

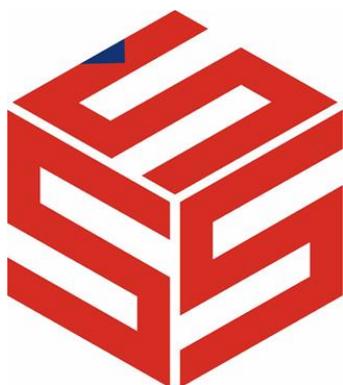


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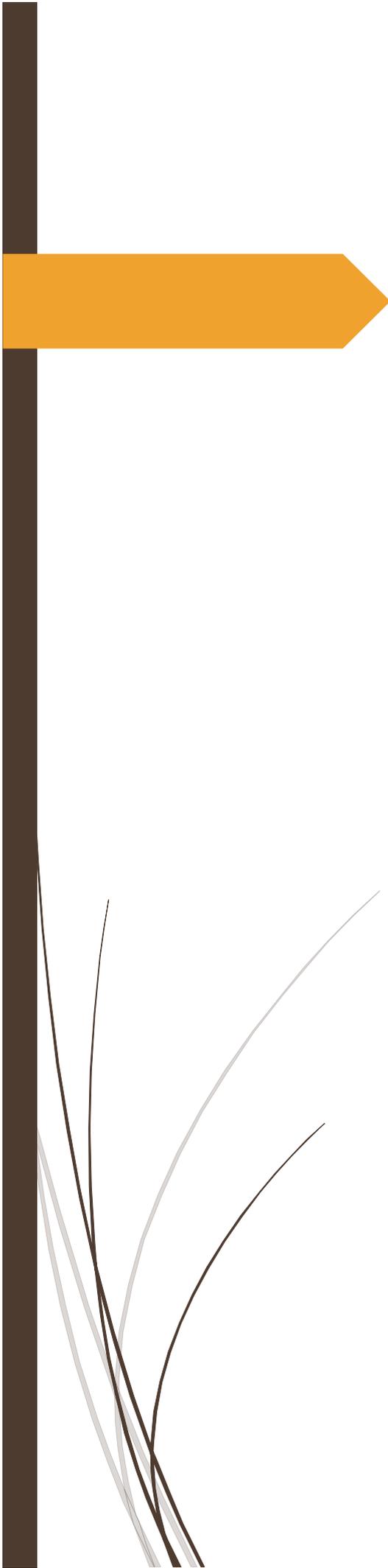


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KRAKÓW





# Stress Has Big Horns

Part 2

Survey Results

Guideline on Stress Coping Methods

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**Review Paolo Bernardini**

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## Introduction

Emergency service workers are at a high risk of experiencing occupational stress and traumatic events. Some units protect densely populated areas, or industrial facilities and critical infrastructure vulnerable to various accidents. In such cases, firefighters expect to have to deal with very difficult and dangerous incidents on almost every duty. Unfortunately, the nature of this profession gives no room to smooth graduation of expectations and mental and physical challenges for those who are at the beginning of their service and have not yet gained much professional experience. It is often the case that firefighters have to face very serious and sometimes traumatic events at the very beginning of their career. In addition to psychological knowledge and training, drawing on the experiences of other rescuers proves to be very helpful. In order to collect data on the psychological challenges and coping methods used by firefighters, studies and assessment of the situation in question was carried out, among other things, through the development of a questionnaire titled "Ways of coping with stress, mental strain and consequences related to taking part in difficult rescue operations". It was carried out on a group of Polish, Italian and Czech firefighters. The results were used to create good practice guidelines on how to cope with the severe mental distress faced by firefighters and what to do to prevent professional burnout. The studies provide a foundation for understanding the actual needs of firefighters with regard to mental health and maintaining mental balance. However, these guidelines are mainly intended for firefighters, but also for psychologists dealing with professional burnout, in order to more effectively prepare training to prevent it.

The study on coping with stress was conducted on a group of firefighters in three countries: Poland - 28 people, Italy - 30 people and the Czech Republic - 58 people. The results in many questions were similar in all three countries, which shows how much we have in common despite the differences in the systems of service and education in the firefighting profession. These similarities also point to the conclusion that developing international training programmes and workshops is possible. Their value will be reflected in the diverse approach to the same issues, which, as we have shown in our study, are universal to all firefighters.

## Prevalence of negative effects of stress among the respondents

The first question sought to determine the level of stress in the responders' work environment. Respondents were asked to indicate how often during the year they face stressful situations. There was a three-point answer scale to choose from. This question was a subjective assessment of the stress experienced by each responder. It is not an objective measure of the number of challenging events. Therefore, it is not obvious whether the respondents' answered "I rather do not experience stress at work" is due to good distancing and coping with stress or rather to an actual lack of stress. Perhaps the respondent has not been involved in stressful operations because he is a novice firefighter and has very little experience, or he is on duty in a quiet area with no highways, industrial facilities or dense population. When asked about the frequency of experiencing occupational stress, the answers of Polish and Italian respondents were very similar. More than 60 % of them do not experience significant stress. The rest of respondents, just less than a half, declared to experience stress several times a month (36% of Polish and 30% of Italian respondents), while a few (4-7%) respondents declared that they experience stress more often - almost after every duty. The group of firefighters from the Czech Republic provided more opposite answers. Only 14 % of respondents from this country chose the middle answer, which was "several times a month". Almost 80 % of respondents do not experience stress in relation to the service, with 7 % of the group complaining to experience stress more than often. Such studies can be developed by comparing these results with the actual number of rescue operations carried out, with particular emphasis on the traumatic ones.

