

Wellbeing support for you and those closest to you

Wellbeing information, tools, and resources for our people who work in emergency and their families. This guide is part of the Family Connect and Support Program.



Acknowledgements

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Author

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Photo credit

Front cover image by [Tyler Nix](#) on [Unsplash](#)

We acknowledge and respect Victorian Traditional Owners as the original custodians of Victoria's land and waters, their unique ability to care for Country and deep spiritual connection to it.

We honour Elders past and present whose knowledge and wisdom has ensured the continuation of culture and traditional practices.

DEECA is committed to genuinely partnering with Victorian Traditional Owners and Victoria's Aboriginal community to progress their aspirations.



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These resources are for educational purposes, and do not replace formal diagnosis, advice, or treatment by a qualified health professional. If you would like additional resources or support, refer to the support services noted within this resource or see your General Practitioner.

Accessibility

To receive this document in an alternative format, contact wellbeing.services@delwp.vic.gov.au

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Glossary

Early Intervention

Early Intervention is a proactive approach to identifying and addressing issues and challenges early. This approach aims to prevent impacts on your health and wellbeing by accessing timely support and resources for individuals facing stress or emotional difficulties.

Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

The Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is a professional counselling service offering confidential, short-term, and solution-focused support to staff and their immediate families. The service is independent and impartial, and all personal details remain confidential.

Peer Support

Peer Support is a confidential service offered by volunteering staff trained in Psychological First Aid principles to support our people across all businesses, regions, and work centres.

Reach Out

Reach Out is an extension of the peer support program, providing confidential, phone-based peer support to departmental and Forest Fire Management Victoria staff, for up to 6 weeks after a significant incident. Reach Out calls will be undertaken by trained staff members and the Department's Peer Supporters.

Self-care

Self-care is the practice of taking care of our physical, mental, and emotional health. It involves activities that promote relaxation, stress reduction, and overall wellbeing, such as exercise, healthy eating, mindfulness, and leisure activities. Self-care is essential for maintaining wellbeing and preventing burnout.

Social Support

Social support may come from those closest to us, like family, friends, workmates and community. They may provide emotional and practical support during stressful times, promote connection and belonging, and improve wellbeing.

Wellbeing

A state of wellbeing in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.

World Health Organization. Promoting mental health: concepts, emerging evidence, practice (Summary Report) Geneva: World Health Organization; 2004

Introduction

Responding to emergencies is an important part of our work to ensure the safety and wellbeing of our communities and natural environment. While bushfire response is a big part of our emergency response, we also respond to other emergencies such as storms, flood and wildlife. Our business as usual (BAU) activities also include planned burning and when needed, supporting search and rescue operations. Whether you're working on the frontline or providing support behind the scenes, working in emergency, particularly for extended periods, can be both rewarding and demanding.

Emergency workers in this context include those with an emergency role or those supporting emergency response or recovery efforts. Juggling this work with regular life can be physically and mentally tiring, which is why it's important to:

- ✓ **Look after yourself:** Be aware of your physical and mental health. Ensure adequate sleep, a balanced diet, and regular exercise.
- ✓ **Seek support when needed:** Recognise when and how to seek support including, accessing personal supports and resources.
- ✓ **Keep an eye on those around you:** These include your workmates and loved ones. Identify signs of stress or fatigue and offer support when needed.
- ✓ **Talk to your social supports:** Share what you do, including deployments with your partner, family, and friends. The best support often comes from the people closest to you and within your community.

Who this guide is for

This guide has been created for our people and their families, acknowledging that “family” can include the people who are closest to us. Whether you have a partner, children, or are in a relationship, this guide contains resources to provide you and your closest ones with information about what working in emergency entails and how to be better prepared. This includes understanding the potential challenges of emergency work, such as high workload demands, ongoing deployments, and ways to support your mental health and wellbeing.

If you are a partner, family member, or workmate of someone involved in emergency response, this guidebook will help you understand what's involved in responding to emergencies and the potential effects it can have on our people who respond, along with how you can provide support to them and yourself.

Before Emergency



The importance of social support and connection

Social support plays an important part in our lives, often coming from those closest to us. Our friends, family, workmates, and people within our community all form our social support network, which is essential to our wellbeing. Research has shown that social support has a protective effect on our mental health and emotional wellbeing. Think of it as personal protective equipment for our mental health and wellbeing.

