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Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center
Established 2002

Traumatic Transitions

By Travis Dotson

Brit Rosso is the Director of the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center—but not for long. Brit is retiring in January 2019, and not by choice.

This winter Brit gets the old "golden boot"—the federal wildland fire mandatory retirement. This is a big transition. So while we still have Brit, we wanted to get his perspective on big transitions. You might be surprised where we end up.

Many firefighters become an FMO. Others go on to work at the National Interagency Fire Center. But there's literally been just two people who have served as leader of the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center. Brit came to this position in 2010. It's a unique situation and the Lessons Learned Center has a unique mission.

There's just one Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center in the nation. In fact, there's only one Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center in the entire world.

What follows is a reflective and revealing dive into the view of the person charged with leading learning in the wildland fire service and the life events that have shaped his perspective.

The intent of this *Two More Chains* issue is NOT to be a tribute to Brit Rosso and his career. Brit, like many of us, is someone who's been through a variety of transitions. And he, like all of us, has had to figure out how to cope with these transitions. In this issue the discussion with Brit is a vehicle for daylighting the subtle dangers of unrecognized maladaptive coping related to "transitions".

Brit: It's not about me, it's about this position.

Travis: Yes, and you were Brit to the wildland fire service before you ever got to the Lessons Learned Center. Some would argue that is why you ended up at the head of the Lessons Learned Center—because you were already Brit, the fire superhero. So, with that context, what do the words "mandatory retirement" bring up for you?

"We're not out there throwing dirt every day, the job is not super physical here, but it's super mental and it's super emotional."

Brit: I think when I hear that now, my gut reaction is fear. It's fear of the unknown. It's apprehension about what that looks like. I feel like I can still contribute to the effort, to our mission here at the Lessons Learned Center. Yes, we're not out there throwing dirt every day, the job is not super physical here, but it's super mental and it's super emotional.

So, I'm not happy about it. I feel like I can still contribute to this mission, to this organization and to the wildland fire service in general.

Travis: I think there's a lot of people out there who share that experience. I hear it expressed from a number of people and a lot of them are less calm about it. It's straight-up anger and frustration.

Brit: Yes, there's quite a few people I see who get into the anger, the bitterness. Not wanting to let go—maybe not knowing how to let go. I've been doing this for 35 years, way more than half my life.

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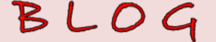

Smooth Transitions

Check out this Wildland Fire Leadership Blog Post that provides great tips on how to make smooth transitions when faced with new phases of life.

http://wildlandfireleadership.blogspot.com/2018/12/smooth-transitions.html#more

Ground Truths

By Travis Dotson
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Chasing Spots

Spot!

We've all heard it. We've all yelled it. We can all feel the little push on our pulse and the tingle in our toes just hearing it in our head.

It can be calm or it can be chaotic. But no matter how it's called out—it's time to get serious.

Let's look at the most common ways we holler this one word and all that gets communicated by the *way* we voice this attention getter.

The Heads-Up

This is the notification version—loud enough for people to hear but with no urgency conveyed. This is saying "heads up, we have spotting, but don't worry about this particular spot because I just put it out." This is purely a notification, information for our communal SA, just feeding the common operating picture for the greater good. That is a lot of information to convey with the volume and tone of one word.

A Little Help!

Then there is the come help me out version. It's definitely loud enough for folks on either side of you to hear and has just enough urgency conveyed to inform others to come help. It's usually clear that if everyone gets on it, it won't be a problem—but, start steppin! You can hear it in your mind. Actually, try saying it out loud just to practice: SPAAAAHT! (Hopefully you are reading this in the break room at the station. Then you can see if you did it right based on people's reactions.)

ALL HANDS! (Fixin' to Go Over the Hill)

Last but not least, there's the full-on scramble. This is a bellow from the bottom. It's loud, urgent, tense. Just shy of panic. Panic is never cool, but getting everybody moving sometimes requires a little pepper in your pipes.

What we're saying in this instance is "we're probably not going to catch this one, but we need to haul ass, bust ass, and pray for the luck that so often smiles on us, cause this one has legs!" This is a serious shout. Don't be messing around with this one. In fact, if you put this call out there and the situation doesn't warrant it, be ready to catch hell. It's a good way to get a nickname—"ole Freddy Freak Out over here." But nobody is joking around when it fills the air. We come running. We don't EVER hesitate to get there and jump in, get dirty, and do our duty—to help.

We all know this in our bones and we learned it quick, because if you don't come running when it's time to chase spots—you don't belong here. AND, if you don't *call for help* when it's time to chase spots—you don't belong here.