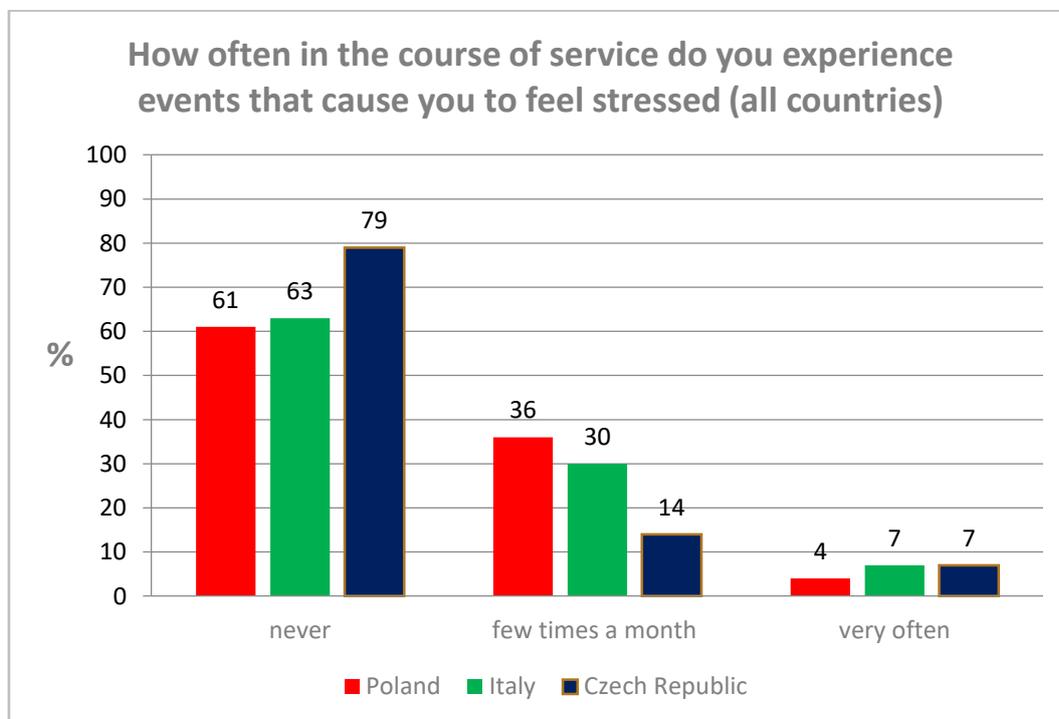


Chart 1 Frequency of stressful situations in the service – Poland, Italy, Czech Republic

## Negative impact of occupational stress on firefighters' life outside of work

In this question, the respondents were asked to indicate the most common negative effects of stress. The examples of symptoms to choose from concerned different spheres of human functioning. The sphere of cognitive disorders, i.e. those related to thinking, memory and concentration, included: intrusive thoughts about work or a stressful situation, distraction, feeling “wrecked” or finding it difficult to “get on with things”, impaired memory and concentration. Affective symptoms included feeling depressed and anxious. The physiological symptoms included gastrointestinal distress and overstimulation. The social functioning sphere included withdrawal and isolation. When searching for effective ways of coping, it is first necessary to recognise how the body responds to stressful events. Then adjust the ways according to the symptoms. The number of symptoms selected by the respondents in the questionnaire is illustrated in the charts below: Chart 2 - Firefighters from Poland, Chart 3 - Firefighters from the Czech Republic and Chart 4 - Firefighters from Italy.

