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WORKING IN AN EMERGENCY



YOUR JOB, YOU... AND YOUR FAMILY



Department of
Environment and Conservation



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A handbook for staff who work in emergency response

INTRODUCTION

Being involved in an emergency response situation can affect you in many different ways.

This handbook will help you take care of yourself, manage your workload and be aware of health and well-being issues that can occur when you return to normal duties. It has been designed for people involved in an emergency response, as well as their family and workmates.

During an emergency, you might have to be away from your normal duties and your home, sometimes for extended periods. You might be given more work to do on top of your core job, or you may be working directly in an emergency support role.

No matter how you are involved, an emergency can leave you emotionally drained, stressed or physically tired when you return to your normal duties. This can happen even if you feel quite positive about your experiences, and are keen to share learning, use new skills and maintain the new friendships you have made.

However you are affected, you need to be prepared so you can return to your normal role as easily as possible.

If you are the partner, family member or workmate of someone involved in an emergency, this handbook will help you understand the effects that emergencies can have on the people who respond to them, and how to deal with the stress this may cause.

Everyone can help prepare for the effects emergency situations have on the people who respond to them.



introduction

YOU...AND YOUR FAMILY

Involving your family in your preparations and staying active once you return will help minimise the effects that an emergency response situation can have.

Take the opportunity to talk

Make sure you talk about your experiences with your family and work colleagues. Go to debriefing sessions or workshops on stress management and relaxation offered by your work area.

Use the Employee Assistance Program

If things are getting too much, you can get in touch with a counsellor through the Employee Assistance Program by calling 1300 361 008. Members of your immediate family can also use the program.

Signs of stress

Find out about the common signs of stress and get to know how you react to stress. Try to change your behaviour to reduce the signs of stress.

Make sure that you and those around you are aware of the signs of stress and burnout so that you can work together to reduce the impact of stressors on you, your family or workmates.

Stress can provoke different reactions in different people. Some common physical and psychological signs and symptoms are listed on the next page.



Common physical and psychological signs and symptoms of stress

Physical

- *feeling hot/sweating*
- *trembling/shaking*
- *muscle tension*
- *clenched jaw*
- *headaches*
- *palpitations*
- *dry mouth*
- *rapid, shallow breathing*
- *'butterflies'*
- *indigestion*
- *frequent need to urinate*
- *diarrhea or constipation*
- *infections such as colds*
- *skin conditions*

Behavioural

- *nervous habits and tics*
- *insomnia*
- *increased smoking*
- *increased drinking*
- *compulsive behaviours*
- *excessive sleep*
- *procrastination*
- *decrease in sex drive*
- *restlessness or fidgeting*

Emotional

- *anxiety*
- *tension*
- *irritability or anger*
- *loss of concentration*
- *forgetfulness*
- *depression*
- *indecision*
- *apathy*
- *easily startled*
- *worry*
- *fatigue*
- *tearfulness*
- *reduced tolerance of frustration*
- *apprehension*
- *dread*
- *confusion*
- *relationship problems*



family

Stay alert for signs of burnout

Burnout is a state of emotional and physical exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress. It can occur when you feel overwhelmed and unable to meet constant demands. As the stress continues, you start to lose interest in your role. Burnout reduces your productivity and saps your energy, leaving you feeling increasingly hopeless, powerless, cynical and resentful.

It causes unhappiness that can eventually threaten your job, your relationships and your health. Burnout happens gradually—and it's difficult to fight once it's started—so it's important to recognise the signs of burnout and take early action to stop it.

The signs of burnout tend to be more mental than physical. They can include feelings of:

- *hopelessness*
- *frustration and powerlessness*
- *being drained of emotional energy*
- *detachment, withdrawal or isolation*
- *being trapped*
- *failure*
- *irritability*
- *sadness*
- *cynicism*

Stress versus burnout

Stress

- *is characterised by over-engagement*
- *creates emotions which are over reactive*
- *produces urgency and hyperactivity*
- *exhausts physical energy*
- *leads to anxiety disorders*
- *leaves you fatigued*
- *tends to be more physical*

Burnout

- *is characterised by disengagement*
- *creates emotions which are blunted*
- *produces helplessness and hopelessness*
- *exhausts motivation and drive, ideals and hopes*
- *leads to paranoia, detachment and depression*
- *leaves you demoralised*
- *tends to be more emotional*

Another difference between stress and burnout is that you're usually aware of being under a lot of stress, but you don't always notice burnout because the symptoms—hopelessness, cynicism and detachment—can take months to surface. If someone close to you points out changes in your attitude or behaviour that are typical of burnout, take steps to address the situation early.

Being with other people is the best defense against burnout

Spending time by yourself to relax is important to reduce stress, but if you are approaching burnout, it's also crucial to be around other people.

Poor relationships and isolation can contribute to burnout, but maintaining positive relationships can help prevent it and reduce its impact.