Advice for workers

Talking to the people closest to you about your work can help them to better understand your role, responsibilities and environments you operate in. This can also prepare them before you get deployed and what to expect when working in emergency.

When talking to your partner, family, or friends about your job, consider talking about:

- ✓ Your role, including the specific tasks and responsibilities you perform.
- ✓ The training you've received, like safety and operational training.
- ✓ What it means to be on standby and being deployed.
- ✓ Your employment agreement and its conditions, e.g., rostering, leave.
- ✓ Times when you can't communicate, such as when there's no phone signal.
- ✓ Being cautious about social media and where to find accurate, up-to-date information.

Learning from experienced workers

Talking to your workmates, Supervisor/Crew Leader, District Manager, or other leaders in the organisation who have experienced multiple deployments over several emergency seasons, may help you to better understand what to expect when working in emergency. It may also provide you with clarity of common situations and be better prepared to handle them, especially if this is your first season or deployment with the department.

Consider asking questions about:

- ✓ The physical and mental challenges they've experienced when working in emergency.
- ✓ Strategies that have been helpful to cope in challenging times.
- ✓ Approaches on how to tell friends and family about work and the experiences.
- ✓ Tips or advice they've received from others that have been beneficial.

Advice for family and loved ones

Family members can greatly benefit from connecting with each other to share experiences, advice, and mutual support. This can be beneficial for families of new workers who may be unfamiliar with working in emergency. Reach out to families of more experienced staff to learn more, seek advice, and build a strong supportive network.

Open communication and establishing new connections between family and workers can create a strong support network that helps to enhance resilience and overall wellbeing, especially during the challenging times of working in emergency.