Did you catch that part? The part where you learned how to call for help?

You know exactly where I'm going.

You are Not the Exception

Why is it we are so capable of calling for help on the fireline but will literally kill ourselves before asking for help off the line?

Emotions regularly kick our ass. I know you think you are the exception—some sort of lone wolf emotion-master killer-ninja bad-ass, but you're not.

Not *if*, but WHEN you are struggling with whatever hard sh*t comes your way—call it out. Just let one person know you got a few spots. Even if you are gonna stomp them out with your boot, it's just a heads up. You never know how many more are out there and you never know when it's gonna go from nothing to scramble mode.

When you are holding line for the crucial burn show, would you ever see spots and just ignore them? Just *hope* they don't grow together? The answer is no, you wouldn't, because you're not dumb (although you have eaten some ridiculously rancid rubbish for absurdly low sums of money).

Ask for Help

We are all capable of doing not-so-intelligent things. In the case of hotshot Olympics, the consequences are rather benign (aside from the emotional scarring of any happenstance spectators).

But the not-so-intelligent move of not getting help with depression, anxiety, substance abuse, suicidal thoughts, and post-traumatic stress gets real in a hurry.

That stuff will push your ass into a hole.

But that's OK, because you know how to ask for help. Little spot, big spot, lots of spots—don't matter. Call it out.

Ask for help, Toolswingers.

[Continued from Page 1]

Travis: I hear a lot of people saying: *"We should get rid of mandatory retirement."* What would that look like, in your case specifically?

Brit: Well for me personally, I would love to keep working here at the Lessons Learned Center and hopefully keep leading from the front—being up on the "Supt Rock" and being lookout for the fire service.

Travis: For how long?

Brit: At least another five years and then I would reassess.

Travis: I don't think you would. If we don't kick you out, you'll never leave.

Brit: Maybe you're right, maybe I'll never get there. I'm not saying mandatory retirement is 100 percent a bad thing. I think for a hotshot or smokejumper—someone who is out there doing the dirty work on a daily basis—it's not a bad thing because of the physical wear and tear on their body.

Brit Rosso's Fire Career

1984-85
Crew Member
Ten-Person BD (Brush Disposal) Crew
Georgetown Ranger District
Eldorado National Forest

1986-96
Arrowhead Interagency Hotshot Crew
Sequoia and Kings Canyon
National Parks

1997-2006
Superintendent
Arrowhead Interagency Hotshot Crew

2007-Fall 2010
District FMO
Kings Canyon National Park

Fall 2010-2018
Director
Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center

High Stress Jobs Kill People

Travis: If we didn't have mandatory retirement, do you think our line of duty death numbers would go up?

Brit: I've never thought about that; I don't know.

Travis: What's the number one killer for structural departments?

Brit: Physical exertion—heart attack. It's possible we would have higher numbers. Why do we have mandatory retirement for air traffic controllers, sitting in the tower every single day, not doing anything super physical? Why do we force them to retire at 57?

Travis: Because the research says high-stress jobs kill people.

Brit: Yes. They sure do, it doesn't have to be physical exertion.

Brit Rosso (left) and crewmate Paul Johnson (on right with saw) on the Georgetown Ranger District Brush Disposal Crew in 1984.

Travis: High-stress jobs kill people and it's a bad investment to keep people doing high-stress jobs. It's a math thing. And we, the workers in the high-stress job, love it. We don't leave!

Brit: Funny, I guess I have a data point on that. I've had one serious injury in my whole career and it wasn't even on the fireline. I fell and screwed-up my shoulder big time and went through physical therapy. My doctor called me in halfway through physical therapy and said, *"Your physical therapist came to me and ratted you out. She said you're going way too fast. She said everything you've been assigned, you're trying to double it. And double it and double it and go twice as fast. That's not healthy for the healing curve. You're going to screw yourself up."*

He looked at me and said, *"You know everyone else that comes in here, they do the exact opposite. They're getting paid to do physical therapy when they're on worker's comp. They stretch it out as long as they can because they don't want to go back to work. They don't enjoy their job."*

He said, *"You guys, you firefighters and cops that come in here, you are my biggest problem. Cops and firefighters come in here and they push, push, push, push because they want to get back to the fire house, they want to get back to the station, back out in the field with their brothers and sisters."*

All that to say, yes, we love our job and we feel like we're not contributing or we feel like we're letting our team down because they're down one. So, I think that's the people we attract because we love the job. Maybe mandatory retirement is not a bad thing across the board.