Some steps you can take to improve your relationships with others

Nurture relationships with your partner, children and friends

Being with other people can help restore your energy and relieve some of the psychological effects of burnout, such as feeling under appreciated.

Put aside thoughts of work and spend positive and enjoyable time with your family and friends.

Make friends with people at work

Get together with people from work, both on- and off-site. Avoid hanging out with negative minded people who do nothing but complain.

friends

Connect with a cause or a community group

Joining a social, religious or support group can help you make new friends and give you a place to talk to like-minded people about how to deal with daily stress. Join a professional association, attend meetings and spend time with others coping with the same workplace demands.

Practise healthy communication

Express your feelings to people who will listen, understand and not judge. Burnout occurs when negative feelings fester and grow, so find healthy, productive outlets for your emotions.



To prevent or recover from burnout, you need to cultivate methods of personal renewal, self-awareness and connection with others. Don't be afraid to acknowledge your own needs and find positive ways to meet them.

community

Health and well-being for families

Have at least one meal together as a family each day. At mealtimes, families share things like nicknames and inside jokes. These small things bind them together and create a sense of personal belonging and symbolic connection that is important for good health and well-being.

Family health

Make physical fitness a focus for family life. You will feel better about yourself and your family will enjoy being active together.

Go on regular family outings such as bike riding, walking the dog or playing in the park.

Involve children in household tasks, such as preparing dinner and doing the dishes. Do them together.



Getting ready to go away

If you can, get your family involved in preparations to go away. This can be as simple as:

- *explaining what you will be doing before you leave*
- *having a to-do list when you are away*
- *planning how to celebrate birthdays and other occasions*
- *having your family help you put your kit together so you don't forget that extra toothbrush, your medication, pictures or little mementos*
- *making a list of phone numbers and times when you can take calls*
- *marking on the calendar when to expect you home*
- *letting the kids give you a send-off and a welcome home.*

YOUR JOB

When you return from an emergency support role, there are a number of things you can do to help you make the transition to normal duties.

Set a new work context

Talk to your manager about strategies such as:

- *varying start and finish times in the first week so you can attend to things at home*
- *re-prioritising tasks, renegotiating timelines, delegating work or asking for help from other team members*
- *using recreation leave, time in lieu, leave without pay or sick leave if you are feeling physically or mentally stressed*
- *reviewing your performance plan to include your emergency support achievements.*

Share your experiences

Talk to your manager one-to-one or with your team. Take part in a formal incident debriefing process. Take part in the Peer Support Program by contacting (08) 9219 9780 or 0429 686 900.

Find the causes of stress

Your stress levels may be higher when you return to normal duties. Try to identify the cause of the stress; for example your workload, readjustment to normal duties, relationships with co-workers, a situation that happened during the emergency or an issue outside work. Be aware of stress on your family and how issues at home affect your health and well-being.

Meet regularly with your manager

Meet with your manager to review workload and prioritise tasks or simply let your manager know how you are travelling.

Manage your workload

- *Develop a single do-to list.*
- *Prioritise what you will do at the start of each day or the end of the day before.*
- *Keep talking with your manager and your team. If you're having trouble with your workload, speak to your manager about ways to deal with it.*
- *Accomplish one major objective each day.*
- *Plan your day so you use your time effectively. This may include:*
 - *planning for the following week on Friday afternoon*
 - *reducing time-wasters and unproductive tasks*
 - *delegating tasks if appropriate.*
- *Avoid procrastination and develop a 'do it now' habit.*
- *Schedule some personal time every day. Write it into your diary.*



Look after your health at work

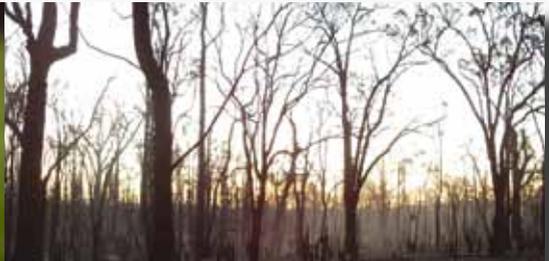
- *Take regular breaks and appropriate rest periods. Use this time to do something enjoyable away from your desk.*
- *Make sure your workspace promotes health and well-being. Have your workstation ergonomically assessed and make sure you're comfortable.*
- *Practise simple relaxation or visualisation exercises, meditation, yoga or stretching.*

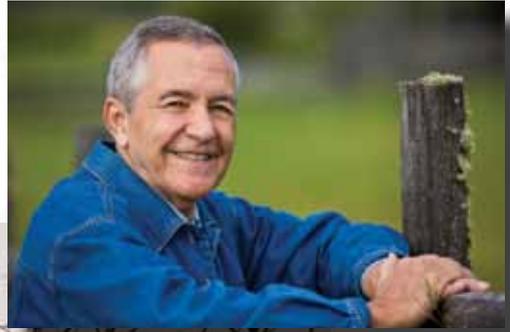


- *Eat a nutritious and balanced diet and set aside time for regular exercise (two or three times a week at a minimum). Make sure you get enough rest.*
- *Don't rely on alcohol, nicotine, drugs or caffeine to relax you as they can make problems worse in the long term.*
- *Ensure you have at least one week's leave at some time during a fire season or similar peak activity period. The best way to manage fatigue and stress is by resting.*

