

Though the events of 9/11 shoved firefighters abruptly onto center stage and into the public eye, the family members who support these workers remain standing in the wings.

A study published in the latest issue of *Family Relations: Interdisciplinary Journal of Applied Family Studies*, examined the effects of emergency service work on the spouses of firefighters. While participants were highly supportive and proud of their firefighting husbands' work, they nevertheless encountered several challenges.

Alarms peal. Sirens scream, then plunge into a descending wail as flashing lights strobe through neighborhood streets. Whatever the emergency, few witnesses are untouched by the sense of urgency evoked. Usually, we quickly tuck the heart-thumping experience away and slip easily back into business as usual. Watching the evening news, we may discover the cause of the calamity. We listen to reports of bravery and dashing rescue efforts by emergency teams on call, and praise their efforts on our behalf; but in the wake of their sacrifices, do we ever think of what it might be like to reside in their homes, to be part of their families, and to live with the intensity and consequences of this work on a day to day basis? Do we consider the levy it places upon spouses and children?

Most of us probably haven't, but Cheryl Regehr, a Professor of Social Work and Director of the Centre for Applied Social Research at the University of Toronto, has given it a lot of thought. The aftermath of 9/11 brought home how intense and long-lasting the impact of dealing with overwhelming violence and senseless loss of life can be for emergency responders. Although these extreme scenarios garner the most attention from the media and the public, Regehr recognizes that emergency personnel are faced with the risk of harm to themselves *and their families* not just in catastrophic situations, but every day of their working lives. "In my years of doing work with people encountering trauma," Regehr said, "I have come to realize that no one suffers a trauma alone...This study has really reinforced that view for me."

Along with research encountered while writing her book, "In the Line of Fire: Trauma in the Emergency Services," Regehr's latest inquiry started down a similar path by first examining the available literature on threats to the physical and emotional well being of firefighters and other emergency workers. Apart from the apparent dangers, the emotional and psychological

impact of dealing with the suffering and death of others could at times be devastating. Although it was found that preparation in the form of skill acquisition and training could have a mitigating influence on these negative effects, studies utilizing the Impact of Events Scale suggest that approximately 25% of active firefighters could be experiencing symptoms of trauma at any given time. Support from the emergency worker's family is critical in helping to combat these symptoms and the occurrence of depressive episodes induced by ongoing high-pressure work situations. But where will that support come from if, as other studies suggest, this destructive level of stress is passed on to the worker's wife and family in a sort of "spillover effect." How will they manage? "After looking at the literature and finding very little," said Regehr, "I decided this was really an important thing to consider."

Attempting to validate the cumulative impact of the continuing stressors experienced secondhand by the wives and families of firefighters, Regehr and her team of research assistants at the University of Toronto formulated a study design firmly grounded in two theoretical bases, *ambiguous loss theory* and the *work-family fit model*. Together they speak to the "stress, loss and trauma" that are inherent to a firefighter's work situation.

Though the events of 9/11 shoved firefighters abruptly onto center stage and into the public eye, the family members who support these workers remain standing in the wings. The qualitative study, "Behind the Brotherhood: Rewards and Challenges for Wives of Firefighters," begins to address the shortage of research on this forgotten population. Though the sample is small, Regehr and her associates employed a system of interwoven methodologies to design, conduct and analyze the study in ways that solidify its scientific merit. Throughout the research process, members of emergency service organizations acted as "community partners" in questionnaire development and analysis, and firefighters corroborated their wives' responses and so increased transferability.

Four major themes emerged. The first emphasized the pride these wives felt in their husbands – their choice of career and work efforts – as well as for the humanitarian personality traits they associated with them. On the flip side, the fact that the public tends to idealize firefighters was found to create tension in some families, and wives frequently felt their needs and desires were less important than their spouses and subordinate to his work. (Note: Though study participation was open to anyone, only women in heterosexual relationships responded to the invitation.)

Another theme had to do with shift work and single parenting. Though shift-work could

be used to maximize childcare flexibility, this benefit could also subjugate the needs of the couple to a secondary status. Wives often expressed feelings of loneliness, frustration and even isolation, especially when outside support was lacking. Study participants emphasized a need to “become independent and self-reliant,” and to invent creative ways of coping.

Theme number three addressed the camaraderie and tight bonding that develops between firefighters and their peers, with the result that many spouses reported feeling “shut out” from large portions of their husband’s life. Although a number of women responded to this by developing outside interests of their own, both older and younger wives admitted feeling socially stifled due to the nature of their husband’s jobs.

The final theme focused on the fear factor...how wives cope with knowing their husbands face dangerous situations on a continuing basis. Although on some level wives are aware of the hazards associated with their husband’s job, couples tended to avoid the issue: firefighters choose not to communicate danger and wives silently agree not to acknowledge its existence. Spouses do, however, learn to read the firefighter’s mood and respond in ways designed to minimize additional stress and to reduce the effects of trauma on the family.

Reflecting on these findings, Regehr foresees the substantiated knowledge gleaned from this study being used to improve interventions for working with family members of emergency personnel. It could also result in additional supports being offered to those suffering the secondary trauma that worms its way into the households of those on the front lines. She points to the opportunity...indeed, the responsibility...for workers in human service fields to take on the many issues surrounding the families of emergency workers and to advocate for programs designed to meet their needs.

This study is published in the current issue of *Family Relations*. Media wishing to receive a PDF of this article please contact journalnews@bos.blackwellpublishing.net

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