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Psychological well-being in firefighters and its importance in emergency practice: a systematic review, 2020-2025

Bienestar psicológico en bomberos y su importancia en la práctica en casos de emergencias: una revisión sistemática, 2020-2025

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Abstract
The main objective of this research article is to examine psychological well-being and its importance in practice in the various emergency situations faced by firefighters in Peru. The methodology was based on a systematic review of the literature and a bibliographic design, for which ten articles were selected for final analysis, allowing information from different specialized sources to be compiled and examined. The findings pointed to the psychological well-being of this population, which is vulnerable due to the nature of their work, as they are exposed to various accidents, inhalation of toxic gases, fires, and other factors that significantly affect their mental health and psychological well-being, leading to emotional problems such as anger, sadness, frustration, relationship problems, guilt, among others. The conclusions showed that the current situation should be considered a priority for defense and health authorities, as firefighters are often overlooked. The importance of implementing preventive strategies and psychological well-being promotion programs, developed in coordination with mental health professionals, that can be applied in different fire departments across the country was also highlighted.

Keywords: psychological well-being, mental health, firefighters

Resumen
Este artículo de investigación tiene como objetivo principal examinar el bienestar psicológico y su importancia en la práctica en las diversas salidas de emergencia presentadas por los bomberos en el Perú. La metodología se enmarcó en una revisión sistemática de la literatura y se sustentó en un diseño bibliográfico, para lo cual se seleccionaron diez artículos para el análisis final, lo que permitió recopilar y examinar información proveniente de distintas fuentes especializadas. Los hallazgos apuntaron a que el bienestar psicológico de esta población, vulnerable debido a la naturaleza de su labor, ya que están expuestos a diversos accidentes, inhalación de gases tóxicos, incendios y otros factores que afectan significativamente su salud mental y bienestar psicológico, llevándolos a problemas emocionales como rabia, tristeza, frustración, problemas en la pareja, culpa, entre otros. Las conclusiones arrojaron que la situación actual debe ser considerada como una prioridad para las autoridades de defensa y salud, ya que muchas veces son olvidados, asimismo, se destaca la importancia de implementar estrategias preventivas y programas de promoción del bienestar psicológico, desarrollados en coordinación con profesionales especializados en salud mental, que puedan ser aplicados en las diferentes compañías bomberiles del país.

Palabras clave: bienestar psicológico, salud mental, bomberos

Introduction
In recent years, the World Health Organization has reported that firefighters worldwide are continually exposed to multiple hazards due to the nature of their work in emergencies, coupled with the high demand in urban áreas (OMS, 2018). Their responses to these situations can be highly stressful, and prolonged exposure to such conditions significantly impacts their social, familial, and occupational spheres, rendering them a vulnerable group prone to psychological ailments and disorders. Similarly, Céspedes (2020) highlights that the environmental factors to which firefighters are subjected, if not adequately addressed, can lead to conflicts in familial, professional, and work settings.

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The General Corps of Volunteer Firefighters of Peru (CGBVP) is founded on a historical and altruistic basis, with the ethos of providing assistance without expecting anything in return. This is reflected in the fact that Peruvian firefighters do not receive remuneration for their services, despite carrying out essential functions such as prevention, accident management, hazardous incident response, fire control, and prehospital medical emergencies. Thus, understanding their psychological training is crucial, as the impacts arising from responding to multiple emergencies foster stress, trauma, and anxiety, which manifest at motor, physiological, and cognitive levels, thereby affecting their mental well-being and personal development (Tenazoa, 2019).

Sánchez (2013) defines psychological well-being as a subjective aspect encompassing personal functions across psychological, social, economic, and physical domains, alongside job satisfaction and relationship quality among other important determinants. Furthermore, Idrovo (2024) emphasizes that psychosocial risks influence firefighters' psychological well-being, as stress, risks, trauma, and the inherent pressures of emergency situations adversely affect their mental health.