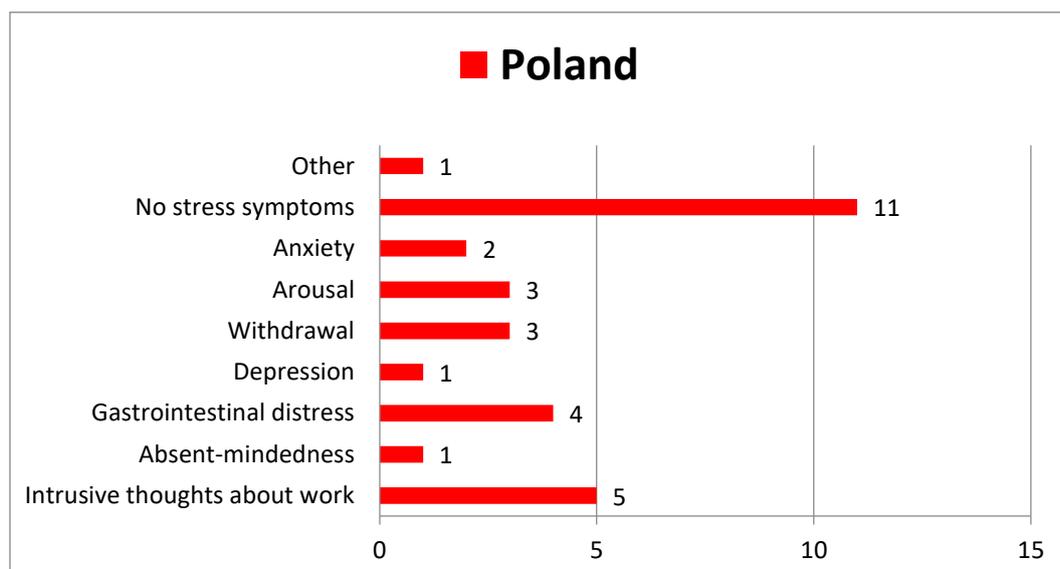


Chart 2 Most often selected stress symptoms in the group of firefighters from Poland

Among firefighters from Poland, the most often selected symptoms were those of the cognitive nature. Intrusive thoughts related to work or rescue operations. These appear out of control, usually against the will. Recalling unpleasant images may trigger previously experienced emotions (most often anxiety and feelings of helplessness). Stress release meetings conducted by psychologists or trained unit and shift commanders should help reduce them. The purpose of such meetings is to show firefighters that these reactions are quite normal, and many persons experience them. Discussing the incident also allows it to be better “sorted out” and understood. Dispelling the concerns about whether actions taken by firefighters during the operation were effective and correct can help reduce future analysing of and dwelling on the event. After a difficult rescue operation, it will be natural to

question whether everything possible was done to mitigate the threat, which is why the role of command in addressing these concerns is so important. Somatization disorders, such as gastrointestinal distress, came second. With such symptoms, it is essential to know the source of the reaction. Somatizations are symptoms affecting the body, caused by emotions we experience. Recognising and expressing emotions reduces the influence of negative feelings and enables greater control. Awareness, acceptance and, above all, putting emotions into words will prevent them from being expressed through the body as somatic symptoms. Expressing and sharing emotions is a very personal experience and possible only when you feel confident and safe with those around you.

Symptoms of arousal and withdrawal, which are strongly linked, were equally often selected by firefighters. Increased stress causes irritability, which can result in conflicts and deterioration of relationships with family and friends. As a result of participating in extreme events, firefighters may develop a belief that what they experience is so complicated that no one will be able to understand them. This will deepen their withdrawal and feelings of social isolation. Many times, this withdrawal will be to protect loved ones from negative emotions firefighters experience. Unfortunately, this strategy will lead to increasing misunderstandings and deepen a sense of isolation. Family and friends who see their loved one's suffering cannot understand the reasons because they are kept at arm's length. Reaching for help of a psychologist to share these emotions may be the best solution for the firefighter. After a few meetings, clients may experience relief, a reduction of tension and, most importantly, they will stop taking work problems into their private and family life.

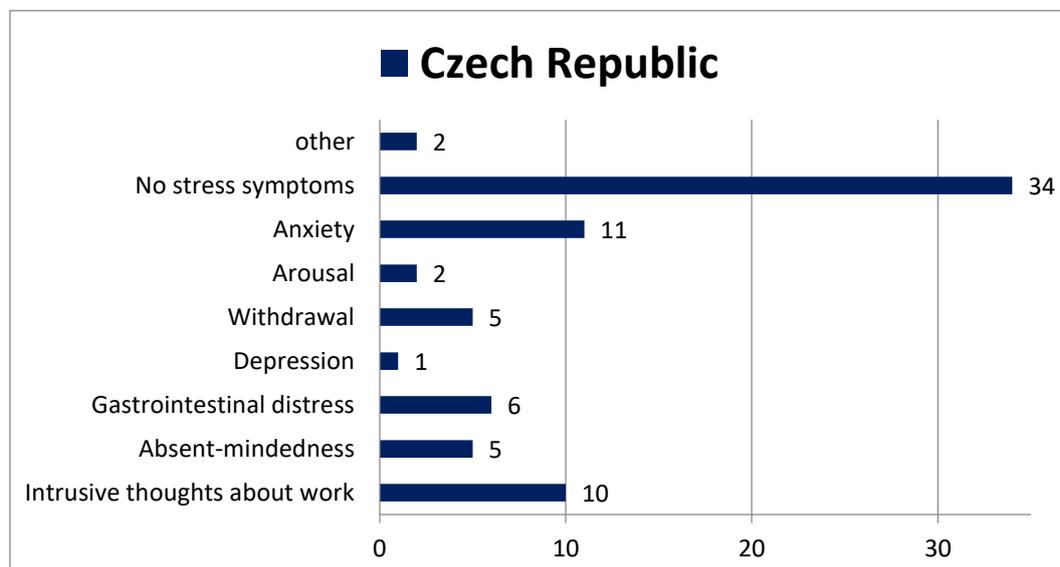


Chart 3 Most often selected stress symptoms in the group of firefighters from the Czech Republic

Among the answers given by firefighters from the Czech Republic, stress symptoms related to anxiety come first and cognitive symptoms (intrusive thinking about work) come second. Emotional tension and anxiety is caused by fear, which can be compared to a “phantom enemy”, because we do not always know where it has originated from. We feel

the consequences as emotions but are not always able to identify their source. Human nature “hates” unclear situations and very often substitutes various events in place of the cause of negative feelings, sometimes unrelated to the real cause of the anxiety. This, in turn, causes us to devote a great deal of effort to dealing with unimportant issues and problems, which in no way reduces anxiety, but actually acts the opposite way and intensifies it. Again, the help of specialists in observing and understanding the causes of these feelings may prove to be the most effective solution.

