



# Survivorship

*Suicide affects the fire community each year, along with millions of others in the world. The phrase 'survivor of suicide' can have several meanings. Someone who lost a loved one to suicide, or someone who has survived a suicide attempt is a survivor. Survivorship looks different for everyone.*

**Below is a story of hope from one wildland firefighter to those who may experience the painful wake of suicide and suicidality.**



## The Emotions:

Fire season can pose big challenges to both physical and mental resilience. We choose the job because we love the work, but that doesn't mean it can't take everything from us. After an incident which required resuscitation and intensive care, I came home in a cloud of emotions. I experienced fear, anxiety, anger, and most of all, the frustration that I didn't just die in the hospital. I physically had to recover, and I mentally felt as though I'd failed both my job and those around me. I felt ashamed and isolated and as though I was a burden in my work and home life. I wasn't sleeping because of nightmares; I was just surviving each day. I was in my third season of my ongoing six-year career in wildland fire. I admittedly did not know what resources were available, which left me feeling as though the return home /Office of Workers' Compensation Programs (OWCP)/ return to work process was crushing me. When asked, I would just say I was okay, because anything less would reinforce my feeling of weakness. As time progressed, I lost all sense of purpose, hope, support, and the feeling of being a burden consumed me. At that time, I felt suicide was the only way to relieve the burden for those I cared most for. I wasn't being selfish – in my mind, this was the most selfless act I could do. It would not be the last decision in my story.

## How Did I Heal:

Healing is non-linear and a lifelong process. Each day, I face the grief, but I no longer allow it to control me. After my suicide attempt, I kept my experience extremely quiet. Only my family knew. I was ashamed and embarrassed, but they helped me reach out to a mental health counselor who saw me and helped me process both my trauma and the experience I'd just gone through. I worked through tools and healthy coping mechanisms, and I began to share what I had been through with others.



## What Came Next:

I continued seeing a counselor, and even today I still seek counseling services with a clinician who specializes in first responder trauma and suicidality. I became my own advocate and began to search for what my life meant outside of being on the fireline. I started participating in Critical Incident Stress Management response, and I found not only an incredible support system, but also passion and a new way to serve in the fire community. I found my own hope and purpose. I learned that sharing my story, as hard as it was, was what saved me and helped others to see that my experience was not the end of my life or career, but the start of a new passion and purpose in fire.

## My Message to You:

It is normal to have questions after someone close to you attempted suicide or died by suicide. A few common questions might be, "Why didn't they tell me they were struggling?" or "Could I have done something different?" Suicide loss can bring up feelings of shame and guilt for friends and family members. If you need support processing a loved one's suicide attempt or death, counseling can be a safe space to work through your thoughts and feelings. It is okay to talk about your experience, but know that each experience is different. Your story may be what saves a life or offers hope to those who are survivors or facing suicidality. There are ways to heal. Attempted suicide or suicidality does not define you. It is a simply a part of who you are and a part of your story; it is not the end of your story. This is a plea of hope to those who feel lost in the aftermath of experiences such as these to keep fighting. You are not alone, as isolating as it may feel. In the wake of my experience, I found purpose in a desire to change the system for the field, and I will serve the remainder of my career advocating in memory of those who have passed, for those who fought their battle silently, and in support of those who may face the pain of suicidality in the future.



*If you are experiencing thoughts of suicide or are in distress, dial or text 988 for free, confidential support available 24/7.*

**988** SUICIDE & CRISIS  
**LIFELINE**