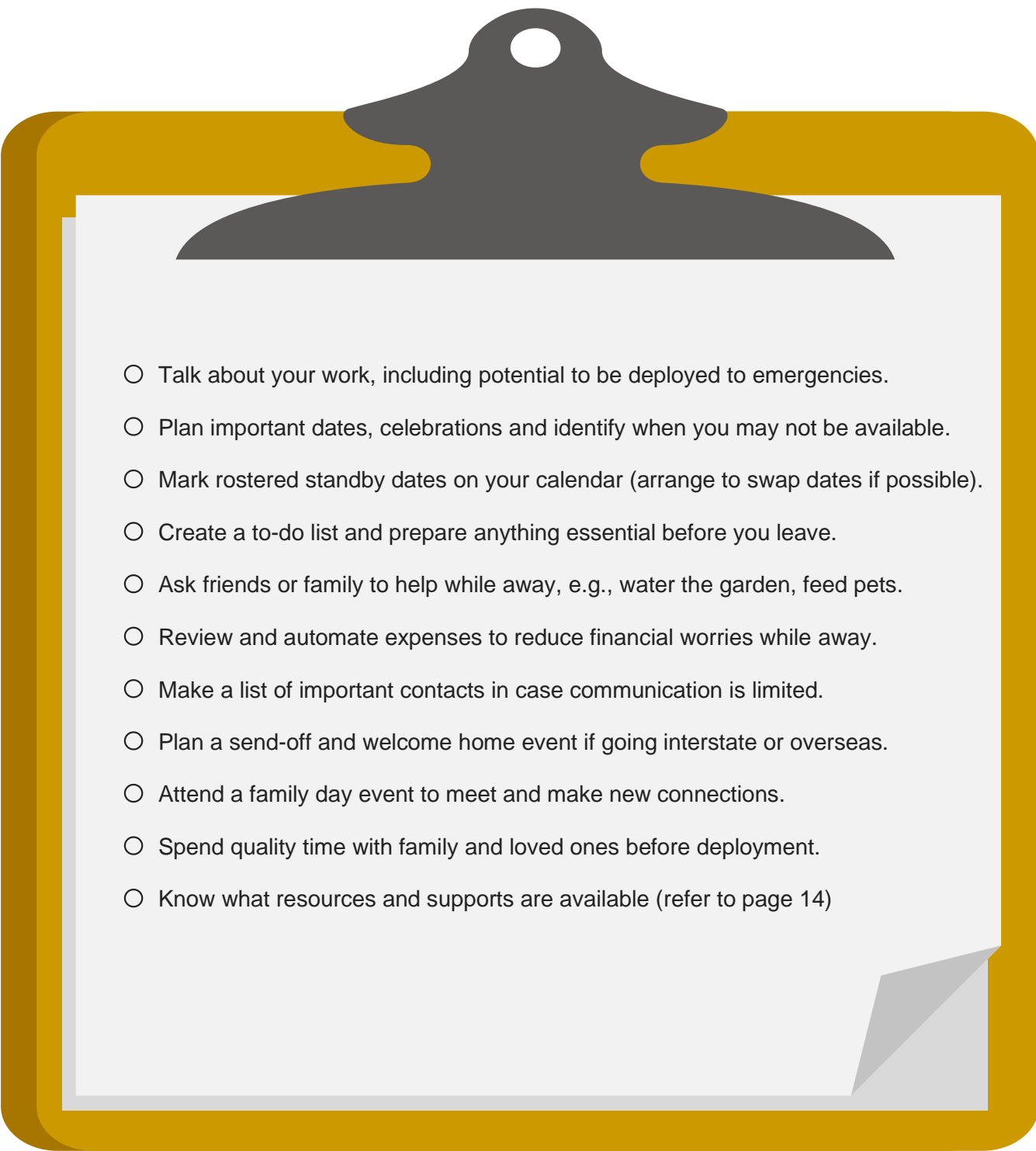


Involving your family and/or those closest to you in your preparation for responding to an emergency and staying connected once you return home, may help to minimise the effects that deployment may have on your health and wellbeing.

Preparing for emergency

Getting ready for any significant event, whether you're an emergency worker or a family member of an emergency worker, can bring about feelings of excitement and nervousness. Whether you're new to emergency work or have experienced multiple deployments, it's normal to have a mix of emotions as deployment approaches.

Being well-prepared means knowing what tools and support are available and taking practical steps as you prepare for deployment. While every emergency season varies, there are some general things both emergency workers and their families can do to prepare for emergency response work.

- 
- Talk about your work, including potential to be deployed to emergencies.
 - Plan important dates, celebrations and identify when you may not be available.
 - Mark rostered standby dates on your calendar (arrange to swap dates if possible).
 - Create a to-do list and prepare anything essential before you leave.
 - Ask friends or family to help while away, e.g., water the garden, feed pets.
 - Review and automate expenses to reduce financial worries while away.
 - Make a list of important contacts in case communication is limited.
 - Plan a send-off and welcome home event if going interstate or overseas.
 - Attend a family day event to meet and make new connections.
 - Spend quality time with family and loved ones before deployment.
 - Know what resources and supports are available (refer to page 14)

During Emergency



How are you feeling today?

preparing for and responding to emergencies and during recovery activities, you may encounter high stress situations. While some level of stress is healthy and normal, too much, or continuous stress can lead to 'distress' and 'burnout'.

Just like warning lights on a car that alert us when to fuel-up, service, etc, our bodies alert us in a similar way. Being aware of signs allows us to **act** early, **prevent** breakdown, and **maintain** optimal health and wellbeing.

Everyone's mental health changes over time. Mental health exists on a continuum, think of mental health moving back and forth. Some days you may feel great and some days you may feel average. This could be due to a range of things happening inside or outside of work. Including conflict with others, not getting enough sleep, or stopping self-care activities etc.



Image: Mental Health Continuum model

Everyone handles stress differently and it can provoke different reactions in each of us. Make sure that you and those around you are aware of the common signs and symptoms of stress, distress, and burnout so that you can work together to reduce the impacts of stressors on you, your workmates, and your family.

Emptying the Stress Bucket

Not all stress is bad, some stress is normal and healthy. Stress can help to increase our energy and focus when required, but when stress is constant, this can lead to feeling exhausted and burnt out.

Think of stress as water in a bucket, some water in the bucket is manageable, but when the bucket starts to fill, it will eventually overflow and become heavier to carry.

Managing stress before it becomes too much should be a priority. To ensure your bucket doesn't overflow, here are a few ways to help with reducing stress.



-  **Seek Support Early**
Reach out to colleagues, family and/or friends when feeling overwhelmed.
-  **Resolve Conflicts Promptly**
Address personal conflicts to ease mental stress.
-  **Delay Major Changes**
Postpone significant life events (if possible) to reduce stress.
-  **Do Something Enjoyable**
Engage in activities and hobbies you love for relaxation.
-  **Regular Exercise**
Maintain physical and mental health through workouts.
-  **Relaxation Time**
Practice meditation for body and mind relaxation.
-  **Discuss Workload**
Talk about work or family responsibilities early on.
-  **Manage social media**
Take a break from social media and news for balance.