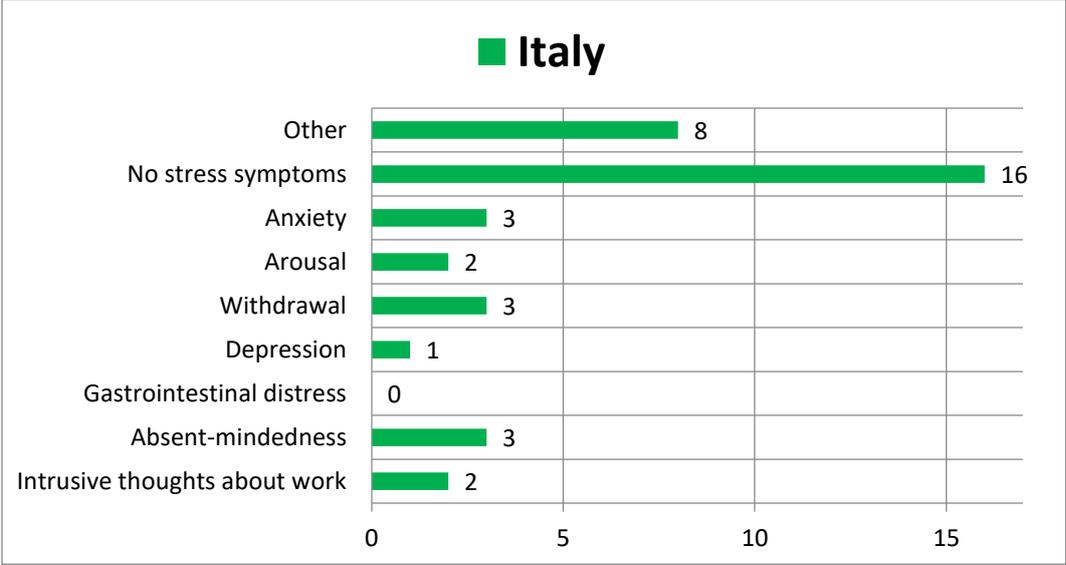


Chart 4 Most often selected stress symptoms in the group of firefighters from Italy

Chart 4 shows how firefighters from Italy answered this question. The most often selected symptoms by them were absent-mindedness, withdrawal and anxiety. A significant difference from the answers given by groups from other countries can be seen with regard to gastrointestinal symptoms. Out of the 30 firefighters, none selected this symptom as their response to stress. This is one of the most interesting pieces of information revealed by the analysis of the results, as it may indicate that Italian firefighters use stress coping methods that are very effective in preventing somatic symptoms. It would be worthwhile to have a closer look at these methods of coping with stress and preventing its negative effects. The above also shows the great importance of conducting cross-cultural studies and projects designed to improve the mental health of firefighters and to better deal with this demanding profession.

## Assessment of firefighters' mental readiness for the service

Most firefighters feel well prepared to cope with occupational stress. In this respect, there is little difference between the officers of the three countries surveyed. Nearly three quarters responded that their training and experience allows them to cope with stress at work. As with the first question, these results show the subjective assessment of the respondents. Psychology. In addition, case-to-case observations and studies in this area show that the rescuer's training is more often included in vocational training programmes. This is promising and beneficial for rescuers and victims, as better training will translate into better quality of aid provided stress during operations is also passed on to the victims, so stress reduction and rescuer's self-control will be beneficial to all engaged in the operation.



*Chart 5 Does your professional training help you cope with stress? - Poland, Italy, Czech Republic*

One of the required prerequisites for successful coping at work is adequate professional training, which should be supported by work experience. The variety and complexity of psychosocial stresses makes the preparation of a good training programme that effectively prepares people to deal with these challenges very difficult. It is important that the programme is based on current psychological knowledge on human functioning, but also considers the context of the firefighter's work and refers to specific circumstances and practical examples. The above chart shows that each country implemented its own training and education programme in the field of stress prevention, and the recipients find it helpful and effective.

## Identification of effective ways to cope with stress according to firefighters from Poland, Italy, and the Czech Republic

The purpose of psychology education and mental health prevention is, among other things, to identify ways, activities and reactions that will be helpful in coping with stress. The scope of these actions can be continuously expanded with further activities depending on individual preferences. Firefighters should be given opportunities to share their experiences in this particular area, as observing how others cope with stress can be inspirational and help discover own methods. The survey attempted to identify the ways firefighters cope with stress most often. From among the suggested options, respondents were asked to choose any number of ways they use. Ways of coping with stress can be classified and grouped based on various patterns. The list of ways in question 4 included, among others:

1. Ways related to close relationships and social contact such as talking to a psychologist, spending time with people (e.g. meeting family or friends), helping others outside of work (e.g. volunteering or individually helping people in need, working in the local community, etc.).
2. Ways focused on recognising and understanding your own emotions related to the event (e.g. analysing and trying to understand the situation that caused the stress, cognitive work through a difficult situation, focusing on the emotions you feel and trying to manage them,
3. Ways of avoiding unpleasant emotions and engaging in activities that allow to focus on something other than stressful and overwhelming events.

