

"Quieting a heart at war"

Some days I hate this job

Family is a word I hear used a lot in the fire service. We recognize that in our profession, family transcends blood lines, last names, and race. When we graduate recruit academy and swear the oath, we are congratulated on joining something "much larger than ourselves". We are promised that in our dark times, both professionally and personally, we can come to rely on this new family. Over our careers, our family at home will often interact with our family at work. Our children will visit us to see the fire trucks and to celebrate holidays. I have so many memories of days like this, that it starts to feel normal—but I have to remind myself that it's not.

I start to become numb to the fact, that my job gets in the way of "our lives"—a lot. It's a sacrifice that "we" must make, in order for me to do what "I" love.

I fool myself into thinking that my wife knew what she was getting into since I was a fireman when we met. With a promise of only having to work 10, twenty-four hour shifts per month, just how hard could marriage to a fireman be? What most significant others fail to realize is that firefighters love part-time side jobs. I owned a construction company whose part-time hours ended up as more than my full-time fire department job. The consequence of all this work is having no recollection of my first child for the first two years of her life, because I was never home to hold her.

As my children grow older, and their activities and interests compete for our family time and present scheduling challenges with my schedule, I begin to realize that some days I don't feel as though I love this job anymore. It's hard for me to kiss them

goodnight, and not be there when they wakeup. I tell myself it's only ten nights a month away, but that ends up becoming twenty mornings, as I rarely make it home in time to help my wife get the children ready for school.

Most days I love this job

It is my desire to be great at this job. I take training classes, attend conferences, and read as much as I can get my hands on because I want to be the knowledgeable, credible, and "go-to guy". So I keep taking classes and signing up for overtime teaching assignments. I'm on committees, and special work groups. If anyone needs anything on my days off I end up volunteering for it before they even finish asking. As I write this, I'm sitting over 100 miles away from my family attending a conference (the irony abounds). I'm having to learn to say no to people who aren't my family and friends, and not feel bad about it.

All of this should help me to have a great career, and make my family proud. But, the idea is starting to creep into my head, that if I keep this up I may not have a family to come home to.

All too often I hear the public tell us "you sure are brave to go into burning buildings". But I don't feel brave because I'm paid and trained to do that. Running into burning buildings isn't scary. Scary is hearing my wife suggest, "**this isn't working, perhaps we need space**"...

A colossal failure

Postpartum is something that my wife and I experienced together in our marriage after having our second child. Unfortunately this wasn't a good experience for either of us, because I allowed work to compete with the needs of my family at home. As I look

back at how my wife was forced to endure her depression alone, I can't help but feel like a colossal failure. I have a strong work ethic, high standard, and at times exhaust myself trying to meet my own professional benchmarks. When I started this job, I was taught to not take sick leave, unless you couldn't drag yourself into work. And even then, when you reported the day after, it felt as if you were under scrutiny for taking a personal day.

So when my wife asked me to "just stay home today", I said no. I wasn't sick, so why would I? Family sick days were for when her or the kids are sick, and my wife didn't *seem* sick. I wish I could have extricated my head out of my ass sooner to realize how alone she felt. If I could redo just one thing in my life this is the moment I would choose. I would go back in time, and tell the younger version of myself, "Your wife is in pain and needs you, pay attention." But I can't and no amount of apologizing or marital counseling, will ever repair the gaping wholes in her heart. Every time she asked me to stay, I chose to leave...

I struggle more than I'd like to admit

I struggle as a dad at times, because of the fears that come with being a parent. It started with a single question: can we become pregnant (so many couples face this challenge), and once we were we started praying we would avoid a miscarriage. I hoped each ultrasound showed ten fingers and ten toes. Two pregnancies and two very tiny, premature, but healthy, babies later, I wondered how could I protect something so small and precious.

I have a fear of strangers around my kids, mostly the future 16 year old boys who I know will break my daughters' hearts. I'm scared of not knowing what to say when they start to ask tough questions, and what happens when my kisses no longer heal their boo boos—and those are just my fears. If I wasn't so selfish, I would have realized sooner that I have been hurting my wife for a really long time, by the things I didn't do and say, as much as by the actions and words I did. So I better get this out in the open now:

"I'm sorry. I'm really, really sorry."

