Resiliency in the Face of Fire/Rescue Stress (Dr Mike Beasley)

It's a given that stress comes with your job. For some it's certain calls, like one more child's death. For some it's where you work, like emergency communications. For some it's the quality of management or financial freezes in MCFR. Stress will be part of your job in some way from start to finish.

Stress, even low-grade, chronic stress, can cause damage in your brain and body over time. The question is can you limit the damage so you come out of your 20, 25, 30 year career in relatively good condition.

The answer is you probably can. What many of you do naturally as firefighters and paramedics involves the same skills set that mitigates stress. On a call you take control. You realistically assess the situation. You adapt as needed. You are task oriented. You regard what you are faced with as a problem to be solved. You can approach stress in your life in the same way. It's a problem to be solved.

Exercise, eating practices, and relaxation techniques can effect brain and body chemistry in ways that combat stress, fight depression and anxiety, and enhance your immune system functioning.

You may find times when life is mostly good. You can likely manage stress in some areas of life more readily in those moments.

Sometimes, things don't feel good and don't work right. This happens on the job and in your personal life. You may find yourself unable to change that well enough despite your own efforts. That might be the time to give a call.

Always, it's important to build your resiliency to spring back, whatever happens. You can build resiliency in all areas of your life. A new paperback that lays out a practical program is Dr Donald Meichenbaum's *Roadmap to Resilience:A Guide for Military, Trauma Victims and Their Families*. Dr Meichenbaum works extensively with combat vets and public safety. He is considered one of the ten top psychologists of the 20th century. He details six areas of fitness with numerous practical action items for building resilience in each area.

- Working on **Physical Fitness** is core. A basic idea in stress management is that the body keeps the score of every challenge. Important actions to build resiliency include:
    - at least moderate aerobic exercise;
    - improving your sleep;
    - what/when/how you eat;
    - moderating alcohol intake.

- **Thinking (Cognitive) Fitness** means being psychologically flexible and mentally agile. That means you respond realistically, thoughtfully, and optimistically with a problem-solving mind-set in challenging circumstances. How you think about what happened, how you react to what happened, influences how you will feel and can make the difference in how you spring back.

- **Behavioral Fitness** involves being willing to try new strategies and to take a "lessons learned" approach where there are mistakes and setbacks.

- **Interpersonal Fitness** includes:

    - working on communication skills;
    - learning to better handle differences and conflict;
    - building a more supportive, nurturing, intimate relationship;
    - decreasing isolation and building closeness;
    - re-connecting with your partner or spouse in a gratifying, healthy way.

- **Emotional Fitness** requires finding activities that enhance positive emotions (joy, contentment, awe, sense of mastery) and regulate negative emotions (fear, anxiety, hatred).

- **Spiritual Fitness** is connecting personally with something greater than yourself. This means finding meaning, purpose, commitment in how you live your life. Most firefighters and paramedics want to help others. You are motivated generally to do good. Exercising compassion and helping others builds resiliency in one's self.

Life is difficult. We can all be hit hard at times. When that happens, do something. Take action that is positive and effective on your own behalf. This is fundamental to being resilient. Thinking in terms of post-traumatic growth, not post-traumatic disorder, may help. How you think about what happened can make the difference in how you spring back.

Sometimes talking with the right other person may help that endeavor to come out of a hard time and to find yourself doing well. If that seems to be called for in any given situation, reach out. The CISM Hotline number is 240- 777-2277. Captain Stacey Daniel is the peer team leader.