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Department of Biodiversity,  
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## Back on track: information on managing stress for firefighters and support staff

### Critical incident stress: self-screening guide

You may find your current stress reactions are more intense and overwhelming than usual, particularly if you have been involved in previous critical incidents or have had some history of emotional issues, for example, depression, anxiety or intense grief.

The following questions are a guide to help you decide if you should consider seeking more information or assistance.

1. Have you had trouble sleeping?

Yes  No

2. Have you had nightmares or thought about the event when you did not want to?

Yes  No

3. Have you tried hard not to think about it or went out of your way to avoid situations that reminded you of it?

Yes  No

4. Have you been constantly on guard, watchful or easily startled?

Yes  No

5. Have you felt numb or detached from others, activities or your surroundings?

Yes  No

6. Are you drinking more than usual?

Yes  No

These and other symptoms will usually decrease over time (about three to four months). However, if the symptoms are interrupting your return to normal life, DBCA has support services available to you and your family members. Please see the back panel of this brochure for more information and assistance.

### For more assistance

You can access more information and assistance via the following contact numbers.

#### Health, Safety and Wellbeing Section

0418 949 177

#### Chaplain (Wellbeing Officer)

0429 346 243

#### Employee Assistance Program (24 hour availability)

1300 307 912

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## Back on track

No matter what your role, fighting fires can be physically and mentally demanding. Although some people may feel run down and tired after working on a fire, they will get back to their usual way of life fairly quickly. Others may have stronger, more intense emotional reactions. Some people may react days, weeks and sometimes months after the event. This brochure will provide you with some tips to help you bounce back from the strain of working on a fire.

## I've been fighting fires for a few weeks. What can I do to manage stress on the job?

### Shift structure and tasks

- Take frequent, brief rest breaks as practicable. Mental fatigue over long shifts can place people at greatly increased risk of injury as concentration begins to wane.
- Make good use of your rest periods – make sure you use them for resting and relaxing, not working or placing additional demands on yourself.
- Watch out for each other. Co-workers may be focused on a particular task and may not notice a hazard nearby or behind.
- Be conscious of those around you. People who are exhausted, feeling stressed or even temporarily distracted may place themselves and others at risk. Pair up with someone else from your crew so you can monitor one another's stress.
- Recognise and accept what you cannot change – the chain of command, organisational structure, waiting, equipment failures etc.

### Physical health

- Maintain as normal a schedule as possible, including eating and sleeping regularly. Eat a good breakfast each day, no matter what the shift hours. Be careful about using sleeping pills to get to sleep – they can be dependence forming and can affect important stages of sleep.
- Make sure you drink plenty of fluids such as water and juices. Eat healthy snacks regularly such as fresh fruit and increase your intake of complex carbohydrates (for example, breads and muffins made with whole grains) to keep your brain fuelled and your blood-sugar level even.

- Avoid consuming too much caffeine and sugar. In the short-term, they provide temporary 'highs' that often end in fatigue or a 'crash' later. You'll feel more relaxed, less jittery or nervous, and you'll sleep better.
- Avoid overusing drugs or alcohol. While using alcohol or drugs might seem to ease stress, it's a temporary fix. Don't mask the issue at hand; deal with it head on and with a clear mind.

### Emotional and mental health

- Talk about your experiences and emotions to process what you have seen and done.
- Talk to people when you feel like it. You decide when you want to discuss your experience. Talking about an event may be relieving it. Choose your own comfort level.
- Give yourself permission to feel rotten: you are in a difficult situation.
- Recurring thoughts, dreams, images or flashbacks are normal – do not try to fight them but allow them to come and go. They will decrease over time.
- Communicate with your loved ones at home as frequently as possible. Stay in touch with your family and friends.
- Use your Employee Assistance Program or Chaplain – counsellors can simply be a 'sounding board' to help you process the experience.



## My family is often worried when I'm fighting fires. What can I do?

Prolonged firefighting places pressure not just on people directly involved in fighting fires, but on friends and families too. Partners may feel helpless and worried about your safety. Then, of course, there are all the usual day-to-day pressures of running a household, which increase when one of you is heavily occupied outside the home.

- Communicate honestly and openly, rather than shutting down. Your partner or spouse may not be able to 'fix' what's going on, but if they know what's happening for you, they can support you. Be honest when you've had a bad day.
- Work out ways to regain some family time and to reconnect with your spouse or partner once you're home. Even 10 or 15 minutes kicking the footy will work wonders for you and the kids.
- Negotiate what will happen on the home front while you're away. Work out what the immediate priorities are around the house and what can wait.

