



# **BREAKING THROUGH**

THE CULTURE OF SILENCE

Having served as a firefighter for nearly four decades, I know this line of work is one that's fueled by personal passion. Firefighters dedicate their lives to helping and saving others, often putting their own lives at risk in the process. To this point, I also know something that isn't often taught in firefighter minimum standards training. When I started as a firefighter/paramedic with the Maitland Fire Rescue Department, there was never any mention of how the job could impact me mentally or emotionally. We knew we could get burned. We knew we would see people die. But there was no discussion on how we could feel after responding to those incidents.

on-the-job trauma. There's no helmet you can put on to protect yourself from emotional trauma, and with 90% of first responders reporting having been exposed to trauma, we need to be talking about this.

That's why nearly one year into my retirement, I'm dedicated to working alongside a passionate team at UCF RESTORES® – a leading clinical research center – to find new ways to combat trauma and PTSD, helping those who are suffering to regain control of their lives. While we have developed an extremely successful treatment program – one that is available at no cost to all Florida residents – the battle for posttraumatic

starts. It isn't always the well-known incidents (like those involving children, MCI, death of a co-worker, etc.); it may be a call that reminds you of something "close to home," like attending to wounded or deceased citizens that carry similarities to loved ones.

As firefighters, we rarely talk about emotions on the job. We're told we'll see some tough stuff, and if we can't handle it, we're not equipped for this line of work. Ask any firefighter how they process the terrible situations they encounter, and you'll likely hear something along the lines of "It was just another day – I filed it away." But the truth is, "filing it away" can be isolating and dangerous, and it's simply

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We rush into fires and deal with the worst injuries – it's our job and what we're trained to do. But we're also human, and sometimes our brains simply aren't equipped to handle the horrible things we see. We need to learn how to take care of our mental health because tragedy is inevitable. The types of trauma to which we are exposed can lead to the manifestation of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). If left untreated, PTSD can lead to emotional distress, feeling helpless, or like we'll never be able to lead a "normal" life – one that includes the job we cherish so dearly – again.

It is imperative that we approach the risk for mental health in the same way we do the potential for physical injury. In the same way firefighters are trained to handle equipment and run a call, they must be properly equipped to encounter

healing starts with understanding and being able to talk about mental health.

In this article, I'm honored to have the opportunity to describe what trauma looks like for those in the firefighter community, the treatment resources available to those suffering, and the inspiring network of PEER support rapidly expanding across our state.

## **TRAUMA IN THE LINE OF DUTY**

In the firefighter community, I often liken the buildup of on-the-job trauma to a "mental trash can." The can is full of incidents and traumas experienced, both on and off the job, and is continuously being filled with new "emotional trash." You can keep pushing all the trash down, but eventually, with one incident or a buildup of many, it'll get too full and overflow – that's when the problem

not possible for all of those memories to be filed away as "another day on the job." Left to their own devices, the thoughts and stress that can stem from trauma have the power to debilitate you, rendering you unable to do what you want to do best – putting others first.

When trauma manifests as PTSD, the event is re-experienced later through disturbing dreams, thoughts or flashbacks. Common signs of PTSD may include avoidance of activities, places or people that are reminders of the event, and feelings of loneliness and detachment from others. Other signs may include difficulty sleeping, irritability and anger, hypervigilance, or an exaggerated startle response. Not everyone that experiences posttraumatic stress will develop a disorder, but everyone that does can be helped.

## SEEKING HEALING IN THE AFTERMATH OF TRAUMA

For those that arrive at the incredibly brave decision to seek treatment for trauma-related concerns, actually accessing treatment can be difficult. Simply reaching a live person on the phone or scheduling an appointment can be challenging as the modern health care system is extremely complicated. Once an appointment has been made, individuals have to grapple with insurance, payments, and scheduling time off. To that point, the stigma surrounding mental health challenges, including PTSD, is no secret. So, in most cases physical and mental injuries simply aren't viewed in the same way, though they should be. If you catch the flu, you can typically take a sick day. If you dislocate your knee, your supervisor will likely work with you to make room for physical therapy throughout the work-week. This type of consideration is not always available for those seeking treatment for PTSD and trauma-related disorders.