Actions taken in crisis situations can sometimes be ineffective or even harmful and have negative impact on coping. Sometimes human reaction is intuitive and despite good intentions, actions do not bring any improvement. This happens for several reasons. One of them is the firmly entrenched “courage myth”, which says that strong people do not complain about anything. They have no right to feel unpleasant emotions and, when something difficult happens, they must face it “manfully”, which, unfortunately, many people understand as pretending that everything is fine, suppressing emotions and hiding them from others as if they were something embarrassing. During socialisation, even young children are taught not to cry and get angry, but to be strong, supportive and help their parents. Such pressure is particularly strong towards boys, although it is more often affecting girls too. Although the intention of such a message is to build resilience, but in fact its meaning is quite different, and we are taught from an early age that emotions are bad, unnatural and must be fought like the worst enemy. But the truth is that humans are emotional beings by nature. Rejecting emotions will not make us stronger, quite the opposite. Problems and difficulties will accumulate until a certain point, beyond which it is no longer possible to pretend that everything is fine. The problems will return twice as strong. Unfortunately, the “courage myth” is still popular among professionals, such as rescuers and firefighters.

## Firefighters' satisfaction with their profession and mental workload

Firefighting is a highly regarded profession. Firefighters are always at the top of the list when it comes to the most trusted professionals. The high social standing achieved through the nature of their work is an important reward and a source of satisfaction. Despite the difficulties, very high expectations and considerable mental and physical strain, most firefighters enjoy their work and are rather satisfied with it. In this respect, no major differences have been noticed between the responders from the surveyed countries. As shown in Chart 6, nearly half of firefighters from Italy and the Czech Republic declares to be very satisfied with their work, with more than 30 % of respondents being “rather satisfied”. It was the other way among the responders from Poland: 25% declared to be “very satisfied” with the remainder being “rather satisfied”. Very few Polish and Czech responders declared to be dissatisfied with their job. Strangely enough, 20 % of Italian responders expressed strong dissatisfaction with their profession. It might be interesting to analyse these results and search for the reasons. In the Fire Service, mainly people with great passion and fascination for emergency response operations can be found. The commitment of young fire service students is usually very high. Fire school students prove to be not only ready to learn, but are also active, have the desire to act, but above all a hunger for experiencing and "being in action". Involvement in the Volunteer Fire Service is also very popular among firefighters (both professional and fire school students), so they also contribute their free time to firefighting. Unfortunately, such a great commitment can lead to occupational burnout which can be reflected in job dissatisfaction.