Travis: I think that your experience is definitely one that a lot of people share. Do you think the next Director of the Lessons Learned Center should be in a covered (mandatory retirement) position?

Brit: Yes.

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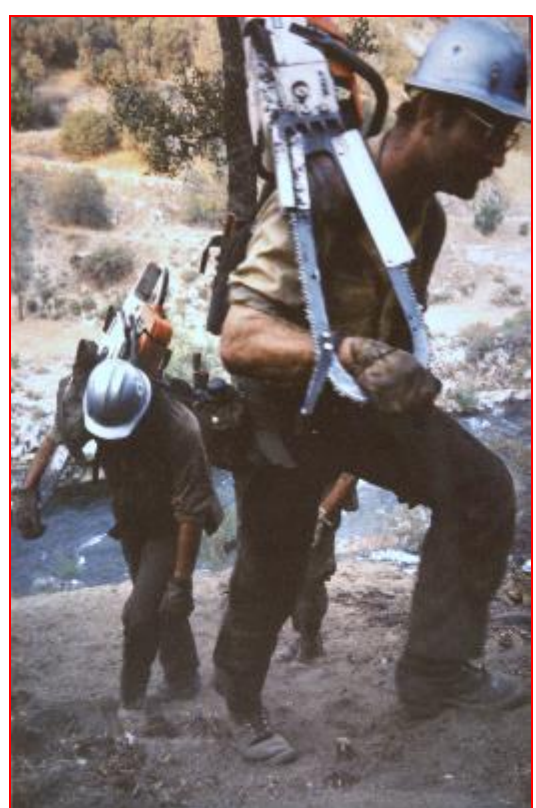

Brit with the bow bar saw in 1989 when he was a crewmember on the Arrowhead Hotshot Crew.

Emotional Exposure, Trauma and Stress

[Continued from Page 3] **Travis**: What advice would you give to your 50-year-old self on the retirement front?

Brit: I'm not sure. I think what I didn't recognize and wasn't prepared for was the amount of stress and exposure to emotional trauma that we experience in this LLC job. I thought I was going from an FMO job to go fly a desk in Tucson, all good.

Well, actually that's not reality. The exposure to emotional trauma that we experience here might be a bit more than at the regional, district, forest, or unit level because we deal with every single one. We deal with every single wildland fire fatality in this country.

I'm not discounting the impacts to the folks in the field. That is incredibly traumatic. But it's almost like we (at the Lessons Learned Center) own every single one. We have spreadsheets and collect the data. We read every report, every single one. That's our job and I didn't think about that.

"The exposure to emotional trauma that we experience here might be a bit more than at the regional, district, forest, or unit level because we deal with every single one. We deal with every single wildland fire fatality in this country."

So, looking back, I don't know how I would have emotionally prepared myself. There's just a lot of emotional exposure, trauma and stress that comes with this job that I wasn't prepared for.

And I think it's all personal; we all deal with it differently. But maybe the thing I would tell myself back eight years ago is: *"Hey, this is going to be hard and it's not going to stop."*

Part of our job is to use our Lessons Learned Center perspective to help others be better prepared. How do we help them do that? We collect personal lessons and we share them.

Travis: Were you eligible to retire in 2013?

Brit: Yes.

Travis: Did it cross your mind after Yarnell?

Brit: Yes, actually more than once. I mean that night for sure, and the next day as we learned more. It crossed my mind multiple times; I was just done. I don't know if that's because of going through South Canyon in '94, the loss of 34 firefighters that year. And then, losing almost a whole crew in 2013. Our LLC program assistant said to me right afterwards: *"We failed. Everything we've done has been for nothing. We failed because this happened again."* She had this perspective that all the energy and effort that we put in from basically 2002 to 2013 was for naught because it happened again, we lost 19 firefighters.

I had a long conversation with her and said, look, this could happen again tomorrow. That's how much risk and complexity and uncertainty is baked into this environment that we engage with on a daily basis, it's an incredibly hazardous environment.

And no matter what we do here, we're not going to be able to stop it, we're not going to be able to get to zero, we're not going to be able to keep bad things from happening to good people. But our hope is with everything that we're doing here we can decrease the chances of these things from happening.

So yes, I did think about retiring after Yarnell—multiple times.

Arrowhead Hotshot Superintendent Rosso (right) with Ben Jacobs on the Comb Wildland Fire Use Fire in August 2005.