Psychological well-being is conceptualized as a component of mental health, linked to self-actualization and existential challenges, and is predicated on human growth and potential (Asad et al., 2023). Additionally, Delgado and Tejada (2020) describe psychological well-being as the ensemble of experiences one undergoes: first, in confronting challenges while seeking alternative solutions through effort and, second, in perceiving success in overcoming such obstacles. This implies that psychological well-being is closely tied to individual perceptions of experiences across various contexts (Villarrubia et al., 2023).

According to García (2020), the concept of psychological well-being encompasses two perspectives: a subjective well-being associated with satisfaction and pleasure derived from positive emotions related to experiences, and psychological well-being focused on personal growth and its development throughout life. Psychological well-being is fundamentally rooted in the growth and potential of individuals, enhancing interpersonal relationships, sense of purpose, and autonomy (Nurius et al., 2015; Ryff, 1989, 2017). Román et al. (2021) assert that psychological well-being evolves from pleasurable experiences involving mind-body interactions, with positive emotions playing a critical role in its enhancement.

According to Collas and Cuzcano (2019), psychological well-being is influenced by a complex interaction of various factors, including personality styles, biological conditions, social environments, and personal beliefs. Rodríguez et al. (2020) note that these elements do not act in isolation but rather interrelate and influence how individuals perceive and cope with life. Thus, resilience, robust social support, good physical health, and positive beliefs about oneself and the world promote greater psychological well-being, whereas the absence or disruption of any of these factors can lead to vulnerability to emotional distress. Experiences of observed or experienced violence, as well as exposure to contexts with addictive behaviors, further exacerbate negative impacts on psychological well-being (Solórzano-Gonzales, 2019).

In Australia, Lawn et al. (2020) conducted research on the impact of ambulance work and its psychological effects, identifying consequences associated with risk factors such as workplace organization and mood, which affect the mental health of personnel. Tenazoa (2019) reveals that 54.79% of the firefighter population in Peru experiences significant mental health impacts due to constant stress, anxiety, and lack of emotional regulation. Regarding the assessed dimensions, 21.92% exhibited difficulties in self-acceptance, coping, and emotional stability, while 16.44% presented symptoms of pain, irritability, and sadness.

This systematic review aims to explore the significance of the construct of psychological well-being, particularly in emergency contexts. Its analysis is particularly relevant for the Office of Psychological Well-Being of the XXV Departmental Command of Lima Norte of the Fire Brigade, as it seeks to provide a theoretical foundation to guide the efforts of firefighter psychologists.

Methodology

This article presents a systematic literature review grounded in a bibliographic design that utilized inclusion criteria to ensure the quality of information gathered from reliable scientific sources between 2021 and 2025. The review encompassed academic communities, including both documents and scientific studies rigorously sourced from databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, ProQuest, and SciELO. The purpose was to describe and demonstrate a review of the findings with objective results, while also excluding books and studies that did not contribute meaningfully to the problem posed in the study (Palella Stracuzzi & Martins Pestana, 2010).

Table 1
Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication year	From 01/01/2021 to 01/01/2025	Before 01/01/2021
Type of documents	Scientific articles (Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), ProQuest, and SciELO)	Other types of sources
Languages	English and Portuguese	Other languages
Age range in samples	People older than 18 years	People younger than 18 years
Publication year	From 01/01/2021 to 01/01/2025	Before 01/01/2021

In the search process, using the databases already mentioned in the inclusion criteria, the initial consultation involved 40 articles. Then, during the screening stage, the inclusion and exclusion criteria detailed in Table 1 were applied. 30 articles were discarded based on title and abstract, and subsequently, 20 studies were discarded after full-text review due to a lack of methodological relevance. Finally, 10 articles were selected for the final analysis, as shown in Figure 1 (PRISMA flow diagram).