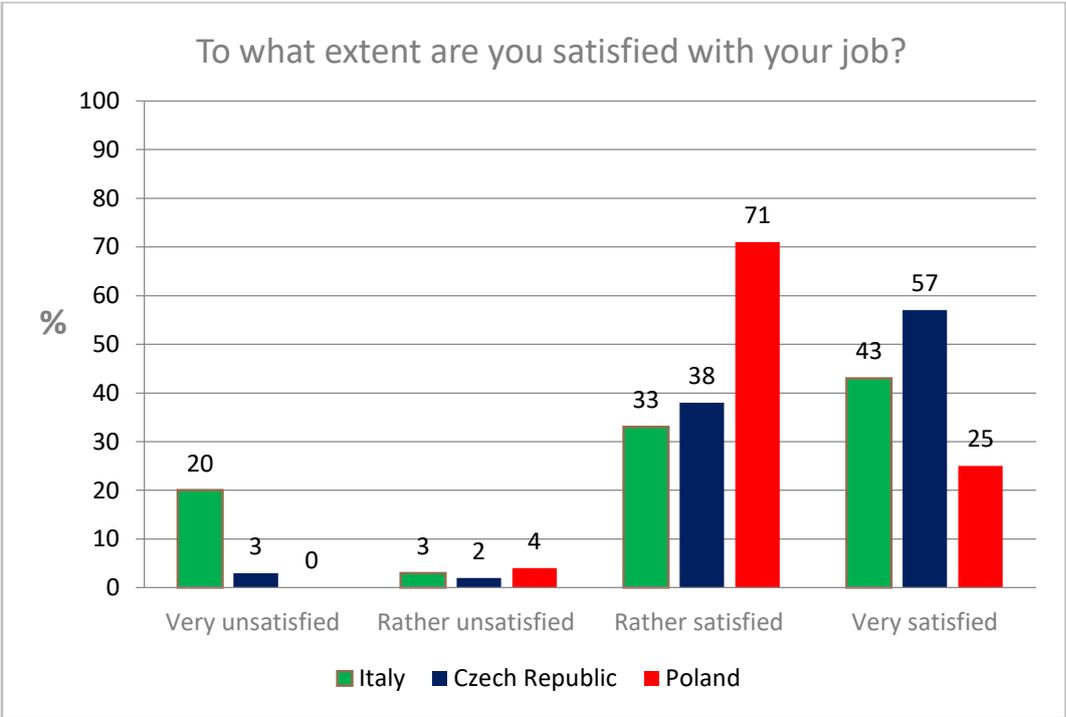


Chart 6 Level of job satisfaction

The results shown in the chart above should be analysed in conjunction with the next question on firefighters' subjective sense that their job is mentally and emotionally draining, as shown in Chart 7. Answers of all respondents, regardless of their nationality, were very similar. The vast majority experience for themselves the difficulties of their job. Only a few respondents declared that they did not find their job difficult. Perhaps these were firefighters who had not yet learnt the specifics of the job the hard way and taken part in the difficult rescue operations. Such results from a large group (more than 100 people in total) clearly demonstrate the need to balance the job strain with professional support from psychologists and preventive medicine specialists, and the possibility of cooperation for this purpose between the services of the three countries shall be an innovative approach to effectively help better cope with occupational strain.

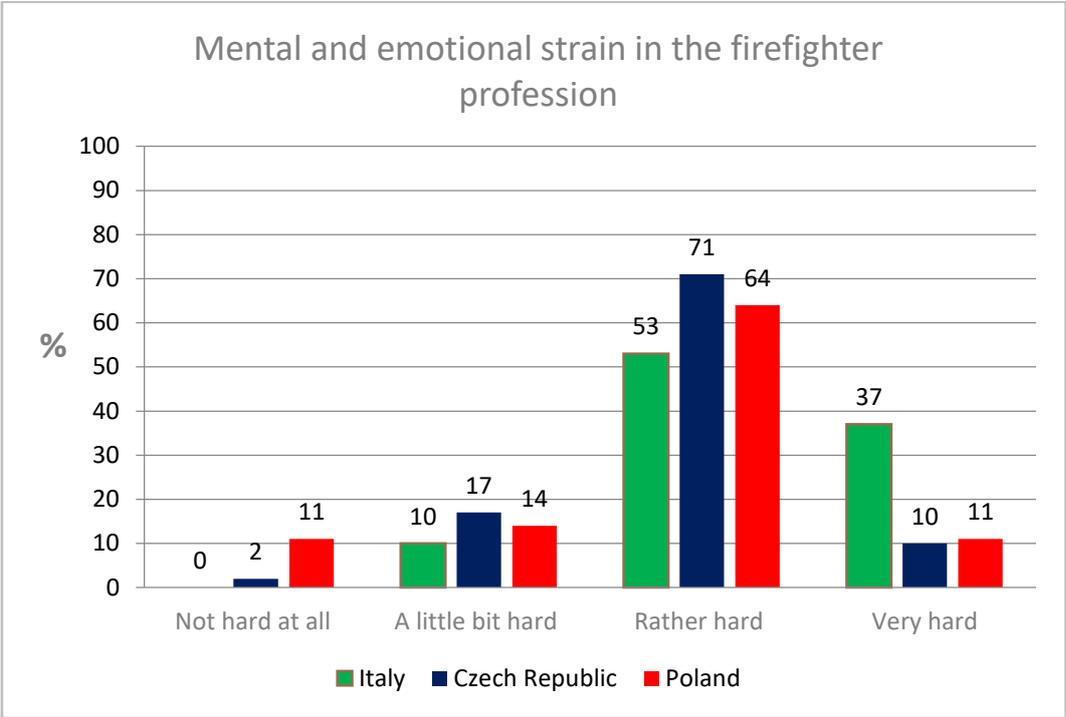


Chart 7 Subjective assessment of mental and emotional strain

## Stress coping self-assessment

In the last question, firefighters were asked to use a seven-point scale to specify how they have been coping with stress over the last two years, where 0 corresponded to the statement "I rather do not cope" and 6 corresponded to "I cope very well". The results for each country are shown in Charts 6,7 and 8.