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"And no matter what we do here, we're not going to be able to stop it, we're not going to be able to get to zero, we're not going to be able to keep bad things from happening to good people. But our hope is with everything that we're doing here we can decrease the chances of these things from happening."

Dan Holmes, Arrowhead Hotshot Crew member, lost his life when he was struck by a tree during a prescribed fire in 2004. For more information on Dan, see the Winter 2016 issue of *Two More Chains*: https://www.wildfirelessons.net/viewdocument/two-more-chains-winter-2016.

[Continued from Page 4] I seriously considered just tapping out. I was done. I just didn't want to go through it all again.

Travis: I think a lot of us felt that way. There's this almost desperate belief that if we're not doing the job, we're going to avoid the pain of something like that happening again.

Brit: Yes. Why would I be leaving? To run away from the pain and the trauma and just not be exposed to it anymore? Life is not that simple. It will be a different kind of trauma or pain, right?

The Death of Dan Holmes

Travis: Yes and I think you know all of that on a very personal level. Do you feel like you've been exposed to a "normal" level of trauma and tragedy throughout your fire career or do you think you've gotten an extra dose?

Brit: Boy, I don't know. I think I probably had a couple of extra doses. And I think part of it is by being in this position at the Lessons Learned Center. Because we get a dose every time we lose someone across the country. Everybody gets a dose. I guess we just get a different level and sometimes find ourselves a little bit closer. On different fronts, we find ourselves dealing with the agency and talking to people that were there and those who go out to do the investigation or the learning review.

So, there is an extra dose that comes just by our position. We're in a bit deeper because part of our mission is to help everyone try to learn from traumatic events. As far as before I came here, I don't know if my exposure was normal or not for someone with 27 years in the business at that time.

In 2004 I did lose Dan Holmes on the fireline, one of my hotshots. Fortunately, not everybody loses someone on their own module. That's a very small club and it's a horrible club to be in, but we don't get to choose.

Everyone on my crew in 2004 was exposed to that same trauma. I would say that's an extra dose. Most people don't actually lose one of your own crew members. And to be there and witness it and your whole module is exposed to the medical response and all that. Then the memorial service and everything that comes with that. And still to this day, 14 years later, still dealing with that trauma.

Also, it's the mechanism of injury because Dan was struck and killed by a tree. Every time someone is struck by a tree, it's probably more impactful or more emotional for me to process. Those events increase the traumatic exposure to myself because of the mechanism of injury, a wildland firefighter who was killed by a tree.

And in 2004 when we lost Dan, I reached out to look around for another hotshot Supt who had been through exactly what I'd been through. There wasn't one around that had lost a hotshot to a tree. Here I am 14 years later and now there's three other ones. We've lost three hotshots to trees in the last three years—now there's four of us.

All that to say, yes, I've probably had a bit more "trauma" than the average firefighter.

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Dan Holmes' superintendent and crewmembers carry him out of the church after his funeral in New Hampshire.

"In 2004 I did lose Dan Holmes, one of my hotshots. Fortunately, not everybody loses someone on their own module. That's a very small club and it's a horrible club to be in, but we don't get to choose."

Brit (far left) returned to California to help support his former Arrowhead Hotshot Crew after the death of Brian Hughes. Photo taken at Brian's memorial service by Kari Greer.

Captain Brian Hughes of the Arrowhead Hotshot Crew lost his life when he was struck by a tree last July on the Ferguson Fire. To see a memorial on his life: https://www.sequoiaparksconservancy.org/captainbrianhughes.html.

A Part of Me Feels I Can Help

[Continued from Page 5] **Travis**: What role has that played in your life? I mean, every time somebody get hits by a tree, I feel like it's this lightning bolt for you. Like *"Oh! That's Brit getting hit again*." It just seems intense and then here you are saying: *"I want to stay; I want to keep doing it."*

Brit: Right. Hang around some more, be exposed to more trauma. Yes, so maybe that's just part of the deal. We are going to be exposed to trauma and trauma is personal. Our previous experience—whether a vehicle accident, hit by a tree, entrapment with burn injuries—you know, we've all got connections to these things that make them a little bit more personal, closer to home. For me, every single time anyone gets struck by a branch or tree, anything related to a tree, rolled over by a log, all that stuff—it's just hard.

Andy Palmer, 18, lost his life during a falling operation in 2008 on the Dutch Creek incident. To see the video "Remembering Andy Palmer": http://youtu.be/TFLgOQqLq_Q.

I never thought about the lightning bolt but that's what it is.

