

Holiday Season Toolkit
for
Fire Hero Families





Approaching the Holiday Season

There is no doubt that if you have lost a firefighter in the line of duty, the holidays can be an especially challenging time of year. The National Fallen Firefighters Foundation understands. And while we can't change the facts, what we can do is offer some simple strategies that might help make the holiday season just a little bit easier for you to navigate.

That's why we have created the *NFFF Holiday Season Toolkit*—a supportive resource focused on fellowship, self-care, and giving back during the holidays. It includes a variety of idea-starters and suggestions to offer Fire Hero Families a positive focus, ranging from honoring your hero by doing good for others—to finding quiet opportunities to take care of yourself today and through the holiday season.

Please read through these ideas and try out those that appeal to you or that might provide engagement for your family, friends, and/or others in your community.

And by all means, please share your thoughts and ideas about what may have helped, so that others can try these strategies, too. We are always just a click away on our private Facebook page.

Wishing you peace this holiday season.

Your friends at the NFFF



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Paying it Forward

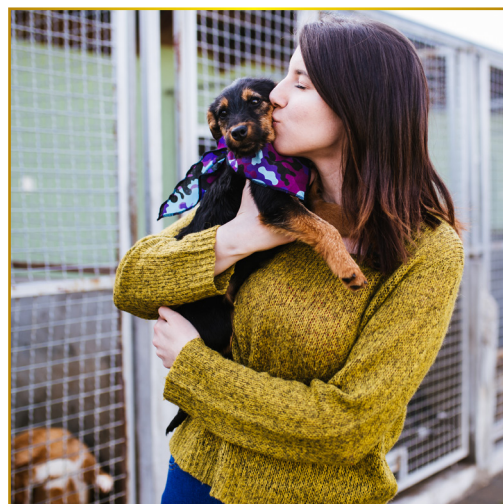
Community Service Involvement to honor your Fire Hero

All Fire Hero Families know how important service to others was to their firefighter. When better than the holiday season to honor this tradition by focusing on helping others who need it? Not only does this pay tribute to your firefighter, but it can help you be part of something special during the season of giving.

Help Community Members in Need

Holidays can be hard for many people and for a variety of reasons. Your support or companionship could truly make a difference for others and can make you feel good, too.

- Does your area get snow in the winter? If so, try gathering a group to go shovel out neighbors who need a hand—such as a single parent, elderly resident, or someone struggling with illness.
- Holiday schedules can often make it hard for local charitable organizations to enlist volunteers. Check out a local soup kitchen or food bank and offer your time.
- While animals in shelters await their forever home, consider being a volunteer “petter” or walker. And who knows—maybe you will meet a new four-legged friend to welcome into your home.
- Volunteer at the local library or hospital.
- GIVE BLOOD!



Engage with National Initiatives

Even in very small towns, there are national holiday initiatives that you can engage with. Ask your friends and neighbors for suggestions, or check out these options.

- Consider “ringing the bell” on behalf of the **Salvation Army** (or drop off a holiday treat or steaming cup of hot cocoa on a cold day for a bell-ringer in your community!). www.salvationarmyusa.org/usn/ways-to-give
- Check out the **First Responder Pouch Program**, which provides personal supplies to first responders in the field. www.operationgratitude.com/who-we-serve/first-responders
- Check to make sure that your workplace, church, or other local organization is participating in **Toys for Tots**—the annual toy drive headed up by the U.S. Marines that is now in its 71st year. Helping to get a toy into the hands of a child in need during the holidays is a goal all of us can get behind. www.toysfortots.org/request_toys



Bring Sunshine to the Elderly

In addition to reaching out to elderly neighbors or friends who are living independently, you can also consider visiting those who are in care facilities. This can be especially meaningful if you have a special talent to share, but just a simple visit works, too.

