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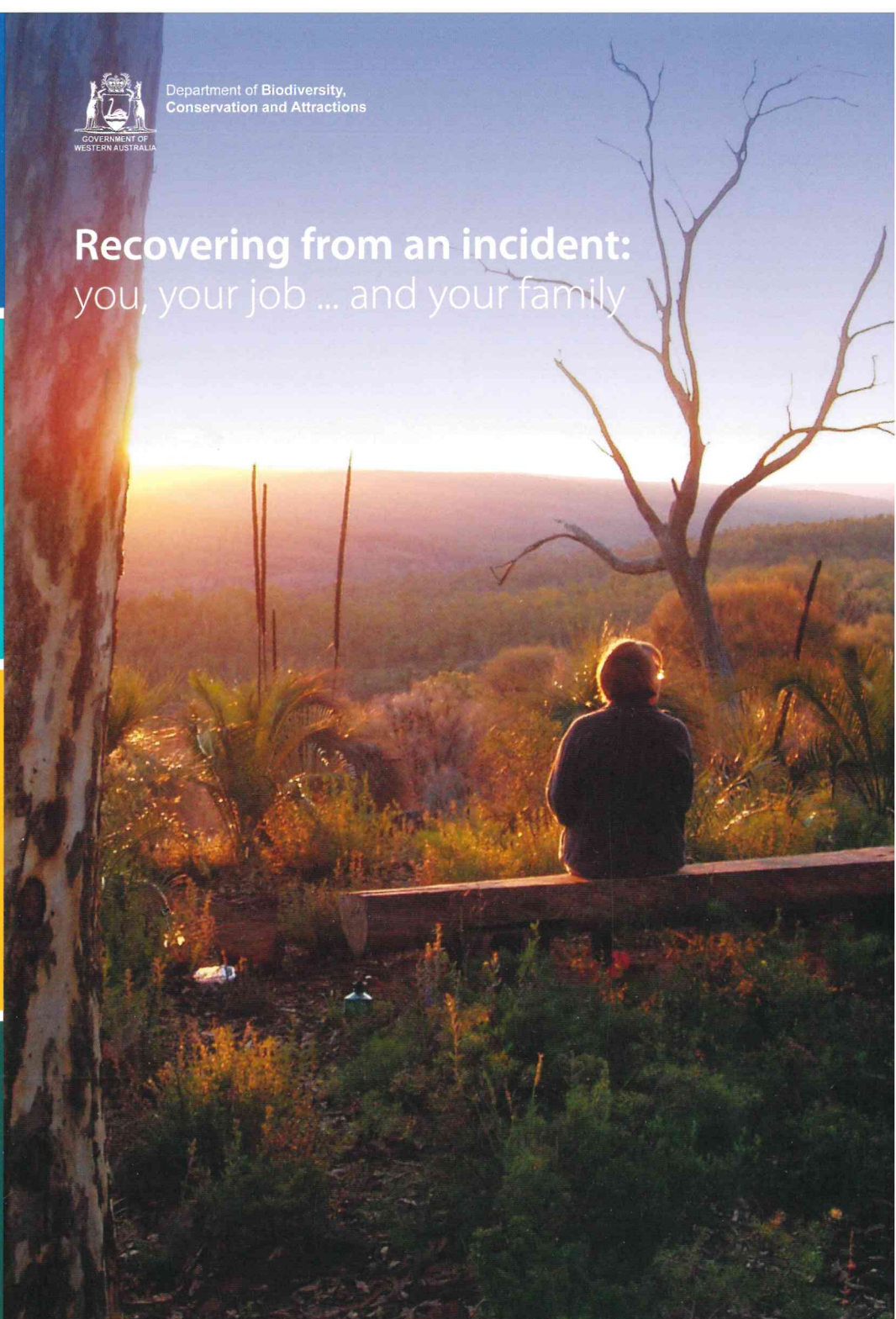
Department of Biodiversity,  
Conservation and Attractions

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Department of Biodiversity,  
Conservation and Attractions

# Recovering from an incident: you, your job ... and your family



# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>You and your family</b>	<b>4</b>
Take the opportunity to talk or let others know your needs	4
Use the Employee Assistance Program	4
<b>Stress</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Common signs and symptoms of stress</b>	<b>5</b>
Physical	5
Behavioural	5
Emotional	5
<b>Stress versus burnout</b>	<b>6</b>
Stress	6
Burnout	6
Being with other people is the best defence against burnout.	6
<b>Some steps you can take to improve your relationships with others</b>	<b>7</b>
Health and wellbeing for families	8
Getting ready to work away	8
<b>Your job</b>	<b>9</b>
Set a new work context	9
Share your experiences	9
Find the causes of stress	9
Meet regularly with your manager	9
Manage your workload	10
Look after your health at work	10
Other things you can do	11
<b>Staff wellbeing self-assessment tool</b>	<b>12</b>
Instructions for use	12
Staff wellbeing self-assessment tool	13
What to do with this information	14
<b>Acknowledgments</b>	<b>15</b>