Some strikes are pretty close and your hair tingles and it's pretty rough. And then there's the direct hits like the 2018 Ferguson Fire when we lost Captain Brian Hughes on the Arrowhead Hotshots a few months ago. So, I think that maybe continuing to do this job, there's a part of me that feels I can help. Maybe help reduce the chances of those events continuing to happen.

As long as we put people out in the woods, stuff is going to fall. Everyone in this business has had a near miss or close call with a tree or a log or a branch or something.

Accepting it's going to happen is embracing reality, but let's get better at the response. We had a huge change after we lost Andy Palmer in 2008 on the Dutch Creek incident. The mechanism of injury just happened to be a tree, but we have become so much better and more direct about being prepared for medical incidents—all because of the loss of an 18-year-old kid on his first fire.

So, for me, that's a little data point. We can make a difference. The Lessons Learned Center had a small part of that effort after we lost Andy to help others be better prepared for these tragic events.

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Our Response to the Survivors

[Continued from Page 6] **Travis**: Yes, I think that's got multiple fronts, too. There's the actual medical response and then there's the response to the survivors.

Brit: Yes, that's a great point and I think that's more where I personally can help others based on what we learned in 2004 [after Arrowhead Hotshot Dan Holmes' death] about dealing with families, notifications, and peer support. All these things that are happening now that we didn't have back then.

This August I was at Brian Hughes' incredibly powerful memorial service that a Type 2 Team put together. They did an incredible job—the turnout, the organization, just how professional it was. For the immediate family, for the crew, for the fire community, all the brother and sisters.

And I can't help but think about what we did for Dan 14 years earlier. We brought him home to his family in New Hampshire. Again, it was incredible and powerful with firefighters from the Rochester Fire Department. And then we came back to California and we put the memorial service together for all the California hotshot crews. We, the crew, not a Type 2 Incident Management Team, not the Park, not the Park Service. And that's not because they didn't care; we just didn't ask.

"For me, every single time anyone gets struck by a branch or tree, anything related to a tree, rolled over by a log, all that stuff—it's just hard."

We just got back to California and thought, now we have to do something for our brothers and sisters here on the West Coast. We were in an emotional state after losing one of our hotshots and here we are trying to scribble out IAPs and making reservations at places and organizing things. Maybe that was a good diversion; maybe that wasn't a bad thing. But then I look forward to how much better we are at this stuff now.

Maybe that's just embracing the reality that we actually need to be good at this stuff because it's going to happen again. And if we're going to do it, let's do it right.

Personal Advice and Organizational Advice

Travis: For the individual or the group that hasn't been in the "Bull's Eye" yet, or they are in it now and they don't understand what's going on because their world is upside down, I feel like you've been in that upside-down world a whole bunch of times. [To learn more about the "Bull's Eye" concept, see the Winter 2016 issue of *Two More Chains*: https://www.wildfirelessons.net/viewdocument/two-more-chains-winter-2016.] You are in a prime position to be able to advise or pass something on. I'm talking about specific personal advice as well as organizational advice.

Brit: Yeah, once we lose a firefighter, it's too late to go make sure your benefit forms and your will is in place and all that kind of pre-incident stuff. Making sure that your beneficiary forms are filled out and up-to-date if something changes in your life. All that is pre-incident. Making sure your people are prepared in case this bad thing does happen.

And then when the bad thing happens and there is that kind of immediate effect and a few days after, how do we deal with this? There are lots of lessons available which I've shared with some folks. Some of that is how to take care of your people, but just as important is how to take care of yourself.

After we lost Dan Holmes I didn't do that. I did not take care of myself because my whole career I was trained and taught and followed the mantra of you come last as a leader. Everybody else comes first, whether that's when they line up to eat chow or go to bed or whatever it is. It was just branded into my brain and that's what I did.

Probably unconsciously, I tried to take care of everyone else. I did not take care of myself until it was almost too late and I was ending up in a bad place. Fortunately, I made it through that. And I've shared some of those slides with others who are just beginning that journey after a loss.

"There are lots of lessons available which I've shared with some folks. Some of that is how to take care of your people, but just as important is how to take care of yourself."

"After we lost Dan Holmes I didn't do that. I did not take care of myself because my whole career I was trained and taught and followed the mantra of you come last as a leader."

There is this perspective of *"well, eventually I will get over it. Eventually, this traumatic event will go away."* But it will never go away. It is now part of you. You have been rewired. You're a different person. The thing to do is find a healthy way to embrace that and live with it because if you push it down and try and bury it and make believe it didn't happen, it's going to come back. It might be a day, it might be a week, it might be 10 years later, but it will come back.