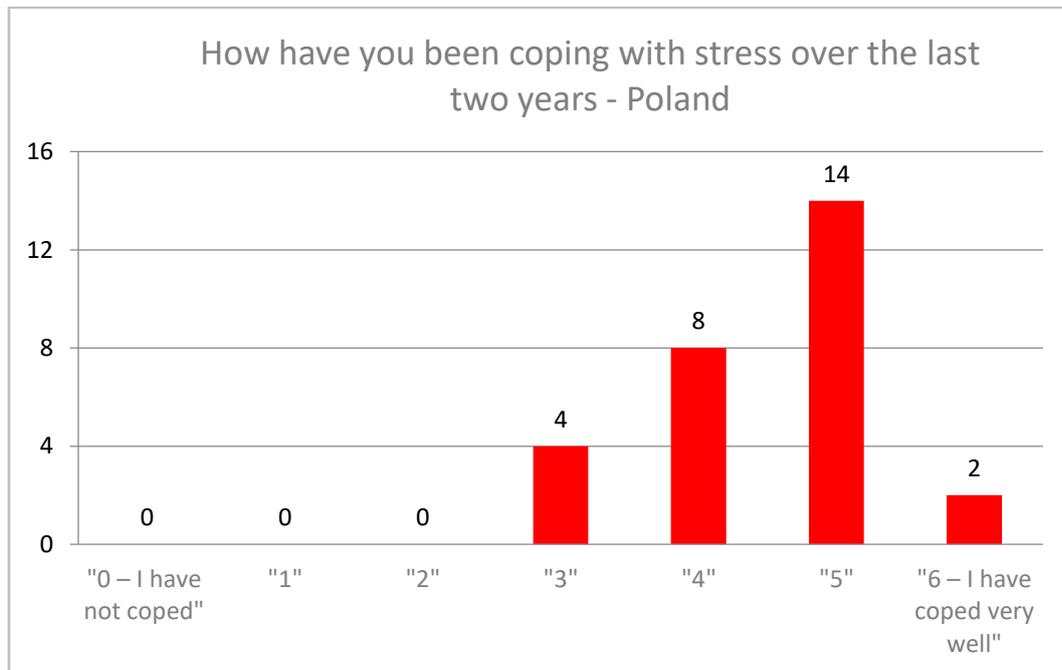


Chart 8 Stress coping self-assessment - firefighters from Poland

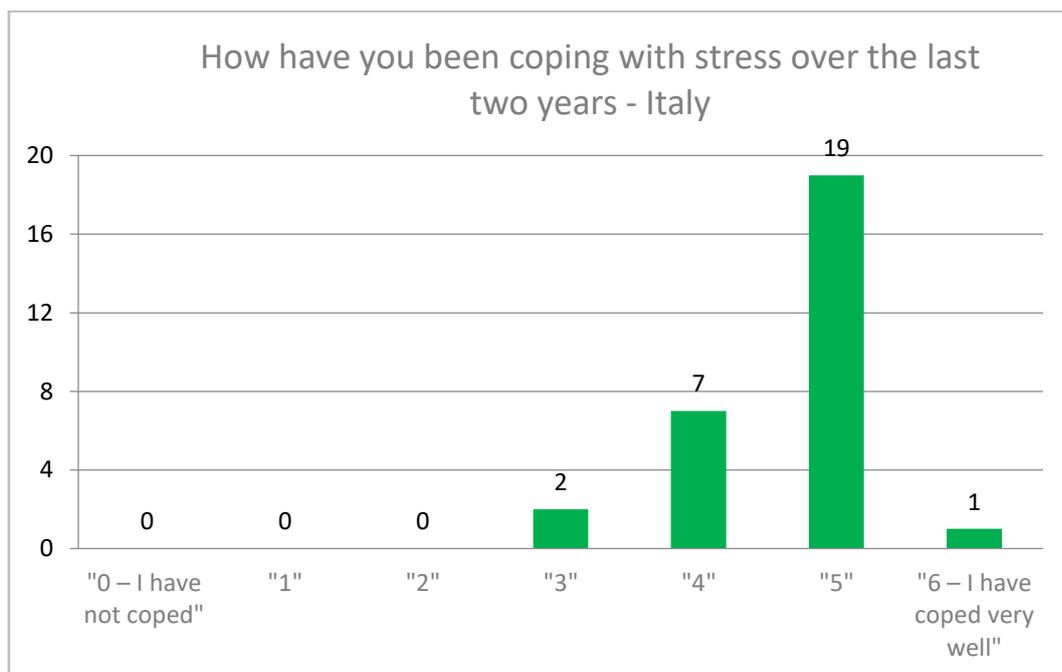


Chart 9 Stress coping self-assessment - firefighters from Italy

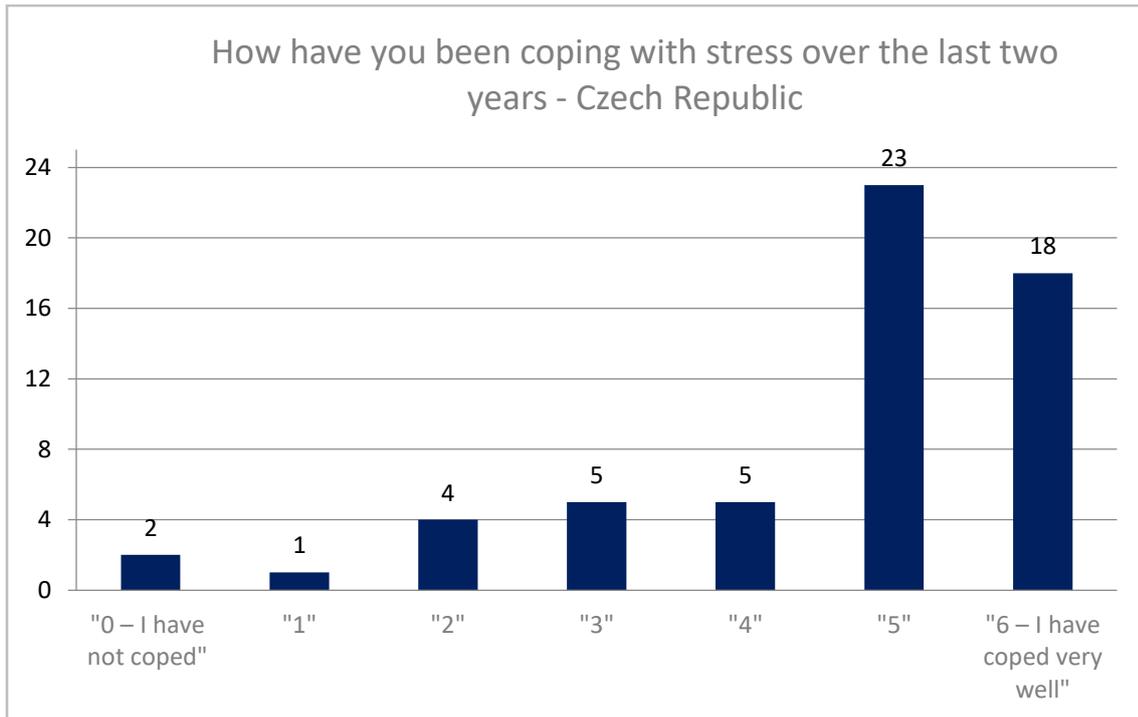


Chart 10 Stress coping self-assessment - firefighters from the Czech Republic

Most firefighters cope well with occupational stress. This indicates good training for the profession but also the possession of effective ways for relieving stress and tension. It would be most interesting to compare the subjective ways of coping with the age of respondents and years of experience in the firefighting service. Some of the respondents indicated their service experience in years, which allowed to observe tendency, but in order to find the correlation, it would be necessary to extend such studies. Some questionnaires have shown that poorer coping comes along with long work experience. One theory of coping with stress says that experiencing difficult events exhausts an adaptation energy, so contrary to popular opinion, the more traumatic events we experience, the more "emotional baggage" we must carry, rather than build resilience for the years to come. Organisational and systemic solutions should give firefighters and rescuers the opportunity to remain professionally active without taking part in traumatic events after a lapse of certain time in rescue operations.

## Conclusion

The above survey has shed some light on the ways of coping with stress in the firefighting profession. Presenting this problem through the results of the survey was an attempt to give voice to the subjects. It was highly interesting and valuable to analyse it from a cross-cultural perspective. This gave grounds to observe similarities that proved the universal nature of the issue, but also differences, which can be seen as foundation for finding new and better ways of coping with stress.

As a result of the study, several major conclusions can be drawn.

1. Despite growing awareness of safety matters and the continuously improving systems for accident prevention, the work of rescuers often involves traumatic events with many victims, which is very demanding in terms of physical and mental abilities. Approximately 14 - 36% of rescuers experience such events several times a month. They cause a lot of stress and mental strain.
2. The negative impact of occupational stress on a life outside of work involves experiencing symptoms of an emotional, cognitive, and physiological nature and results in a change in social functioning. The results of the survey regarding symptoms firefighters experience most often varies depending on the country. Intrusive thoughts and physiological disorders are predominant among firefighters from Poland, recurring memories affect firefighters from Italy, and those from the Czech Republic experience emotional symptoms such as anxiety. Some symptoms were almost non-existent in some groups (such as physiological ones among Italian firefighters).