# Introduction

Exhaustion and confusion are typical after-effects from being involved in a high-stress incident response situation, even for trained individuals. Most will experience some kind of reaction and we all react differently, so signs of stress do not equate to personal or professional weakness or incompetence. This handbook will help you take care of yourself, manage your workload and be aware of health and wellbeing 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 incident support role.

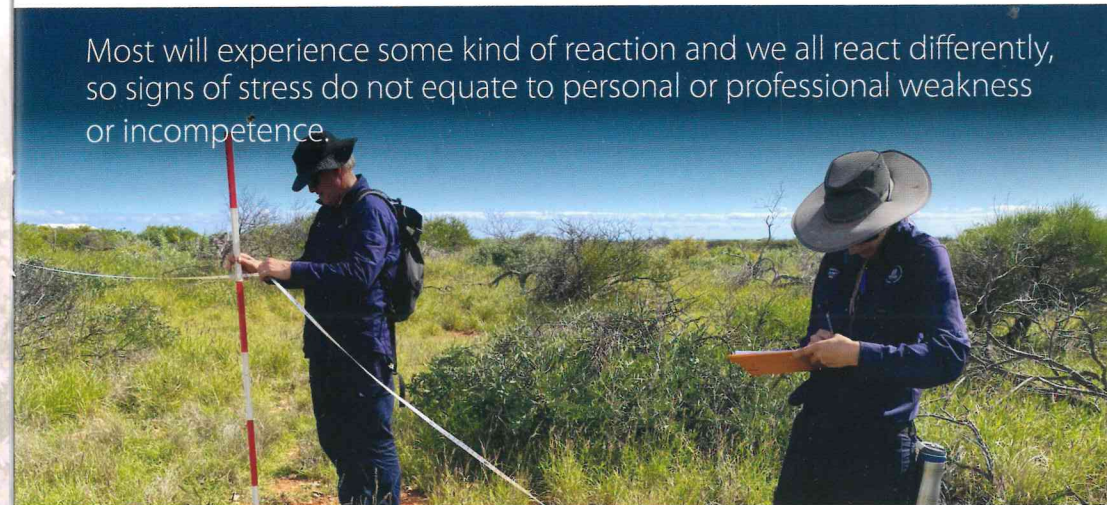
Even though you have many strengths and good levels of resilience, an incident can leave

you feeling 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. For most, these reactions subside over a few days or weeks. For some, the symptoms may last longer and be more severe. This may be due to several factors such as the nature of the emergency, the level of available support, previous and current life stress, personality, and coping resources.

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 to further support those who respond to emergency situations.

Most will experience some kind of reaction and we all react differently, so signs of stress do not equate to personal or professional weakness or incompetence.



## You and your family

Having your family involved in your preparations, and also staying active once you return, will help minimise the effects of being exposed to a critical incident.

### Take the opportunity to talk or let others know your needs

Let your friends and family know of your needs. With understanding and support from family, friends and colleagues stress symptoms usually quickly resolve. Help them to help you by letting them know when you are tired, need time out, or need a chance to talk or just be with someone.

### 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 307 912. Members of your immediate family can also use the program.

## 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 stress.

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

People react differently to stress. As long as the symptoms are not too severe or last for too long, then they are considered normal reactions. Although symptoms can be distressing, they will settle rapidly in most people. They are part of the natural healing process of adjusting to a powerful event. Some common signs and symptoms are listed on the next page.

## Common 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
- diarrhoea or constipation
- infections such as colds
- skin conditions

### Behavioural

- nervous habits and tics
- insomnia
- increased smoking
- increased drinking
- compulsive behaviours

- excessive sleep
- procrastination
- change 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

If you notice someone struggling – start a conversation.

### 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

Excessive amounts of stress over a prolonged period of time results in loss of wellbeing or illness. Excessive stress generally leads to burnout.

### Stress

- **is characterised by over-engagement**
- **creates overactive emotions**
- **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 defence 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 spending time with negative-minded people who do nothing but complain.

- **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 likeminded 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.



Don't be afraid to acknowledge your own needs and find positive ways to meet them.

### Health and wellbeing 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 wellbeing.

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 work away

If you can, get your family involved in preparations when you go away for work. 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. Consider an application for the Peer Support Program by contacting **0418 949 177**.