So, I think it's just embracing reality and finding a healthy way to process it. It will take time, but eventually, you have to find a way to live with the experience and the loss.

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"There is this perspective of *'well, eventually I will get over it. Eventually, this traumatic event will go away.'* But it will never go away. It is now part of you. You have been rewired. You're a different person. The thing to do is find a healthy way to embrace that and live with it because if you push it down and try and bury it and make believe it didn't happen, it's going to come back. It might be a day, it might be a week, it might be 10 years later, but it will come back."

The Elevator Analogy

[Continued from Page 7] **Travis**: I know you've used the "elevator analogy." All the different floors that people get off and then they get back on, whether that's denial or anger or acceptance—all those different floors. It's just a really convenient way of describing the reactions. How much control do you have over what floors you get out on?

Brit: I think initially we have very little control over which floors we end up on. That analogy was shared with me by Vicki Minor from the Wildland Firefighter Foundation a long time ago and I use it because it makes so much sense.

Everybody takes different rides and they spend different time on different floors. Some people come out to the anger floor and the door will open and they'll look around and spend maybe a few minutes or an hour there and then move on to the next floor. And some people get to the anger floor and get off and they're still there—10 or 15 years later.

Just the awareness of the ride you're going to take is what I've shared with people. I tell them: *"Look, there's going to be an elevator and you're going to take a ride. Initially you may have no control and eventually you might get a bit more control."* I've never had full control over where I end up. I experienced all that again when we lost Captain Brian Hughes on Arrowhead a few months ago. I had a pretty gnarly ride and really had no control. I even tried to control it. I was even pushing the elevator buttons. But they weren't connected to the floors that I wanted to go to.

Travis: I think that elevator analogy can be applied to a whole bunch of different things.

Brit: For sure. There is another one that's being shared in "Stress First Aid" efforts today, a pretty easy to follow colored chart that just provides a language to be able to express where you're at. Like *"How are you doing, bro?"* [See the "Mental Health Continuum Model" on right.] Often, I get "all green". I'm all good. After these traumatic events, for me, it's been a yellow day. And I can even spend some time in orange. It's green, yellow, orange, red—and red is really bad.

In red you need help. It's like red is Code 3—get help to this person. After losing Brian and spending time with the crew out in California, especially coming back afterwards, after I wasn't with them anymore—I was all by myself. And that's how I was communicating with a couple people. I was operating in the orange and even drifting into the red at times. I mean, I could pull out this little chart and read it, look at the chart and say: *"Yep, that's where I am."*

MENTAL HEALTH CONTINUUM MODEL

HEALTHY	REACTING	INJURED	ILL
• Normal fluctuations in mood • Normal sleep patterns • Physically well, full of energy • Consistent performance • Socially active	• Nervousness, irritability, sadness • Trouble sleeping • Tired/low energy, muscle tension, headaches • Procrastination • Decreased social activity	• Anxiety, anger, pervasive sadness, hopelessness • Restless or disturbed sleep • Fatigue, aches and pains • Decreased performance, presenteeism • Social avoidance or withdrawal	• Excessive anxiety, easily enraged, depressed mood • Unable to fall or stay asleep • Exhaustion, physical illness • Unable to perform duties, absenteeism • Isolation, avoiding social events

ACTIONS TO TAKE AT EACH PHASE OF THE CONTINUUM

HEALTHY	REACTING	INJURED	ILL
• Focus on task at hand • Break problems into manageable chunks • Identify and nurture support systems • Maintain healthy lifestyle	• Recognize limits • Get adequate rest, food, and exercise • Engage in healthy coping strategies • Identify and minimize stressors	• Identify and understand own signs of distress • Talk with someone • Seek help • Seek social support instead of withdrawing	• Seek consultation as needed • Follow health care provider recommendations • Regain physical and mental health

I look back at 2004 when we lost Dan Holmes on the crew and we had a page that the CISM group gave us. It said: *"Think about these things and don't make big decisions for a year and . . . blah blah blah."* That was good stuff and it was helpful. But we didn't have this exposure to a traumatic stress handy-dandy booklet that we have now through "Stress First Aid".

What this now provided me with was a tool to look at and say: *"That's normal."* Something that I experienced that I didn't even have words for at the time is called "social withdrawal". It's common. It's a thing that can happen when you go through a traumatic experience. You start turning off friends or turning off coworkers because you don't want to talk about it and you don't want to engage with them. So it's easier to just start turning off those switches. Don't reply to texts. Don't call them back. Don't reach out for help. You start turning all those things off and you withdraw socially. You don't go to the party you got invited to. You don't get tacos with Timmy and Sally when they invite you.

