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# FIREfighting IN CANADA

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## FIRE FIGHTING TACTICS

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# WELLNESS CURIOUS?

## Decompress in these healthy spaces.

Managing chaos, battling exhaustion, and enduring discomfort are all in a day's work for a firefighter. But when the gear comes off, personal struggles often surface. Canadian fire personnel face an elevated risk of depression, alcohol misuse, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) according to researchers (Cramm et al., 2020). While the settings of a counsellor's office, a 12-step meeting, or a gym can assist with turning the corner on these issues, there is a growing number of alternative, transformative environments that offer paths to recovery. Across Canada, yoga studios, Nordic spas, and makerspaces are emerging as powerful destinations for healing and growth.

### MINDFUL MOVEMENT

Troubled by a senior colleague's remark about anticipating mobility issues from years on the job in Edmonton, 23-year veteran firefighter Tim Seutter stepped into a space that would set him on a life-changing trajectory: a yoga studio.

"Yoga helps you slow down, process life, be in the present and learn you don't have to think of calls and terrible things you have seen," he says. "When those creep up, you can learn to deal with them, breathe through them, instead of reliving them." While Seutter emphasizes the value of the mental side of getting on the mat, he also points out the physical benefits such as improved range of motion and ability to both run and lift weights.

After the challenge of relocating to New Zealand with a young family 12 years ago, yoga became a way for Seutter to connect with himself and his new colleagues, which led him



**ABOVE** Edmonton firefighter Tim Seutter founded Yoga Fire.tv.

to deliver classes at the fire station. Encouraged by the improvements he saw in the overall vitality of his crew members, Seutter took yoga teacher training. Following that, he founded Yoga Fire.tv – an online platform for classes ranging from relaxing “yin” sessions to strength-focused “power” yoga. Other common styles yogis practice includes “hatha” which is an introduction to basic poses, “vinyasa” which emphasizes cardio and strength, and “ashtanga” which is more physically demanding.

Seutter explained: “We see pretty traumatic and horrific things every shift and multiple times a day. Without good tools, years and years of this trauma builds up and unfortunately many firefighters can get PTSD.”



Kananaskis Nordic Spa in Alberta offers a hydrotherapy circuit based on Scandinavian bathing rituals.

One study of first responders showed that yoga can greatly support resilience, reducing the development of PTSD (Tan et al., 2024). This aligns with research by Bessel van der Kolk, MD, a leading expert in the field of trauma and author of the seminal book, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. His findings concluded, “Yoga significantly reduced PTSD symptomatology...” (van der Kolk et al., 2014).

Seutter acknowledges that for firefighters new to the holistic exercise, practicing it in public may be daunting – especially in a culture that can feel uncomfortable with vulnerability and inexperience. But in-person classes can foster relationships in a health-focused community. He believes the ancient discipline, “will help you in every aspect of your life...”

As this mind-body practice continues to

grow in popularity, so too do the number of spaces offering it, ranging from specialized studios and fitness clubs to community centres and even libraries. For a listing of trauma-sensitive yoga facilitators, visit [traumasensitiveyoga.com](http://traumasensitiveyoga.com).

#### NORDIC RETREATS

Also rooted in tradition are the upward trending Nordic spas – otherwise known as Scandinavian or thermal spas – inspired by bathing rituals from the Nordic countries of Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Iceland.

These rejuvenating sanctuaries, often set amidst spectacular scenery, consist of a hydrotherapy circuit centred around hot-cold-rest cycles and include such options as saunas, steam rooms, hot and cold pools, and waterfalls. Hammocks, loungers, and stretching areas provide opportu-

nities for inner stillness and self-reflection. Many spas have nutrient-rich fare too.


Science reinforces the benefits of hydrotherapy, with findings indicating its effectiveness in reducing depression and anxiety (Koroglu, S., & Yildiz, M., 2024). What’s more, evidence highlights that contrast (hot/cold) water therapy aids in reducing pain and swelling of delayed onset muscle soreness (Vaile, J., et al., 2008) and sauna bathing promotes relaxation and recovery (Laukkanen, T., et al., 2019).

Stephanie Miloknay, a retired Sergeant from the Ontario police service, registered social worker, clinical counselling hypnotherapist, co-author of *Mental Health Awareness: Self-Care for First Responders*, professor, yoga teacher, and founder of White Lotus Wellness said, “I know the importance of prioritizing wellness. I used to believe that just being away from work was rest. It is not. Some of us have even forgotten what a restful state of being feels like.”

Miloknay added, “...many of us can benefit from attending spaces that facilitate a restorative process within our bodies – and places that offer heat can do just that. I encourage all first responders to try a thermal spa or hot yoga class as they are wonderful ways to detoxify cells, and cellular health can lead to improved physical and mental well-being.”

In Ontario, Quebec, and British Columbia are the serene Scandine Spas. Alberta’s alpine haven, Kananaskis Nordic Spa, along with Chester, Nova Scotia’s waterfront Sensea Nordic Spa, and Whitehorse, Yukon’s wilderness retreat, Eclipse Nordic Hot Springs, invite you to unwind.

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## HANDS-ON HEALING

While settings based on traditional practices make for soothing decompression zones, contemporary ones do too. As the technology and do-it-yourself culture evolved in the early 2000s, makerspaces – also known as hackspaces – gained momentum. Located in schools, libraries, and public as well as private facilities, a listing of makerspaces across Canada can be found at [hackspace.com](http://hackspace.com).

Participants have access to a wide variety of equipment from 3D printers and laser cutters to power tools and Computer Numerical Control (CNC) machines which are computer-controlled and used for automated machining. These creative environments spark innovation, learning, and problem-solving. Makers of all ages collaborate while building confidence and exploring woodworking, photography, music, and more.