At UCF RESTORES, we address these common barriers to care by approaching treatment differently. Currently, all of our treatment services are provided at no cost to Florida residents, removing the hassle of dealing with insurance companies and intricate health care systems. And, of course, all patient information is strictly confidential, ensuring that each person maintains control of their stories, experiences, and treatment journey.

To address the care-access barrier, we have a full-time Clinical Care Coordinator who serves as a warm and inviting first point of contact for those interested in seeking treatment. In collaboration with our team, the Coordinator conducts phone screenings to determine whether

our treatment services are the right fit for each person's unique needs. In the case that our program is not appropriate for their needs, we are careful to pull and provide resources and referrals that are right for them. No one is ever "left behind."

## THE UCF RESTORES APPROACH

At UCF RESTORES, we leverage Trauma Management Therapy, an empirically supported, comprehensive treatment program for first responders, veterans, active-duty military, and other trauma survivors suffering from PTSD and trauma-related disorders. By combining individual exposure therapy and group therapy sessions, our program addresses each individual's unique traumatic memory while working on feelings that often accompany trauma-related disorders, like social isolation, anger, and depression.

While this treatment can be offered on a traditional outpatient basis, UCF RESTORES offers a unique, three-week intensive outpatient program that has proven to be incredibly successful. At the end of the program, 76% of first responders no longer meet the diagnostic criteria for PTSD.

This program relies heavily on exposure therapy, which brings patients "face-to-face" with very specific elements of their traumatic memory, not to make them comfortable with that type of trauma, but to help them process the memory, put their trauma "in its place" and regain control of their daily lives.

When someone experiences a traumatic event, some of the things in that scene or place at the time of the trauma become part of their memory and become danger signals in the future. For example, if a bomb went off in the room you're

sitting in right now, and the room smelled like cleaning supplies, your brain may connect the smell of cleaning supplies to danger. With exposure therapy, we're making new neuronal connections in the brain. In other words, your brain now learns that danger will not always follow every time you smell cleaning supplies. So, exposure therapy would help your brain learn that the smell of cleaning supplies – a sensory element that you were exposed to at the time of trauma – does not pose a threat to your present reality.

At UCF RESTORES, we often use virtual reality as a tool to augment exposure therapy. Because we cannot (nor would we want to) physically recreate the traumatic event that occurred in real life, virtual reality allows us to recreate patients' traumatic memories – incorporating the sensory elements of sight, sound and smell – to bring them even closer to that memory to allow for greater immersion, which has been proven to facilitate faster learning and healing.

This approach may sound counter intuitive at first, but the intensive component of our three-week treatment is crucial. Exposure therapy, though extremely effective, is not easy for patients (at least at first). However, having daily appointments allows us to condense and reduce the time needed to help them overcome their trauma. This approach really challenges the notion that recovery needs to be a process that takes months or even years.

To use an analogy, PTSD could be likened to a wildfire. When a wildfire occurs, you don't combat it by tossing a glass of water at it once a week; you would use a firehose and attack all areas of the entire fire at the same time. With the three-week intensive outpatient



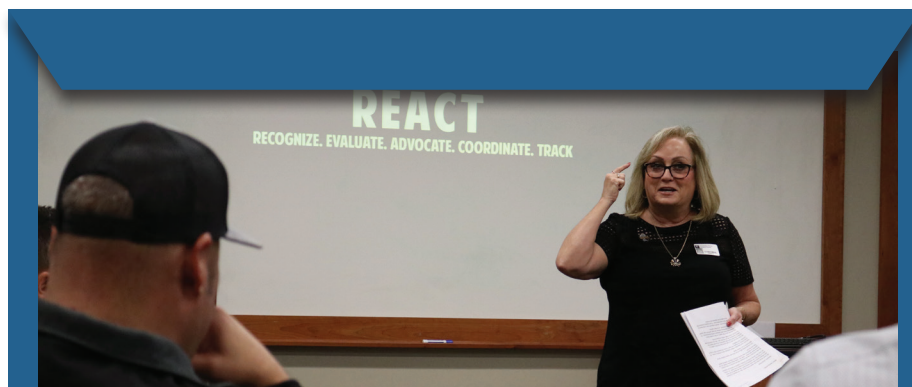
program, we're taking a "firehose" to patients' traumatic memories, helping them process their trauma, regain hope, and return to their daily lives faster.