Call the center and speak with the activities director to see what's on the calendar and whether you can get involved. For example:

- Do you crochet or knit? If so, perhaps you could share your skill. Or if you aren't, maybe a resident could teach you to embrace this age-old needle crafting skill.
- Do you enjoy singing? Singing together is something that can lift the spirits of all involved. See if there is a carol singing event scheduled – perhaps a youth choir or local scout troop is scheduled to appear; consider stopping in that day to enjoy the event with residents. Or, gather some willing friends and go caroling at the center together.
- If you like to bake, consider baking a batch of cookies for a center or nursing home/eldercare center.
- Donate books or holiday decorations!



Support Your Local Fire Service

Baking, making a big pot of chili, or helping to decorate the local fire station is something you can do by yourself, with your family, or with others in the community. For the firefighters who are working through the holidays, it brings cheer to the station and can give you a calming sense of community.

- Try making cutout trees or snowflakes, each with a message of thanks written by a classroom of children or a scout troop.
- Arrange a time for a “make your own pizza” night at the fire station—it could be as simple as ready-made crusts, jarred sauce, and packaged mozzarella set out with oregano and hot pepper flakes!

Explore Mentorship Opportunities

Many people gain a sense of optimism and hope through mentoring youth in their area. To see what opportunities might be available, contact your local chapter of one of these organizations:

Big Brothers and Big Sisters of America: www.bbbs.org

Boys and Girls Clubs of America: www.bgca.org

Girls Inc.: girlsinc.org

United Way: www.unitedway.org

YMCA: www.ymca.net

YWCA: www.ywca.org





Staying Active

Seasonal Hands-on Ideas to do alone, with the family, or with friends

Isolation can become unhealthy—especially during the holiday season. That's why there is something to be said for "keeping busy." Whether you are in the mood to gather with family or friends or would prefer to be on your own, these idea-starters can help fill the time while also fostering camaraderie and/or the holiday spirit. Try to keep busy. It really can make the days easier.

Spread Cheer with Crafts

Consider a craft idea that is fun to do and will spread cheer to others who need it. There are so many options, but here are a few idea-starters.

- Paint rocks to leave in surprising place for others to find. Painted rocks with messages or simple art/patterns can delight the finder! Consider placing them outside a hospital, in your downtown area, near your local fire station, or in the local park. Search "rock painting" on Facebook and you'll find lots of ideas—be sure to look for the [#fireheroesrock](#) group!
- Create simple tie blankets (check out YouTube for tutorials) and donate them to a local homeless shelter, or braid friendship bracelets for a local foster care organization.



Focus on Food

These ideas can be done by yourself, with family members, or with friends/neighbors.

- Bake holiday cookies or other treats for a local senior center, fire station, homeless shelter, soup kitchen, or inner city school so that they can have a holiday party. You can turn the "creating" into a gathering at home or maybe at the local fire station.
- Similarly, organize a "sandwich making party" and pack brown-bag lunches for a local homeless shelter, or make a meal for families at the local Ronald McDonald house.
- Enlist a group to volunteer at a local soup kitchen or other non-profit that needs extra hands during the holiday season, when many of their regular volunteers are tied up with other plans. (Also check to see if a local food bank needs help in their loading/unloading area. It's a task that is often in need of a little extra "muscle.")
- If you are a coupon-clipper, cash them in and donate the food you purchase to a local food bank or shelter. You can make this a group activity by organizing a "coupon shop-athon" with friends or colleagues at the local grocery store.

Share the Light

While decorating and other at-home traditions might be something that makes you feel sad, you can share the spirit of the season by keeping busy in other ways.

- Provide an ornament for the NFFF holiday trees in Emmitsburg, MD in honor of your fire hero.
- Put your decorating skill to work by starting (or adding to) a “memorial tree” at the local fire house; or, decorate the halls of a local hospital. Or, donate a decorated tree to a local shelter.
- As a family or friend-group activity, consider focusing your holiday gift efforts on a family in need. Local non-profits (like your United Way office) can provide matching and serve as the conduit for gift delivery.



www.firehero.org/resources/family-resources/programs/holiday



Connect In Your Own Neighborhood

Many who are across the street or around the corner can be a source of companionship.