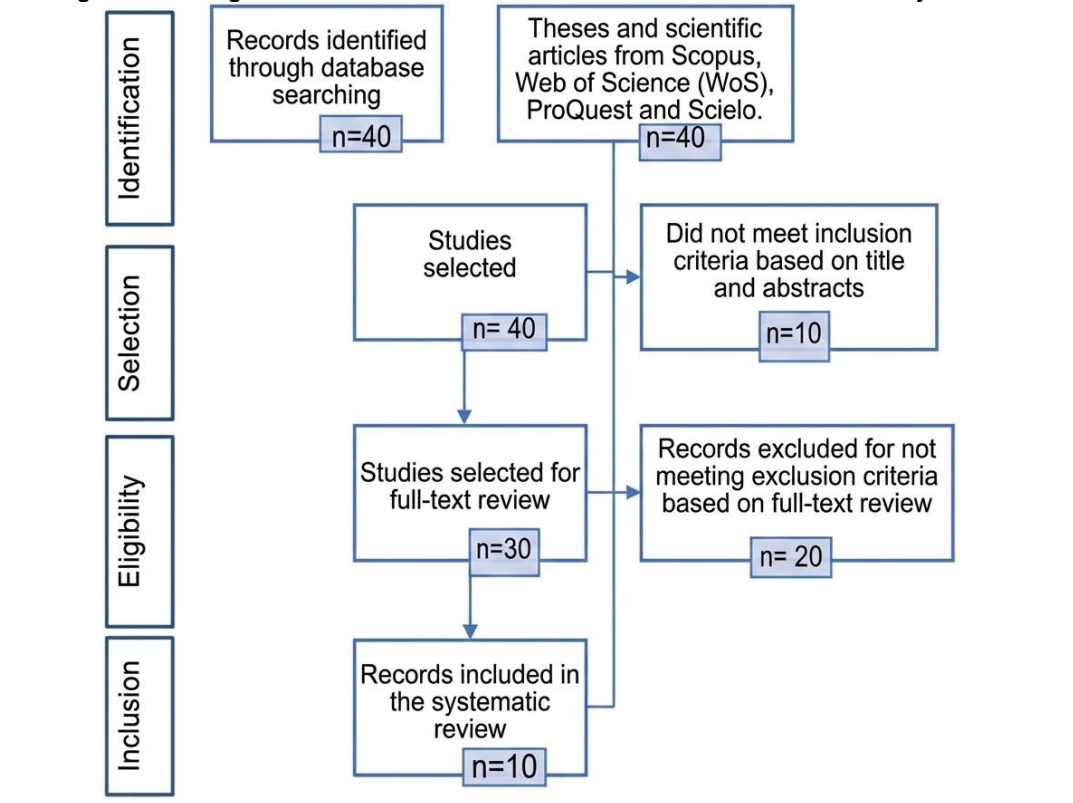
Table 2
Characteristics of studies included in the review

No.	Author/ year	Context	Type of study	Population	Main findings
1	Báez Cotto, 2024	Paramedic and firefighter health	Applied Research	Healthcare and emergency personnel, including firefighters	Analyzes the impact of emergencies on psychological well-being and proposes guidelines for self-care and coping for first responders.
2	Flores et al., 2025	Buena Fe Fire Department (Ecuador)	Applied Study, Mixed Methods	Fire department operational personnel	Describes elevated levels of stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion in firefighters. Highlights the need for psychological support and self-care practices.
3	Freitas et al., 2023	Brazilian military firefighters	Quantitative Study	Military firefighters	Examines the impact of work on health self-care, demonstrating how working conditions can affect psychological well-being.
4	Orellana-Ortega et al., 2024	Firefighters in a city in Chile	Quantitative Study	Firefighters from a Chilean city	Evaluates post-traumatic stress in firefighters exposed to emergencies, demonstrating an elevated risk to their mental health.
5	Pinargote & Barreiro, 2025	Fire Department (Ecuador)	Quantitative Study	Firefighters from an emergency service	Analyzes the influence of burnout syndrome on the behavior of firefighters and its impact on psychological well-being.
6	Díaz, 2025	Firefighters of Cojedes State (Venezuela)	Correlational Study	Professional firefighters	Demonstrates that emotional intelligence predicts job satisfaction and psychological well-being in firefighters.
7	Cruz et al., 2025	Healthcare personnel in disasters	Applied Theoretical Study	Healthcare personnel in emergency contexts	Proposes a strategy for strengthening the psychological well-being of healthcare personnel in disaster settings.
8	Oliveira & Moraes, 2021	Military Fire Department (Brazil)	Descriptive Study	Fire department professionals	Correlates working conditions with mental health indicators and psychological distress in firefighters.