## A STATEWIDE NETWORK OF PEER SUPPORT

Although our doors at UCF RESTORES are always open, we know that not everyone is ready to seek (or may need to seek) clinical help. Thankfully, our state's firefighter community has banded together to serve as the first line of defense in combating PTSD through PEER-to-PEER support.

PEER support initiatives within the community have proven to be, quite literally, a lifesaver — improving mental health and stability for firefighters as they continue to serve in the line of work they love so much. One of these initiatives — arguably the strongest in the Sunshine State — is the Florida Firefighters Safety and Health Collaborative (FFSHC).

The FFSHC is a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing critical education and bolstering fellow firefighters' passion for selfless service in the process. Our team at UCF RESTORES is proud to serve as the FFSHC's committed partner for mental health and wellness. In doing so, we're able to streamline access to support, resources, and treatment for PTSD for our state's behind-the-scenes heroes. We are incredibly excited to support the enhancement of one of the collaborative's anchor initiatives — Redline Rescue™. Redline Rescue was designed to take PEER support to a new level. By leveraging a statewide network of trained firefighters to connect PEERs directly with one another, factoring in rank and level of



Kimberly Neisler offering the REACT PEER support training program.



UCF RESTORES incorporates the sensory element of smell as part of the virtual reality exposure therapy.

experience, the FFSHC provides those in need with the necessary support to seek help for anxiety and other distressing symptoms that often accompany repeated exposure to traumatic events.

As the FFSHC now represents more than 350 fire departments across the state, demand for support has continued to grow since the collaborative's founding in 2016. Until now, assistance provided to support operations of the Redline Rescue model has relied on the tireless efforts of collaborative volunteers that remain available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to serve as a conduit between at-risk firefighters and the help they need.

Now, through its partnership with UCF RESTORES, the FFSHC is working to fully automate the model, bringing it to an online-portal format that will allow for an even more effective approach to

providing tangible support, no matter the time of day.

To learn more about Redline Rescue, other resources offered by the FFSHC and how you can get involved, visit [floridafirefightersafety.org](http://floridafirefightersafety.org).

## BUILDING A POWERFUL SYSTEM OF IN-STATION SUPPORT

As I mentioned before, the fire service as a whole has made incredible strides in acknowledging and addressing the mental wellness challenges facing its members. You can turn to nearly any major trade publication or industry conference and find the topic being discussed in-depth. When critical incidents like natural disasters or mass-casualty incidents occur, Critical Incident Stress Debriefings are scheduled and Critical Incident Stress Management



The UCF RESTORES and Florida Firefighters Safety and Health Collaborative partnership team.

teams are put in place. But what resources are available to those in need after the debriefing is over and the team leaves?

This question is answered by the development of on-the-ground, PEER-to-PEER support. By equipping firefighters with the tools they need to identify signs of stress in their PEER's and effectively "start the conversation" when needed, our community is building powerful, empathic teams that are ready to provide approachable, accessible support, right at home in our fire stations.

UCF RESTORES offers the REACT training program, a course designed specifically for the first responder community to introduce, improve, and strengthen PEER support skills among firefighters, EMS personnel, and law enforcement officers. Through this program, first responders learn how to recognize stress injuries and evaluate the mental health of their PEER's, offer PEER-level support, and effectively coordinate necessary follow up in the event clinical assistance is warranted.

In completing this program, firefighters are empowered to open up to

their PEER's, remind them that they are not alone, and encourage candid discussions about mental health. Given reported statistics, one of your brothers or sisters has been affected by on-the-job trauma. By tapping into available educational resources, you can learn how to identify signs of post-traumatic stress and be equipped with the tools to actively engage with someone who may be struggling. In learning how to effectively remind them that they are not alone, you can play a crucial role in breaking down the stigma barrier.