"I experienced all that again when we lost Captain Brian Hughes on Arrowhead a few months ago. I had a pretty gnarly ride and really had no control. I even tried to control it. I was even pushing the elevator buttons. But they weren't connected to the floors that I wanted to go to."

So what it taught me is that this kind of thing is normal. Once I was able to understand that, I gained a little bit more control. Like, *"Well, that's happening and I'm doing that—how do I manage that?"* versus just go for the ride, like I did 14 years ago.

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Transitions: Brutal and Dangerous

Travis: So those are significant advances we've made in that arena. We have a pocket guide and a class that you can go to and homegrown support groups and that kind of stuff. But what if we're just not there yet with retirement? What if we're going to have either a pocket guide or a continuing support group for high-stress professions with mandatory retirement? We can support each other and we can use some of these lessons that we've learned in the gorier circumstances to aid in this transition.

"So those are significant advances we've made in that arena. We have a pocket guide and a class that you can go to and homegrown support groups and that kind of stuff. But what if we're just not there yet with retirement?"

Transitions can be brutal and they're dangerous. It's a skill to reorient.

Brit: We should talk about post-retirement suicide as well. It's one of those things we just don't want to talk about. I'm not saying *"Well, they were forced to retire. Therefore they weren't happy anymore. Therefore they chose to take their life six months or a year down the road."* It's way, way more complex than that.

But I think it's part of the conversation. I don't know what to do other than talk about it. I don't think we are alone either. Law enforcement struggles with this. I think structural fire struggles with it. I think other organizations, maybe professional sports struggles with it, I don't know.

"I think what we have acknowledged here is that this business exposes us to some gnarly transitions and we ought to get better at preparing our workforce to navigate the inevitable tough times."

Travis: Yes, it's possible there is a higher percentage for first responders, but retirement does tend to kick-off bouts of depression. Substance abuse, suicide, those types of things are all connected. In the recovery community it's not uncommon to hear stories about peoples' active addictions starting with retirement.

It's a transition, and we are cautious around transitions. As firefighters we have learned to respect the added layer of complexity that comes with *operational* transitions, but we're talking about regular old life here.

Life includes all kinds of transitions. You can plan the hell out of a transition and still have it end up a sh*t show. And then there are the sudden unplanned transitions—like traumatic events—that are completely disorienting because you had no idea they were coming and how intense and unsettling the experience would be.

I think what we have acknowledged here is that this business exposes us to some gnarly transitions and we ought to get better at preparing our workforce to navigate the inevitable tough times.

All of the Arrowhead Hotshot Superintendents—since the crew was established in 1981—gathered together after Brian Hughes' memorial service. From left: current Superintendent Joe Suarez; former Superintendents John Goss, Patrick Morgan, Brit Rosso, Dan Buckley, and Jim Cook.

Brit: Yes.

Travis: One more question: Can we fight fire safely?

Can We Fight Fire Safely?

Brit: No. When I started back in 1984 we "learned" the 10 and 13 by doing push-ups. I was told to follow these rules, follow the boss, don't ask questions and you'll be safe. Later that year we almost got burned up on a fire in Nevada.

I don't know if that was the beginning of my personal transition away from *"we can fight fire safely"* to *"you can follow all the rules and still not come home."* Then losing my friend, Roger Roth at South Canyon. And then more close calls and near misses. And then the loss of a friend here or there and then the Grant West [prescribed fire] where we lost Dan right in front of me. We did everything we could to save him—and we couldn't.

I have to say that was a major perspective transition in my career. From I believe you can fight fire safely to I'm not so sure I believe that anymore. And then the loss of Andy Palmer. And then the loss of Justin Beebe. And then the loss of Brent Witham. And then the loss of Brian Hughes—and we can go on and on and on. It was a long transition for me versus a five-minute handoff.

Now my perspective is 180 degrees. We cannot fight fire safely. But we can fight fire *safer*. We can put an effort into fighting fire safer. But it is impossible to fight fire safely because the definition of "safe" is free of risk or harm. It is impossible to step on the fireline and be free of risk or harm. It's just not possible. Sorry.

Want More?

For more information, insights, and lessons related to this "Traumatic Transitions" topic, see the *Two More Chains* 2017 Fall Issue on "Leaving the Fireline and Why Identity Matters" that includes the Podcast "The Importance of Identity" and the Blog Post on "Self-Extrication".