### Find the causes of stress

If your stress levels feel higher when you return to normal duties then 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 of work. Be aware of stress on your family and how issues at home affect your health and wellbeing.

### Meet regularly with your manager

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



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



### Manage your workload

- Develop a single to-do list.
- Prioritise what you will do at the start of each day.
- 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 or electronic calendar.

### Look after your health at work

- Take regular breaks and appropriate rest periods. Use this time to do something enjoyable away from your desk.
- Take regular annual leave breaks during the year to re-energise.
- Make sure your workspace promotes health and wellbeing. Have your workstation ergonomically assessed and make sure you're comfortable.
- Practise simple relaxation or visualisation exercises, meditation, yoga or stretching. Even a modest amount of light exercise will help.
- Eat properly, get adequate amounts of sleep and exercise regularly.
- 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. Obtain appropriate peer or family support formally and informally.
- Keep in touch with friends.
- Talk to a chaplain.
- 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. Develop and maintain warm, nurturing relationships professionally and personally.
- Know your limitations and don't over commit. Learn to be assertive and say no without offending or upsetting anyone or feeling guilty.
- Be honest with yourself and your management team about how much is possible to achieve during a working day.

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.

Find people at work you can talk to about how you are feeling. Obtain appropriate peer or family support formally and informally.





## Staff wellbeing self-assessment tool

Many staff within the department will contribute in some way to an incident 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 incident**
- **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 wellbeing Coordinator, peer supporter or a counsellor from the Employee Assistance Program.**

### Staff wellbeing 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
- 11 Keeping yourself busy to avoid remembering the incident?  
 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 appropriate support if you have not already done so. You could also complete the survey again in a month to see what has changed.

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

#### Health, Safety and Wellbeing Section

**0418 949 177**

#### Wellbeing Coordinator

**0429 346 243**

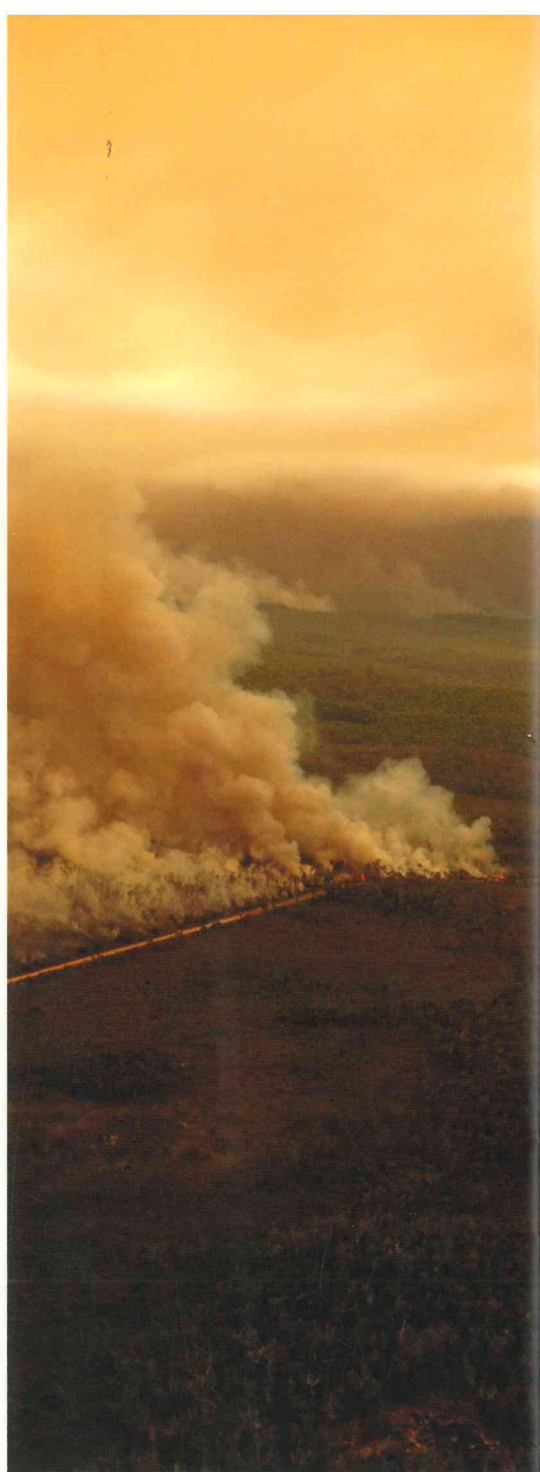
#### Employee Assistance Program (24 hour availability)

**1300 307 912**

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 WHS Coordinator or the Health, Safety and Wellbeing Section know if you found this tool useful.



## Acknowledgments

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