It's important to remember that PEER support personnel are not trained to be counselors and there's no pressure to consider yourself as the "final stop" for someone in need of help. In the case that professional help is needed, graduates of the REACT training program are provided with ways to connect with culturally competent clinicians. These mental health professionals have a deeper understanding of the firefighter community and how to provide effective treatment, thanks in large part to programs like the FFSHC's Clinician Awareness Program. This training, along with a keen awareness of the unique

stressors firefighters face, allows clinicians to be more readily and naturally prepared to help those in need.

If you're interested in bringing PEER support training to your team, I encourage you to share this article with your station chief, direct them to **ucfrestores.org**, or ask them to reach out to our team directly to learn more about this life-saving resource. Broaching this topic with someone that has been in the field for years, or potentially decades, may seem daunting at first. You may think, "They've seen everything and they're doing just fine." But I don't have to tell you that your chief has their team in mind each and every day, and there may be a chance that they're reaching the "mental trash can" tipping point themselves.

## SOUND THE ALARM FOR MENTAL HEALTH

It's never a sign of weakness to talk about what you've seen and what you've been through. In fact, it's a true sign of strength to raise your hand and ask for help when needed. Through my career in the service, and now in my work with UCF RESTORES, I've been honored to call so many members of this courageous community family and am humbled to dedicate my life to giving back to those in need.

With the resources at our disposal, we have the tools we need to continue breaking through the stigma and helping the ones we love find healing after trauma. Every day, firefighters are equipped with tangible gear needed to protect themselves from the physical risks of the job; in the same way, they must be prepared with the knowledge

and ability to support their brothers and sisters. Bottom line: mental wellness training should be as standard as our uniforms. In making awareness and discussion of mental health the “new normal,” we can pave the way for the next generation of firefighters to truly understand the importance of putting themselves first.

We have come a long way in the battle against mental health stigma in the first responder community, but there is still a lot of work to be done. The impact of the “culture of silence” is illustrated by the fact that more first responders, including firefighters, die by suicide than in the line of duty.

This year, our community lost brothers and sisters to suicide — mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers that can never be replaced. As we remember our fallen heroes, my call to you is clear: whether you’re a newly instated volunteer or veteran chief, sound the alarm for mental health. Tap into the resources available to our community and actively share them with others. Reach out to one another and remember that none of us are in this alone. As firefighters, we chose the best job in the world, but we can’t continue to help others if we aren’t first willing to help ourselves. **FSFA**

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Kimberly Neisler, joined UCF RESTORES in 2019 after retiring as the Maitland Fire Rescue Department Fire Chief, following a 37-year career as a firefighter/paramedic. The UCF RESTORES team can be reached at **407.823.3910** or online at [ucfrestores.org](http://ucfrestores.org).

## Are you or a loved one having trouble sleeping?



JOIN THE  
UCF RESTORES  
SLEEP ASSISTANCE  
RESEARCH STUDY



[ucfrestores.org](http://ucfrestores.org)  
407.823.3910

Catching the rest you need can be a challenge, but we are working on a potential solution.

UCF RESTORES, a leading clinical research center and trauma treatment clinic in Central Florida, is conducting a research study that tests a mobile application that may assist in the treatment of sleep difficulties associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Participants will receive a \$25 Amazon gift card.

### ELIGIBILITY

- Must be 18 years old or older
- Must be active military, a veteran or first responder, active or retired, experiencing symptoms of PTSD
- Must have a traditional, night-time sleep routine

### PARTICIPATION REQUIREMENTS

Those interested will be screened for eligibility through an initial phone call. If eligibility requirements are met, participants will be asked to attend an in-person, 2-hour assessment.

Following the assessment, participants will interact with a mobile application from home, daily, for 30 days. At the end of the 30-day period, participants will attend a final, 2.5-hour screening session.

### LOCATIONS

UCF MAIN CAMPUS:  
4111 Pictor Lane,  
Bldg. 99, Ste. 203,  
Orlando, FL 32816

UCF CONNECT  
COCOA CENTER:  
1519 Clearlake Rd,  
Bldg. 3, Ste. 279,  
Cocoa, FL 32922