I struggle as a husband at times, because I can act self-centered. I hide from helping at home as much as I should behind the agenda that I need to work more to pay for the stuff we own. When I come home, I've fooled myself into thinking that I've "earned the right to relax", even as the kids run around dancing on my wife's last nerve. I love my job at the firehouse, and it has stood as rival to loving being at home with my family. I've failed to remind my wife how beautiful a mother she is, because I'm preoccupied with satisfying my own goals. If fireman are so brave does letting my wife go to bed mad because I refuse to say I'm sorry make me a cowards?

Why do I let ego occupy so much space in my life....The reality is I'm not as brave as my wife.

Loosing sight of what's important

So many leaders loose sight of what's really important. Unfortunately it's really easy to do, especially when you experience a lot of success at work. But the reality is we should take the extra time to see our family's perspective more often, and to ask about their fears and hopes. I'm a stubborn man and I don't ask for her help when I should.

I've realized that anger is a mask for people's hurt and fear. It's obvious even to my four year old that my wife and I are scared and angered for our marriage.

My opportunity to lead, and to have impact is with my family. My absence is felt every second I am away from them. As a result, I show up to work everyday conflicted that I am unable to fill my obligation to my real family. I am a professional fireman, and my heart is at war.

If this is hitting too close to home for you, please don't beat yourself up: struggling to balance family and work is more common than you think. But you should realize that the struggle is not just about you— it's about your significant other and children. I've admitted to my wife recently that I have anxiety some days when I'm not at work. I don't want to miss company training. I don't like missing a work day and feeling out of the loop. But the reality is the fire service never needed me anyway. It allows me to show up and feel valued for a few hours out of the workday. But, if the fire service never knew Ben Martin, fire engines would still answer the 911 calls just the same.

I realize that as I grow in my career, and seek additional leadership responsibilities and promotion, I risk continuing to grow further away from my family. There are always "more" classes that I should take. More so, as I continue to see "bad people do bad things", and "bad things happen to good people", I compartmentalize my feelings and experiences more and more each day. As I seek additional leadership responsibilities, and engage employees at work in the name of the fire service mission, I continue to encounter resistance from people who don't care. I hear rumors about me that barely resemble the truth.

The Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance reports that already to date this year (it's only March), more than 28 firefighters and EMT's have committed suicide. Last year it was a 114, and those are only the ones that are reported.* I don't find it coincidental, that people who give so much to their communities, are quietly hurting inside, until there is no hope left. It certainly reinforces my belief that many of us who serve in a public safety profession are also suffering from hearts at war.

Quieting a heart at war

If you are reading this, perhaps for more than just the first time please remember that there is hope. In order for the fire service to be serious about valuing families in our culture, then a change is needed in which we no longer ignore our divorce rate hoping it doesn't take root in our own homes. I encourage you to have a conversation with your significant other that acknowledges the challenges a career in the fire service presents to your marriage. When both partners are intentional about creating a dialogue in their home that reinforces their commitment to each other incredible things begin to happen. Hearts are mended through a careful and deliberate blend of honesty, humility, underscored by faith and forgiveness—change is possible. Here are some other closing thoughts:

1. When we talk about **leaders**, we are talking about those who can **instill hope in our situations and problems**. Whether things are great at home, or on their last leg, you always possess the ability to do just that—**make things better**. It's time to recover our work and life balance, and put our families first.
2. This job is about helping others. Our mission is to save "them". Make sure you understand "them" includes our families too. Too often they are the exposure on our fireground, that simply needs a little cooling off, but too often ignites due to a neglectful focus of the main body of fire (our careers).
3. Your children are your legacy. Make sure you do everything in your power to be the one who gets to put them to bed, and be in their lives. Remembering this may help you find humility and the words "I'm sorry", sooner than later. Don't let your spouse or yourself go to bed angry.

Reference

*<http://www.ffbha.org/what-are-these-numbers/>