

As a 15 year veteran of the Omaha Fire Department, and having a unique upbringing of being a 3rd generation firefighter, I wholeheartedly believed I was "built" for this job. I felt like things just didn't seem to bother me the way they affected others on the job. I knew I had issues, as we all do. I thought I was doing everything I needed to cope with the stress of the job, plus a busy home life and family. I felt out of sorts but shrugged that off as nearing 50 years old; I had convinced myself that what I was doing was working just fine. Mary Rosenthal, the First Responders Foundation's Vice President, has spent a lot of time over the last few years going to fire stations and talking to our membership about dealing with stress, dealing with PTSD symptoms, and recognizing the signs in our co-workers as well as in ourselves. She has always been willing to listen when any first responder needed an ear.

My story takes a turn in January of 2019, my mood had been worsening, my drinking increased, my temper and my energy had all begun a downward spiral. It was a social media post by Mary, one of the many every week she does asking first responders to keep their eyes open, that opened my eyes. The post was "The 7 Early Warning Signs of PTSD". I read through it expecting to take away a piece of knowledge to help my friends, and I found just the opposite. What I found was an article that was all about me. I had every one of the signs. I reached out to Mary, first to thank her for always being there for us, but also to thank her for possibly saving my life. It was that post, and her hard work and dedication to make sure we all get to go home every day, that sparked my realization that I needed professional assistance. I did the hardest thing I've ever done, I asked for help. I admitted that I could not fix what was wrong with me without help.

Mary, on behalf of the FRF, was there through the entire process, always reaching out to see if I needed anything. Before, when something was needed from the FRF, it was always a piece of equipment. We would ask for something that would make our job safer or more comfortable, and the FRF would respond quickly. Knowing that the FRF has our backs as firefighters means everything to us. The assistance in mental and emotional wellness is of utmost importance, they use a hands-on approach for this disease, and it is another way the FRF shows us that they are not satisfied until everyone goes home safe and stays safe, every day.

I've been in some dangerous situations in my time on the job. However, none of them compared to the danger that I was facing from within. Compared to where I was at, I am now a better firefighter, a better husband, a better father, a better son, and a better friend because I asked for help. I was pulled from despair and brought back to a place where I could survive. If you even think you might have an issue, please reach out to someone. We can't do our jobs 100% if we aren't feeling 100% and we go to the doctor when we are physically sick, we should go see someone when aren't feeling like ourselves too.

The FRF has confidential programs available to all first responders and dispatchers from any department around the Omaha metro area.

It is not a sign of weakness to ask for help, it's a sign of strength.

Thank you for always having our back. Thank you for being there when I needed you most.

Donnie Dodge
Firefighter
Omaha Fire Department