Your FEEDBACK

This page features unsolicited input from our readers. The independent content on this page does not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Two More Chains staff.

We heard from many of you in response to our Summer Issue that focused on "An Overlooked Truth: Our Dispatchers are Exposed to Trauma" (https://www.wildfirelessons.net/viewdocument/two-more-chains-summer-2018). All of your input was in full support of our Dispatchers.

This Summer Issue on Dispatching featured commentary from four Dispatchers. We also highlighted their perspective and stories in their four individual Blog Posts. We received many supportive comments in response to these Blogs.

Tracey Kern, Center Manager at the Fort Collins Interagency Dispatch Center, was one of these four Dispatchers. Here are three of the responses Blog readers provided on Tracey's Blog Post "Are Dispatchers Exposed to Trauma" (https://wildfirelessons.wordpress.com/2018/08/28/are-dispatchers-exposed-to-trauma/).

We Are There

Dispatch is often forgotten during these times and I appreciate this article greatly.

Here's our story. A couple of months ago, our District was faced with an employee (a park ranger) who went missing from her home (located on the park). Our fire crews, foresters, and her fellow park rangers spent two days combing the woods with law enforcement trying to find her.

In Dispatch, we had an "incident card" open on it and we were worried about her. All of us had talked to her on a daily basis and she was very well liked.

Ultimately, we learned that she had been murdered. Her body was found in another state.

The search crews were immediately put on admin leave. I was covering Dispatch that day and was mentally numb once I heard the news. A few minutes later, I realized with all these crews off duty, I needed to move the remaining crews around to make sure fire coverage was available. I did so but could tell I was in a fog.

All I could think about was my park ranger who I would never see or talk to again. It's tough, but we got through it. A CISM Team came in and helped out.

A few weeks later, we had a memorial service. At the last minute, the decision was made to have one of our local Dispatchers do the last call. I thought that was very difficult. So, to whomever is reading this, remember your Dispatchers. We may not be physically on the line, but We Are There.

Sarah Stewart

Dispatch Left Out

I have been through tragedies on the fireline and in Dispatch. As a Dispatcher I still feel the trauma like I did as a firefighter. Every event accumulates and you find yourself in a moment where everything floods your emotions.

You never know what will set it off: a sound, a smell, or something you saw. When it happens, you are monetarily frozen.

After an aviation fatality, several days went by before anyone asked if I was OK. It has been six years now. Several things have been done to honor the pilots. But Dispatch has been left out.

"Oh, we forgot about Dispatch," people will say as they look at you with the "why does Dispatch need to know" look.

(Name not included)

Anything Less is Unacceptable

Our Dispatchers are our daily lifeline. When things go terribly wrong out there, that lifeline can become very literal.

Surely, anyone on a fire who has ever listened to a tragedy unfold over the radio—with tears in their eyes and their heart banging against their chest—can understand the magnitude of what Dispatchers deal with, while still maintaining their professionalism and clear-headedness.

Whatever consideration we give to crews on the line after a serious incident needs to be extended to our Dispatchers, every time and without prejudice. Anything less is unacceptable, full stop.

Kibby

[Continued on Page 11]

Two More Chains, published quarterly by the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center, is dedicated to sharing information with wildland firefighters. For story tips, questions, or comments, please contact: Paul Keller, prkeller@fs.fed.us, 503-622-4861.

For past issues of *Two More Chains*: http://bit.ly/2morechains

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We also received the following input on our Summer Issue
via our *Two More Chains* "Your Input/Feedback" link:

What Dispatchers Deal With

Thank you for recognizing Dispatchers and showing what we deal with.

I sent a good friend to a fire that he (and two of his crew) died on. I lost a Dispatcher to suicide three years ago.

I once had a chief tell me that we are not first responders. He asked (laughing): *"Where do you respond to, since you never get out of your chair?"*

Things like that mess with a person for a long time. It's hard to keep morale up when your team gets treated that way.

I am very blessed as I am now a Center Manager at a different Dispatch Center. I get great support from the leadership on this Forest.

Again, thank you for bringing this to light.

Walter Malena, Center Manager
Fortuna Emergency Command Center
Six Rivers National Forest

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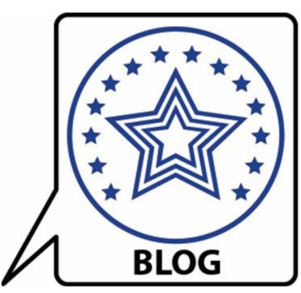

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on this Issue of *Two More Chains*

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