Stress versus burnout - what is the difference?

A well serviced and properly maintained vehicle will continue to operate and be reliable, however, if we don't do regular checks or servicing, the vehicle will eventually break down. 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. 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.

Stress	Burnout
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Characterised by over-engagement.• Emotions are often over-reactive.• Often produces urgency and hyperactivity.• Usually exhausts physical energy.• Constant / prolonged stress can lead to depression and anxiety.• Typically leaves you feeling overwhelmed.• Tends to be more physical.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Characterised by disengagement.• Emotions often dulled.• Often produces helplessness and hopelessness.• Often exhausts motivation, drive, ideals, and hope.• Burnout and prolonged stress can lead to depression and anxiety.• Typically leaves you demoralised.• Typically leaves you with a sense of reduced accomplishment.• Tends to be more emotional.

It's important to look for the signs and symptoms as shown in the Mental Health Continuum model on page 6, to help manage and reduce stress. Don't be afraid to acknowledge your own needs and find positive ways to meet them.

Burnout happens gradually and is difficult to fight once it has started, so it is important to recognise the signs of burnout, and to take early action to stop it.

Following Emergency



When returning from working in emergency getting back into your normal routine can take some time to re-adjust. For an extended campaign, this can take longer, sometimes up to several weeks. It is normal to feel unsettled, emotional, and fatigued, especially if you've been out of your normal routine for an extended period.

Here are some suggestions that may be useful for you and your family when working in emergency, though not all may apply to your circumstances.



Acknowledge and Embrace Your Emotions:

Allow yourself to feel all emotions, even if uncomfortable.

Give yourself permission to experience your feelings.

Be patient and allow time for readjustment.



Communicate with Others:

Share your feelings with family, friends, or a trusted colleague.

Talk about your experiences to help the readjustment process.

Professional support is available if needed.



Manage Your Schedule:

Avoid overbooking and gradually ease back into your routine.

Grant yourself the flexibility to adapt to your comfort level.



Prioritise Exercise and Fitness:

Engage in physical activities to support overall wellbeing.

Encourage your partner, family, and friends to join for added enjoyment and accountability.



Maintain a Nutritious Diet:

Recharge and repair your body with a balanced diet.

Limit alcohol consumption to avoid negative effects on decision-making, emotions, and sleep. (Refer to page 19 for more resources and information.)



Share Your Experiences:

Discuss your experiences with your manager or team.

Reflect on what you learned and share your feelings about the experience.



Reconnect with Colleagues:

Arrange catch-ups with workmates.

Participate in debriefing processes if available.



Strategies for Returning to Work:

Discuss leave options with your manager for any personal matters.
Consider renegotiating timelines, delegating tasks, or seeking help from colleagues.
Consider reviewing your performance plan to include any achievements.



Prioritise Self-Care:

Continue engaging in self-care activities.
Take leave when needed to disconnect from work and focus on personal wellbeing.

Remember to take small steps each day and each week, this can help make the transition back to normal routines easier. It may take up to several weeks after deployment to re-adjust and get back into your usual routine. Everyone responds differently.

If you feel you are having difficulty getting back to engaging in your usual daily tasks, routine, or things you previously enjoyed, have difficulty coping or have thoughts or feelings that are playing on your mind, there are a range of supports available to you and your family which you are encouraged to access. These are covered in the next section of this guide.



Photo by [Helena Lopes](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Resources and Support



Similar to how you stay healthy by exercising and eating well, there are tools and resources to help you take care of your mental health and wellbeing. These resources can support both your work and personal life. The department and its partner agencies offer an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), Peer Support, and Reach Out to help with your wellbeing.

Resources and Support for Employees

The following Wellbeing Resources and Support are available for employees only. Please check with your home agency for specific resources.

Reach Out Program

Reach Out provides short-term, confidential, and phone-based support to departmental and Forest Fire Management Victoria staff. Reach Out calls are undertaken by trained staff members who can provide support for up to six weeks after a significant incident.

You can contact Reach Out for yourself or for someone else. A Reach Out representative will be in contact as soon as possible and is available Monday - Friday during business hours 8:30am – 5:30pm. Conversations with Reach Out representatives and collected information are confidential. However, if safety or wellbeing concerns arise, there is an obligation to escalate the issue from a duty of care perspective.