Other things you can do

- *Find people at work you can talk to about how you are feeling.*
- *Focus on the positive aspects of your performance and coping. Tell yourself statements such as:*
 - *This situation is in my hands and I will decide what to do about it.*
 - *I can cope.*
 - *I am able to manage this.*
- *Do training to learn new skills or extend existing ones; for example, time management, assertiveness, communication skills, conflict resolution or stress management.*
- *Approach work situations as a problem solver. Think: what am I able to do about this? When and how will I take action? Answer the phone with a smile on your face. Look at problems from a different perspective.*
- *Avoid unnecessary conflict and seek positive win-win outcomes for all parties.*
- *Know your limitations and don't over commit. Learn to be assertive and say no without offending or upsetting anyone or feeling guilty.*





Many of these things are about attitude.

Attitude is a key factor in the prevention of and dealing with stress.

While not always easy to attain, a healthy attitude is a significant tool for you to have.



attitude

STAFF WELFARE SELF-ASSESSMENT TOOL

Introduction

Many staff within DEC will contribute in some way to an emergency response situation.

This may be directly as part of an Incident Management Team.

Others will help out behind the scenes, providing support to those working directly on the response. Families also give crucial support by keeping homes and businesses running while partners and family members are away or working long hours.

This tool has been developed for staff and families. It may help you identify problems early and so you can take steps to limit any possible long-term effects.



Instructions for use

There are a number of ways you can use this questionnaire.

You can complete it:

- *by yourself, so you can consider any areas that haven't returned to normal after the emergency*
- *at home, so you can involve your family in your recovery*
- *with work colleagues, so you can talk about returning to normal routines*
- *with someone you are concerned about*
- *with your manager or supervisor*
- *with a peer supporter or a counsellor from the Employee Assistance Program.*



instructions

Staff welfare self-assessment tool

The following is a checklist of some of the expected or common reactions to stressful situations. These symptoms can often occur and are 'normal' responses to experiencing a stressful situation. While such symptoms will often subside after a short period of time, on occasion they can persist and as a result cause significant distress or disruption to one's life.

If, after completing this assessment, you feel that any ongoing symptoms you have identified are causing you or others close to you significant distress or are having a negative impact on your ability to effectively function in your day-to-day life, please seek appropriate help and support.

Have you experienced any of the following (in the last month):

1. *Having more difficulty sleeping than before?* Yes No
2. *Feeling constantly tired or fatigued?* Yes No
3. *Having difficulty returning to previous work or home routine?* Yes No
4. *Reliving stressful incidents or aspects of incidents?* Yes No
5. *Reluctant or anxious about attending future incidents?* Yes No
6. *Having difficulty recovering from injury?* Yes No
7. *Relationship problems?* Yes No
8. *Feeling that personal effort is not recognised or supported?* Yes No
9. *Talking about any worrying experiences constantly?* Yes No
10. *Avoiding thinking or talking about your experiences?* Yes No



Have you experienced any of the following (in the last month):

11. *Keeping yourself busy to avoid remembering the emergency?* Yes No
12. *Increased use of alcohol and/or drugs?* Yes No
13. *Nightmares and/or flashbacks of stressful experiences?* Yes No
14. *Repeated, disturbing memories or thoughts of the stressful incidents?* Yes No
15. *Loss of interest in normally pleasurable activities?* Yes No
16. *Difficulty with concentration?* Yes No
17. *Feeling irritable or having angry outbursts?* Yes No
18. *Feeling cut off or not wanting to be around people?* Yes No
19. *Being easily startled?* Yes No
20. *Physical reactions such as heart pounding, sweating and trouble breathing when reminded of the stressful experience?* Yes No



What to do with this information

After completing the assessment and considering your answers, you may feel there is no need for any further action.

If, on the other hand, you feel that things are not returning to normal, no matter what your answers, you should consider seeking welfare support if you have not already done so. You could also complete the survey again in a month to see what has changed.

Choose the method with which you are most comfortable or familiar. This could include contacting:

- *your manager*
- *the Risk Management Section on (08) 9219 9779 or 0418 949 177*
- *DEC Peer Support on (08) 92199780 or 0429 686 900*
- *the Employee Assistance Program 24-hour hotline on 1300 361 008.*
Assistance is provided by trained counsellors and psychologists.

Your confidentiality is assured. If you need help, seek it sooner rather than later.

Please let your OSH Coordinator or the Risk Management Section know if you found this tool useful.



what to
do now?



Acknowledgments

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