Cameron Bennett, a 20-year veteran of the Canadian Armed Forces reflects on a concern shared with many fire professionals. “In our line of work, we’re trained to take action, to respond to emergencies, to fix what’s broken. But when our careers end or injuries happen, that sense of purpose can get lost.”

After facing his own struggles and discovering blade smithing post-service, Bennett’s journey evolved from navigating fear, doubt, and anxiety to experiencing improved sleep, focus, and concentration, drawing him into the maker movement. Vowing to “rebuild” himself and others, Bennett founded Forging Ahead, a not-for-profit charity based in St. Adolphe, Man., south of Winnipeg.

Offering a “therapeutic and supportive space”, the organization welcomes first responders and veterans, providing encouragement while they manage mental health issues and engage in artistic blacksmithing and metalworking.

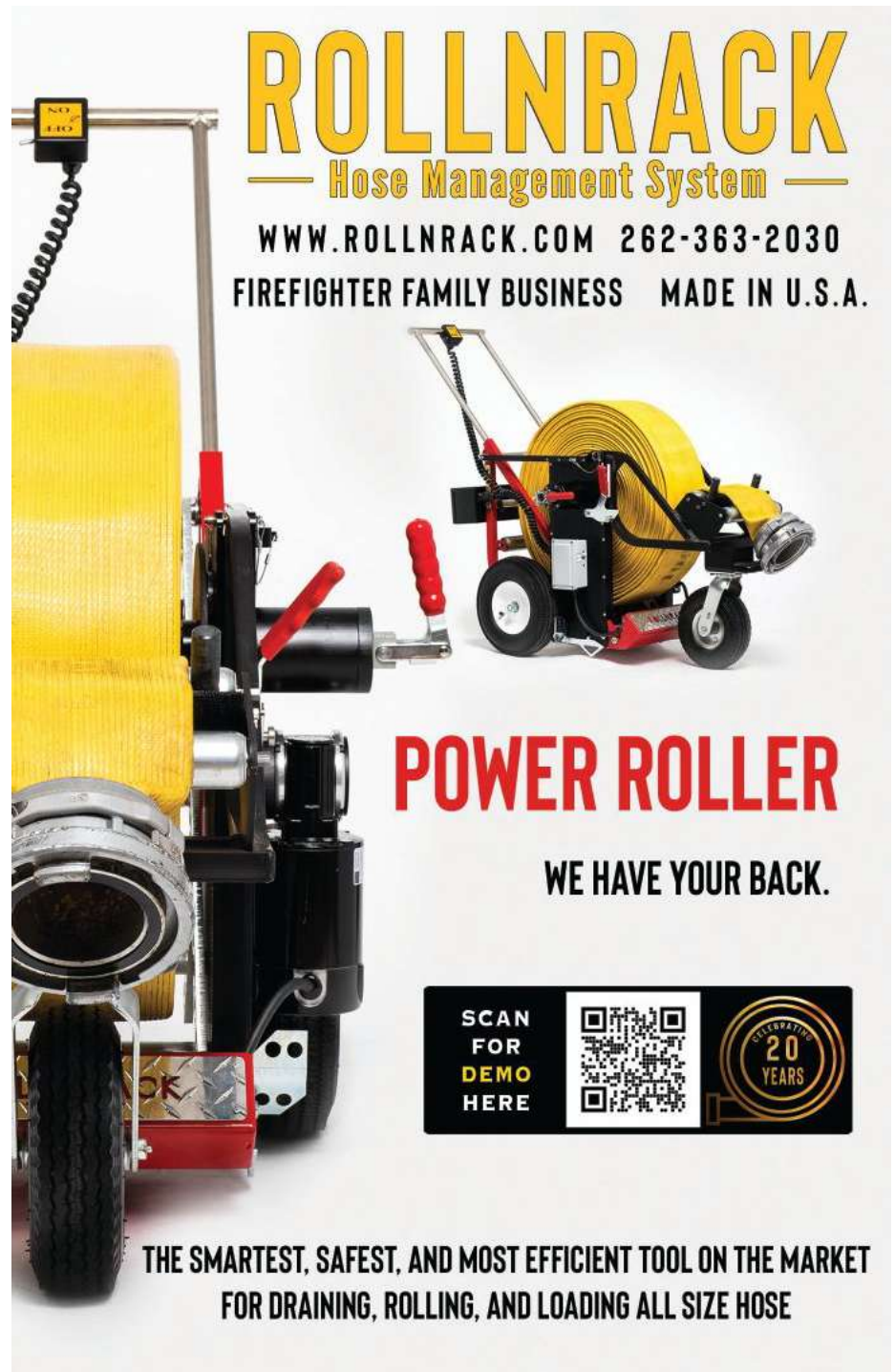
“In the forge,” Bennett explained, “The noise of trauma, the weight of experiences we carry—they get pushed aside...by the need to be fully present...You don’t have to be ‘creative’. You just need to show up, take a breath...it’s about giving your brain and body something meaningful to do.”

His thoughts are echoed by a study of 7,182 adults which concluded that engaging in creative arts and crafting enhances personal happiness and, “a sense that life is worthwhile” (Keyes, H., et al., 2024). Bennett added, “I’ve

seen big, tough guys walk away from a day in the forge with tears in their eyes—not because they were weak, but because for the first time in years, they felt seen and capable again.”

Creative outlets like these can reduce stress, providing a chance to recharge and prepare for the challenges ahead. In the future, though, the primary role of firefighters will continue to be to put out fires. But there’s one area

that should never be extinguished: one’s own self-care. Together, fire personnel - along with other first responders can make healthy living more accessible by collaborating with wellness destinations negotiating extended hours, special rates, and vitality-boosting events. By fanning the flames for a vibrant future, well-being can be woven into firehouse culture and beyond.



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