

This month's topic is a tough one. Over the past couple of years, we have had many emails that have come in asking about how someone can make their spouse feel more comfortable with them having a member of the opposite sex as a partner. Of course this tends to me more of an issue with male emergency workers and their spouses than it is for female emergency workers. But, for the sake of all of those firefighters and EMS workers who are struggling with this issue, whether male or female, this article isn't biased towards one particular sex.

To go back to that question, 'How do I make my spouse feel more comfortable with the males/females at my station?', the simple answer is integrity. Always keep your integrity and keep it to the highest of standards. This usually means using your common sense and listening to your gut feelings. If it doesn't feel right, no matter how little or how much you try to cover it up then don't do it. If you know your spouse would disapprove, then you should probably stay away also.

We know though that life isn't always that simple, especially in the emergency world. The shift work, the living quarters, the close proximity of working with a partner (especially on an ambulance), and the bond that develops with someone who has to save your life when it comes down to it, throws a real kink into our simple answer. However, I do believe that integrity must always be the foundation of any relationship that you have whether it is with your spouse or with your partner.



Firefighter Ministries

Dealing with Issues That Arise Between Spouses and Co-Workers of the Opposite Sex

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The best way to get a handle on this issue is to do so either before you are married or before you enter into a department. I always, always encourage couples to seek counseling when one or both of them enter into the fire service. So many things can happen to the firefighter during their career (volunteer or paid) that even the thought of those things can bring a great deal of stress onto a marriage. Outside of death or injury, an affair is one of the biggest fears a spouse can have. If you talk about these things ahead of time, have boundaries and a plan in place, the less likely this issue will become something major later on in the relationship. Spouses must know what they are facing when a loved one decides to enter into the emergency services. To keep them in the dark would be unfair.

As far as your relationship with your co-workers, you need to be aware that the more developed your relationship is with someone, the more commitment is implied, and the greater the odds are that the situation will get out of hand. You don't have to have a physical relationship with someone to establish a level of intimacy, commitment and expectation; this can happen simply by deepening relationships and growing in relational intimacy.

Over time, it's all too easy to move from sharing pleasantries to sharing common events. Then to sharing not so common events (i.e. the sort of things you wouldn't share with a casual acquaintance). This moves easily to thoughts, emotions, and relatively intimate details (the absolute worst warning sign is if you find yourself

discussing problems you are having with your boyfriend/girlfriend or spouse with someone of the opposite sex).

At this point, you've created a meaningful relationship whether you intended to or not, and you run a real danger of that relationship moving into other arenas, supplanting other relationships, or at the very least consuming relational energy and intimacy that could (and if you're married, should) be directed elsewhere.(1)

Here are some tips that you can use to keep your relationship with your spouse and your co-workers in check:

- Don't give your spouse an initial reason to be distrustful with you. If you and your spouse are already having problems with trust, working with a member of the opposite sex can add fuel to the fire. However, if you have proven to be trustworthy and continue to work hard at being trustworthy, this issue won't be as difficult for you.
- Be honest with your spouse about who you are working with. If you have members of the opposite sex working with you on a 24 hour shift or as your partner on the box, don't try and hide that from your spouse. This could cause more hurt and distrust in the long run.
- Keep some emotional distance between you and your co-worker. The more emotionally involved you are with an individual of the opposite sex, the more likely you will find yourself in compromising situations. Be friendly and polite but don't plan on being 'best friends'.

- Don't socialize outside of work with your partner by yourselves. This could cause a lot of trouble and heartache for your spouse and your family. There aren't too many couples who are 100% comfortable with their loved one having deep friendships with members of the opposite sex. If your spouse isn't 100% comfortable, then you shouldn't do it. If you and your spouse are comfortable with opposite sex relationships, then you should be able to be contacted 100% of the time and your whereabouts should be known 100% of the time. This policy may sound strict, but if you are only able to be contacted 90% of time, that 10% of not knowing could eventually cause relationship trouble. It's better to be 100% right than 10% wrong.
- Let your spouse visit you at the station and become acquainted with your co-workers.
- Encourage your loved one to be involved with the auxiliary or other spouse support groups. It can help your relationship to have your spouse involved with the fire department in some way. This also gives the chance for them to see how other spouses handle these types of situations.
- Keep communication open and flowing. The more you communicate the least likely you will feel emotionally cut-off from your spouse and will want to turn to someone else for that type of intimacy.
- Be willing to get counseling, even if it's just for maintenance.

And most of all, keep your integrity.