3. Most firefighters (72-89 %) feel mentally well prepared for their job. Firefighters from Poland ranked first. This shows that the education and training in scope of psychological readiness are well perceived and rated as effective by the rescuers.
4. Most of the respondents feel satisfied with their job, but when comparing the results from the three countries, a clear difference can be observed in choosing one of the extreme answers. As many as 20 % of Italian firefighters declared their job dissatisfaction. This answer was chosen by only 3 % of the respondents from the Czech Republic and none from Poland.
5. All firefighters perceive their job as “very difficult” or “rather difficult”. On a four-point scale, the extreme answer to the question about the level of difficulty due to mental and emotional strain (“very difficult”) was selected by the highest number of firefighters from Italy (37 %). Firefighters from Poland and the Czech Republic chose this extreme answer less often (10-11%). It might be interesting to compare the above with results of job satisfaction surveys in further studies.

Who we are, what we think, how we behave and, consequently, what we feel, is the combination of innate personality, upbringing, and the environment in which we live. Looking for reasons for differences in responding to stress would require all these factors to be analysed. Findings from these comparisons may provide substantial grounds for prevention measures regarding stress and stress-related disorders. As the study shows, cross-cultural comparisons can be an excellent source of knowledge and skills in this area. The scope of the study can be developed by including further questions and analysing factors for better coping with mental strain and stress. Such studies and projects are particularly important for emergency response and uniformed services because the lives and safety of hundreds of people depend on their performance. Furthermore, preparing and training rescuers requires a lot of time and financial resources, so their psychological functioning must not be overlooked. The study has also shown that much more can be discovered when researching stress through international cooperation than only on local grounds. One such example is the very successful coping with stress by Italian rescuers. The fact that they experience almost no somatic symptoms proves that stress can be coped with effectively. Human behaviour and reactions are universal, but also highly dependent on the circumstances and the fast-changing social context. These changes include greater concern for one's own mental health. More and more people accept that the substance of feelings and emotions is just as important as physical health and cannot be neglected or overlooked. As authors, we hope that this study has encouraged active rescuers and future firefighting students to take greater care of their own mental health, and we have also shown that stress is not so terrifying and coping with it is possible. We encourage you challenge it hand on and take it like the bull by its horns, and with a bit of support from family and friends, experienced rescuers and psychologists, you will certainly be able to fight it.