- Help an elderly friend put up holiday lights, or shovel sidewalks for those who can't.
- Are there neighbors you haven't met? Introduce yourself.
- If there is someone you know who may be alone for the holidays, consider inviting him/her to dine at your home or arrange to go out to dinner together.
- Clean up/fix up a local playground and write “Santa was here” on the sidewalk when you're done!

Make Memories a New Tradition

Another inspiring way to keep busy during the holiday is to honor your fire hero's memory. There are so many ways to do this. You may already have ideas *for a new tradition you'd like to start*. In addition, consider these.

- Designate a “memory box” or another special place where you, family, and friends can write down memories you treasure. Select a time during the holidays to read and share them together.
- Light a candle in your home in memory of your fire hero.
- Embrace memories of your fire hero by including one of his/her favorite dishes in your holiday meal or playing favorite music.
- If you have a yard, consider getting a live Christmas tree and planting it in a special place in his or her honor after the holiday.
- Always, always keep telling stories.





Engaging with Others

Opportunities to Seek Interaction

When you are grieving during the holiday season, it's important to not try to deal with it alone. Companionship can be located in a variety of places, both near and far. After all, the holidays are a wonderful time to connect—or reconnect—with others. Here are some suggestions.

Family and Friends

If a colleague, neighbor, or yoga buddy suggests that you get together, try very hard to do it, even if you aren't feeling it. Don't dodge phone calls (as tempting as it might be), and take every opportunity to spend time with family or friends sharing memories, continuing traditions that are important to you, or just appreciating quiet companionship. Remember, those who know you are aware that this time of year may be difficult, and they are there to help. Many of the ideas throughout this Toolkit can be done *together*.

Therapy

If you've been considering finding a therapist or you already have one, the holidays is an ideal time to schedule an appointment.

If you would like help finding grief support in your area, fill out the confidential request form on the NFFF family resources web page. There are also many online grief organizations target to specific family members.

Confidential Request Form:

www.firehero.org/resources/family-resources/support-resources

Online Grief Organizations:

www.firehero.org/resources/family-resources/support-resources/grief-resources

Meetups

If you aren't familiar with Meetup, it is a tool platform for finding and building local communities. Check to see if there are any meetups scheduled for your area. There are many types, ranging from grief discussion groups to shared hobbies to fire service-specific organized events. You can search in your geographic region here. Or, if you would like to explore the idea of hosting your own, check out the Meetup.com online information.

Geographic Region: www.meetup.com/find/groups

Host Your Own: www.meetup.com/start/organizing

NFFF Resources

There are many NFFF resources available to you, ranging from the ability to have a Fire Hero Family contact you to chat...to volunteer opportunities...to fallen hero tributes. Check out the information and links throughout the *NFFF Family Programs* web page. Also, be sure that you are subscribed to the *NFFF Newsletter* to stay aware of fellowship events and other activities in the coming year.

If you haven't already, check out *NFFF's Facebook* page online or on your mobile device. This is where you will find others who are in a similar situation; whether you choose to post or simply follow the conversation, you are welcomed there.

NFFF Family Programs:

www.firehero.org/resources/family-resources

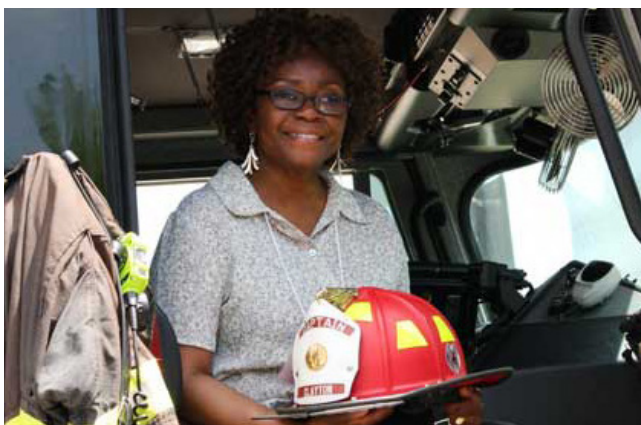
NFFF Newsletter:

www.firehero.org/about-us/media-center/publications/subscribe-online-newsletter

NFFF Facebook:

www.facebook.com/NationalFallenFirefightersFoundation





Holiday Season Self-Care

Gentle Reminders for Taking Time for Yourself

The holidays moving forward will be different—and difficult at times. Traditions are a big part of the season, so there may be some you'd like to keep and others you'd like to change. But however you decide to approach the holidays, remember that it's not all about others. It's also about you striving to find a bit of peace for yourself, too.

Self-Care Checklist

While much of the holiday season involves doing things for others, self-care is just as important. So as you face the days ahead, this checklist of ideas can serve as idea-starters you can use throughout the season and beyond.

✓ Be Open To New Traditions

To begin, decide where you want to spend the holidays. You may like a new location, or it may be important to you to keep it the same. Either way, discuss the plan with those you'll spend the holidays with so that you all know the plan. Maybe instead of putting up Christmas decorations, you can participate in a town festival or go on a neighborhood walk or drive to view holiday lights. Consider inviting new faces to share holiday events with you/your family, to change things up a bit and pay your spirit forward.

✓ Say YES

This season will be different, so try to have some back-up activities in mind. Take advantage of offers from friends, colleagues, or neighbors to get together or try a new tradition. Doing the unexpected or enjoying untraditional gatherings can help you deal with the expectations that often come with the holiday season. And by reaching out to those you're close to and asking about their holiday plans, you'll be reminding them that this holiday will be different for you.

✓ Nutrition Matters

Keep a food log as a reminder to eat healthfully, and pause to examine/recognize your feelings instead of reaching for extra food calories or alcohol.

✓ Unplug

Try a page-turning book in the evening instead of electronic devices. You'll be less stressed, and will sleep better, too.

✓ Try a New Hobby

This could be anything that intrigues you or that you've always wanted to dabble in—like journaling, photography, collecting, or woodworking. And who knows, this year's hobby may lead to next year's Christmas gifts!

✓ Aim to Be Thankful

End each day with a moment of gratitude, and try to find the bright side. While it's hard to avoid sadness, make an effort to focus on the positives. For example, if there is a personal or work event you aren't looking forward to, consider how lucky you are to have friends and colleagues to share it with. (But keep in mind that it's also okay to say "no"!)

✓ Exercise

Try yoga, meditation, or a nice walk outside—preferably in the sunshine—and without a headset. Exercise can reduce stress, help you fight depression, and improve your mood. It helps with grief overall, and it's more critical during the holidays than ever.

✓ Indulge Yourself

There is nothing like a massage, a manicure, or a long bath or jog to allow you to check out for a bit and just "be." Go for it.

✓ Allow Time For Reflection

Know that certain moments may trigger sad memories. Be sure to give yourself time away from everyone to acknowledge and process your feelings. Acknowledging your sadness (and not trying to hold back the tears) is the best way to be honest with yourself. Others will understand.

✓ Get Consistent Sleep

It sounds so simple, but it often doesn't happen during the holidays. It will help your physical and emotional health, so keep it on the top of your list. Cutting back on caffeine, sugar, and midday naps can help, too!



Contact Us

The National Fallen Firefighters Foundation is dedicated to honoring firefighters who die in the line of duty and assisting those heroes' families. We understand that dealing with the loss of a loved one is a long and difficult journey—especially during the holiday season.

We offer immediate and continuing assistance. More than anything, we want you to know that you are not alone. Though each person's loss is different, there are many families who have walked a similar path.

If you are looking for support resources or could use a listening ear, a compassionate heart, or a sense of hope, please don't hesitate to contact us.

Website with family resources: www.firehero.org/resources/family-resources/new

Facebook Group: www.facebook.com/NationalFallenFirefightersFoundation

Phone: (301) 447 1365

