

How to Support a Crew Member Returning From Treatment



If a member of your crew is returning to the job after time off to get help, you and others may be struggling with mixed feelings and questions. What should I say or not say? Is this person really ready to be back at work? How can I help? Regardless of the circumstances, IAFF members know the importance of being there when a fellow fire fighter or paramedic is in need. Supporting your brothers and sisters is what the firehouse family is all about. Here are some steps you can take:

Above all, follow their lead. Whether in recovery from addiction, a major loss, mental or physical illness, no two individuals respond the same. Depending on an individual's stage of recovery and comfort level, the member may or may not want to acknowledge their struggles to other peers in the station. This must be respected. Forcing someone to discuss their health or why they have been off the job could negatively impact the individual and the entire crew.

Convey a supportive welcome back. While directly inquiring about a member's health or treatment experience can be intrusive, no one is asking you to ignore the elephant in the room. Offering neutral supportive statements to a member transitioning back to work can help minimize mutual feelings of awkwardness, while conveying a sense of trust and support. Simple statements such as "We're glad to have you back", "It hasn't been the same around here without you", or "I'm here if you need anything" can go a long way.

Avoid comparisons or claiming that you understand. Occasionally, well intentioned attempts to empathize with someone's experience can have the opposite effect of minimizing their pain. You cannot truly understand what someone is going through, unless you personally have walked in their shoes. Refrain from statements such as, "I had a friend that went through the same thing". It's okay to acknowledge you actually don't understand, but you do still care.

Small talk is good talk. Don't be afraid to engage the returning member in discussion about recent events in your station or community. Conversations such as these can help normalize the individual's experience back at work by shifting focus from the individual to the daily operations of the job. Such conversations help convey the message, "You are still one of us". Cultivating a sense of comradery is essential to support the member's reintegration back to the job and your crew.

Respect a modified workload. If a member is returning from a long absence due to mental or physical injury, bereavement or any other personal issue, he or she may be placed on light duty or receive temporary accommodations to support their transition. You may or may not agree with such accommodations, particularly if you feel the member's past impairment or absence from the job has negatively impacted you in some way. While decisions made by your department to support a member's transition are not up to you, they are to be respected.

Educate yourself. It is estimated that 1 in 5 fire fighters will suffer from PTSD at some point in their career, while addiction and substance abuse impact first responders at the same or higher rate when compared to civilians. You can take a proactive role by learning about the risks, signs, and symptoms of behavioral health problems that commonly impact fire fighters and paramedics. Consider taking the IAFF Behavioral Health Awareness Course, a self-paced online course tailored to fire service.

Look out for one another. The hardest part of recovery begins after the individual is discharged from treatment. For some, relapse or resurgence of symptoms is a part of the recovery process. If you see changes in mood or behavior that could suggest a member is struggling to readjust at home or on the job, it's a good idea to gently approach the member first and simply ask "How are you doing with everything?". If you don't feel comfortable or able to approach the member, talk to your next in command for guidance.



If you or someone you know needs help,
call the IAFF Center of Excellence at
(855) 999-9845