9	Van Hasselt et al., 2022	Firefighters (thematic synthesis)	Review Article, Non-Empirical Study	Specialized literature on firefighters	Synthesizes stress and mental health factors in firefighters and highlights the need to implement psychological support programs.
10	Patiño et al., 2025	Nursing staff in disasters	Intervention Study	Nursing professionals	Evaluates an intervention program to strengthen psychological well-being in personnel exposed to disasters.

Figure 1

PRISMA flow diagram showing the results of the search and selection of articles for analysis



Results and discussion

The findings indicate that while theories of psychological well-being exist, they are generally broad and exhibit limited adaptation to the specific context of Peruvian firefighters, particularly concerning individual factors. As noted by Baez Cotto (2024) in his study on the impact of psychological well-being during emergencies attended by first responders, including healthcare personnel, paramedics, and firefighters, this type of work often leads to occupational, personal, familial, and academic burnout. Additionally, Morales et al. (2022) confirm that any worker exposed to critical events and long work hours in the role of providing first aid faces emotional difficulties.

Ryff (1989), a pioneer in the field of psychological well-being, proposes a multidimensional model known as the "integrated model of personal development," which comprises six dimensions: self-acceptance, positive relationships, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. According to Cordero (2020), positive relationships were identified between self-acceptance, personal development, and a sense of purpose, with these areas being particularly affected by the stressful context experienced by participants. This perspective highlights the significance of self-acceptance as a factor that facilitates the construction of healthy social connections. Furthermore, it suggests that individuals with a high degree of autonomy demonstrate a greater capacity to adjust to and respond effectively in novel or changing scenarios. Moreover, personal growth contributes to the enhancement of skills, achievements, and competencies aimed at specific goals. In this regard, Araque et al. (2020) reinforce the importance of these elements, demonstrating their positive influence on overall well-being and adaptive coping in adverse circumstances.

Several conceptualizations of psychological well-being exist. Ryan et al. (cited in Benavides et al., 2020) define it as the capacity to maintain a positive self-perception, accepting oneself as one is, while projecting into the future with a holistic perspective that fosters personal growth. Molina et al. (2023) also emphasize the importance of having tools to assess psychological well-being, which can provide a foundation for designing intervention programs with a preventive and mental health promotion focus.

Camilo et al. (2020) studied a group of police officers who, in addition to their regular functions, participated in rescue and emergency response efforts in Colombia's Caribbean region. They identified 668 cases with psychosocial risks, evaluated based on psychological well-being across dimensions such as life satisfaction, happiness, income perception, and relationship satisfaction. The results revealed that women scored higher in the analyzed dimensions, particularly in partner and family relationship areas, compared to men. In agreement, Marín et al. (2023) propose that psychological well-being is closely linked to the balance each person achieves in their family environment.

In the research conducted by Flores et al. (2025), the impact of firefighters' duties on their mental well-being was examined, with a focus on self-care practices and available psychological support. The findings revealed that these professionals experience high levels of stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion, which is to be expected in their work environment. Specifically for firefighters, these conditions lead to immediate emotional burnout, decreased psychological well-being, and an urgent need for self-care strategies and psychological support to enhance their mental health amidst operational stress.

Professionals engaged in high-demand roles, such as firefighters, are consistently exposed to risk contexts and high levels of emotional pressure. Results from various studies demonstrate that these conditions significantly contribute to emotional burnout and depersonalization, factors that deteriorate mental health and job performance (Pinargote et al., 2025). Consequently, the need for establishing psychological intervention and support programs is emphasized to bolster their coping capacity and preserve and promote the psychological well-being of firefighters, as this is a crucial component for their emotional balance, operational efficacy, and the quality of service they provide to the community (Van Hasselt et al., 2022).

The World Health Organization (OMS, 2022) states that psychological well-being is the ability to enjoy and find satisfaction in daily activities, both individually and socially, which is vital for functioning in one's environment. López and Nihei (2021) argue that psychological well-being involves a subjective perception of satisfaction and is directly linked to active coping strategies. These strategies include seeking solutions, formulating clear goals, and displaying resilience in challenging situations, all of which possess a positive correlation with emotional well-being.

