

Protecting your mental health

You have an important role

As volunteers in the fire and emergency services you have an important role to help keep the community safe and well. Your role may also help you to build connections with like-minded others, do things that you enjoy, and give you a sense of giving back to the community. BUT this role also can be stressful and involve difficult experiences.

In fact, people working or volunteering in the fire and/or emergency services are considerably more likely to experience potentially traumatising events, and are also more likely to experience mental health impacts than the general Australian population.

So, it is important to do things to **protect** your mental health!



Mental health impacts

Those experiences in relation to the fire and emergency service volunteer role that may be associated with risk for mental health impacts include:

- Exposure to incidents or events that involve significant injury or loss of life
- Where there is personal relevance to the incident or event (e.g., a victim is known to you)
- Experiencing an injury yourself during a response to an incident or event
- Experiencing dangerous situations such as becoming trapped yourself when attending an incident or event
- Ongoing exposure to repeated events over time (known as cumulative trauma)

It is normal to be impacted by traumatic or distressing events. Research has shown that the best way to avoid long-term impacts is to discuss your feelings and experiences with someone you trust. If necessary, seek help promptly if you notice changes in your behaviour or feelings or impacts on your relationships with others.

Reducing the impact

Factors that may help to reduce the impact of potentially traumatising events include:

- Talking with others about your experiences in your emergency services role
- Social support (receiving support AND giving it to others)
- Keeping physically healthy and engaging in physical activity
- Getting enough sleep and eating well
- Engaging with supports and counselling
- Reducing stress in other parts of your life
- Keeping alcohol intake within recommended limits

Your mental health and wellbeing is important

Volunteering in the fire and emergency services involves developing lots of skills to ensure you can perform the role safely. To be able to function effectively in the role and contribute to your group, unit or brigade, learning and maintaining skills for your mental health and wellbeing is just as important as the operational skills you develop.

Some of the skills to help support mental health, along with tips for how to practice these skills, are included in the next pages of this guide.

“Those role models that say to you, “It’s OK to speak. It’s OK to not be OK.” I find that that’s a really big thing.”

– young volunteer, age 17.