at Knightsbridge and Hillingdon, told the getwestlondon web site of the mental anguish Grenfell wrought:

“I have been to counselling and I still currently go to counselling. I have had eight sessions since Grenfell. Grenfell was the catalyst for a lot of other incidents and stuff coming to the fore. It’s a collective thing, not just Grenfell. It’s other countless incidents I have attended over the years.”

Many of the firefighters who tackled the Grenfell fire suffered mental health problems following that terrible event. This year alone 103 firefighters from the London Fire Brigade had to take mental health leave, five as a direct result of Grenfell.

These figures were uncovered by the BBC’s 5 “Live

Investigates” programme, using Freedom of Information requests.

The number of firefighters and other employees taking long-term leave because of mental health issues, including depression and anxiety, has risen from 600 to 780 in the last six years. Since 2011, 126 fire service workers have left the service due to mental health issues.

Separate research carried out by the Fire Fighters Charity found that there were 41,000 shifts lost nationally in the past year because of mental health issues.

The new findings substantiate research undertaken last year by the Mind mental health charity’s Blue Light Programme. It found that 27 percent of firefighters had contemplated suicide due to stress or poor mental health, with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) commonplace.

Mind’s research included an online survey of 3,627 emergency staff personnel, representing 1.5 percent of the “blue light” national workforce, including firefighters and ambulance workers. It found that those working in the emergency services were disproportionately affected by the work they do, with nine out of ten staff having experienced stress and poor mental health at work.

As a group of workers, they are twice as likely to identify problems at work as the cause of their poor mental health.

Emergency services workers are exposed to trauma by the nature of their work. However, large numbers of staff reported factors such as reduced budgets, with more challenging targets placing them under increasing pressure, and reducing the opportunities for more informal support—a significant factor that staff depended on in the past.

Of those interviewed, 56 percent were affected by excessive workload. Pressure from management was cited by 52 percent and long hours by 45 percent. Stress from exposure to traumatic incidents stood at 42 percent.

The aftermath of a fire or other incident can potentially leave staff experiencing symptoms associated with trauma. This can include, poor sleep, low mood, flashbacks, depression and anxiety. Without the right help, this can have a long lasting and detrimental effect and can in some cases lead to long lasting, and serious mental health problems.

Many emergency staff did their best to prevent their mental health affecting their performance at work, but this came at a high personal price, often affecting their physical health, and relationship breakdowns. Mind found that 28 percent of staff turned to drink and drugs to deal with increasing pressure.

Faye McGuinness, programme manager for the Blue Light programme, said, “Our survey of over 1,600 staff and volunteers across emergency services shows nearly nine in ten have experienced stress, low mood or poor mental health while working in their current role. A shocking one in four told us they had contemplated taking their own lives.”

Sean Starbuck, mental health lead for the Fire Brigades Union, said, “Grenfell has brought this issue to the forefront, but we’ve been raising it for some time with our employers on the back of the earlier Mind information.”

The Fire Fighters Charity reports a growing number of firefighters and rescue staff turning to them for help. According to CEO, Dr Jill Tolfrey, 5,000 people visit their support centres every year and 40 percent enlist for psychological support.

The drastic increase in stress and trauma levels among emergency services workers is a direct outcome of nearly a decade of unrelenting austerity measures, which have destroyed or sharply reduced their budgets. Cuts to London’s fire service vastly reduced their ability to deal with fires, but also included cuts to counselling services for those working on the frontline.

Former Conservative Mayor of London Boris Johnson, prior to the Grenfell fire, made enormous cuts to the fire services across the capital. These included the closure of 10 fire stations, the loss of 13 fire engines and 600 firefighters’ jobs. At the same time

counselling services were slashed, with the number of counsellors trained to help firefighters process traumatic scenes slashed from an already low 14 to just 2. This is what the ruling elite now considers adequate for nearly 6,000 firefighters who serve the capital’s population of nearly 10 million and attend around 50,000 incidents each year.

Since 2010, 11,000 firefighters (one fifth of the workforce) have lost their jobs, while at the same time firefighters are responding to a record number of incidents. Latest government figures show a rise in fire deaths by 15 percent in 2015/16.

In April 2016, the heads of six large fire services across England, but outside London, raised concerns that further budget cuts posed a risk to community safety. In 2015, 294 deaths were caused by fire, as against 242 for the year 2014, a rise of 21 percent. This was the largest rise since 2001-2002.

The fire services face budget cuts of up to 50 percent by 2020, from a 2010 benchmark. Greater Manchester fire service is being cut by 43 percent, from £117 million to £96 million, and West Midlands by 46 percent, from £119 million to £94 million.

The firefighters who faced the inferno at Grenfell were clearly ill equipped to be able to deal with the fire as it unfolded. Following the fire, in an outpouring of solidarity from the local community, there were offers of help from more than 300 hundred professional counsellors and therapists. They offered free sessions to all those forced to deal with the trauma of the blaze.

This instinctive response to help others contrasted sharply with that of the central government and the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea council, who stood by and did nothing despite possessing enormous wealth and resources. This callous indifference was summed up by Johnson, who in 2013 told protesting firefighters—warning him about the life threatening impact his cuts would have—to “get stuffed .”



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