Therefore, psychological well-being can be understood as the cumulative result of the experiences a person internalizes throughout their life, whether positive or negative. This process is connected to the quality of interpersonal relationships and the type and adequacy of social support received, according to Narváez (2021). In this context, each individual possesses a particular capacity to face the challenges presented to them, which encompass various dimensions. This capacity is largely shaped by personal characteristics and their prior emotional state, assessed based on the personal and external resources available to them. If any of these factors are compromised, there will inevitably be a negative repercussion on their psychological well-being, as noted by Ruiz et al. (2020).

According to Freitas et al. (2023), the psychological well-being of firefighters is directly related to their ability to manage stress, maintain emotional balance, and perform effectively under high-pressure situations. A sound mental state enables them to respond with greater resilience to emergencies and preserve their overall health in the long term. Through this type of training, firefighters acquire tools to appropriately manage their emotions and those of affected individuals during critical situations, thereby helping to reduce the impact of stress and prevent emotional fatigue. Strengthening their coping skills also contributes to facing the traumatic experiences inherent in their work with greater resilience, promoting a mental and emotional balance that translates into improved performance and higher quality of life (Becerra et al., 2023).

The proposed strategies for enhancing the psychological well-being of healthcare personnel in disaster scenarios encompass measures aimed at preserving their emotional and mental stability in high-pressure settings. These include training in stress management, practicing self-care, ensuring constant access to psychological support, and fostering cooperation among colleagues, elements that collectively enhance resilience (Cruz et al., 2025). Additionally, creating safer and more empathetic work environments that facilitate emotional expression, professional support, and skill development for adequately coping with the psychological consequences of critical situations is promoted. For firefighters, psychological well-being is particularly significant, as they are consistently exposed to highly stressful, dangerous, and potentially traumatic experiences (Patiño et al., 2025).

The findings derived from the literature analysis suggest that continuous exposure to critical scenarios can significantly influence the overall health of firefighting personnel, as well as that of healthcare professionals,

paramedics, and other individuals in similar roles. The reviewed information demonstrates that the frequent stress these individuals face has implications extending beyond the workplace, also impacting their personal and familial spheres.

Due to constant exposure to hazardous situations, intense stress, and unexpected emergencies, firefighters face challenges that directly affect their emotional and mental equilibrium. In this context, the review underscores the necessity to implement strategies and practices that effectively promote greater psychological well-being, which serves as a fundamental pillar for adequately responding to various critical situations.

The research is enriched by situating its findings within the model of Carol Ryff (1989a) about psychological well-being, which proposes six fundamental dimensions: self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. These dimensions function as individual indicators of well-being and are also reflected in the emotional and social manifestations observed among firefighters, indicating that a balance among them enhances their mental health and performance in high-demand and risky contexts.

Research by Marín et al. (2023) and Narváez (2021) demonstrates that emotional balance in the family environment enhances performance and mental health, while tension and lack of social support constitute critical risk factors. It is important to note that these patterns are not exclusive to the firefighting context; they are also evident in other scenarios where individuals face constant pressures and emergency situations. Thus, the need for interventions promoting psychological well-being in these professionals is reinforced.

Conclusions

In conclusion, there is a consensus among the consulted research regarding the importance of psychological well-being for firefighting personnel. The analyzed studies agree that when this aspect is not adequately supported, repercussions may emerge in emotional and behavioral domains. These disturbances can increase vulnerability to experiencing stress, anxiety, or professional burnout, and additionally impact how these professionals navigate the demands of their work, compromising job performance and interpersonal relationships.

The stress associated with working in emergency scenarios is perceived as a factor predisposing these professionals to challenges that affect their satisfaction across various life dimensions. It is also concluded that the absence of effective coping strategies to manage stress stemming from constant exposure to dangerous and emergency situations poses a significant risk to those in these roles.

Interventions in this area should not be limited to merely recognizing the problem; rather, they should focus on actively strengthening coping strategies that consider both the individual's internal resources, such as resilience, self-confidence, and emotional management, and external resources, including social support from family, colleagues, and the community.

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