For support outside of these hours, the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is available 24/7.



ffm.vic.gov.au/reachout



1800 950 411



ReachOut@delwp.vic.gov.au

Peer Support Program

Our trusted Peers, trained in Psychological First Aid principles, are available to provide support to our people across all businesses, regions, and workcentres. They are equipped to listen and offer local information, practical support, and guidance for personal or work-related matters. If professional services are needed, our Peers can help connect people to appropriate resources. By fostering a safe and open environment for wellbeing conversations, our Peers aim to promote positive mental health and empower our people to seek the support they need.



For DEECA staff: Visit Ada and Search “Find a Peer”.

For Parks Victoria Staff: Visit the Peer Assist page on Warnawi.



Wellbeing.Services@delwp.vic.gov.au

Resources and Support for Employees and Families

The following Wellbeing Resources and Support are available for both employees and family members.

EAP (Employee Assistance Program)

A free service that provides confidential, short-term, solution-focused support for you and your family. You can access four EAP sessions per assist category (as shown in the diagram), per calendar year. EAP can be provided over-the-phone or in-person at an off-site location away from your workplace and is available 24/7.



Free



Confidential



Available for up to 4 sessions per issue

Find out more or book an appointment:

1300 687 327 (Aus) | 0800 666 367 (NZ) | +613 8620 5300 (Intl)

convergeinternational.com.au | eap@convergeintl.com.au

FACE TO FACE

PHONE

ZOOM

LIVE CHAT

EMAIL

EAP CONNECT APP



Environment,
Land, Water
and Planning



Specialist Phone Helplines

Specialist confidential support by our experts.



First Nations

Call for specialist advice and support around Indigenous issues. Our consultants can also arrange for referral to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples services.

1300 287 432



LGBTQI+

Speak with a specialist counsellor and access support across issues specific to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer or Questioning people.

1300 542 874



Domestic and Family Violence

Speak with a specialist and access counselling, referral and support around domestic and family violence.

1300 338 465



Aged Care

Access advice on aged care issues and referral to specialist resources, as well as emotional support when caring for family members or friends.

1300 035 337



Disability and Carers'

Disability support and referral to state and local resources and services, as well as emotional support around caring for family or friends who live with disability.

1300 243 543



Youth and Student

Access age-sensitive support focusing on the emotional needs and psychological pressures many young Australians and students face in their daily lives.

1300 687 399



Spiritual and Pastoral Care

Speak with a counsellor who will help you draw on spiritual resources suitable to your faith journey. We have counsellors from all major faith traditions and every major Christian denomination trained to integrate spirituality as an essential aspect of well-being.

1300 772 435

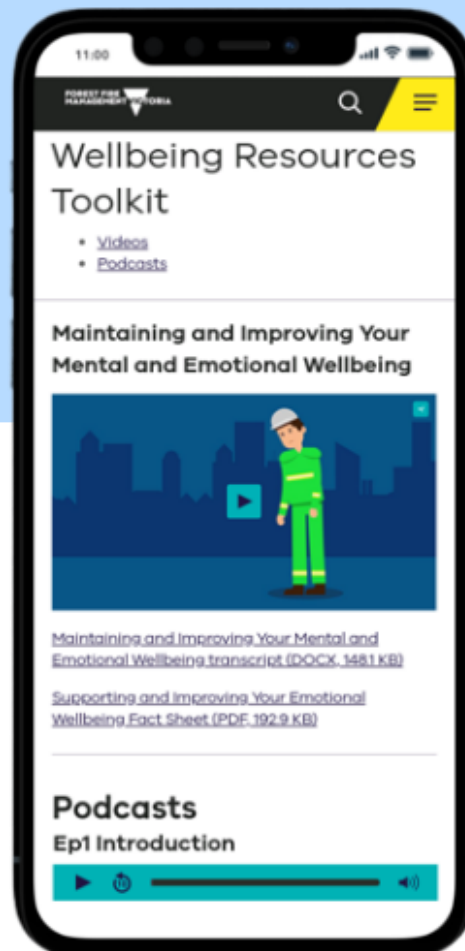
Wellbeing Resources Toolkit

In collaboration with the Australian College of Applied Psychology (ACAP) and Corporate Health Management (CHM), a range of free resources (videos, podcasts, and fact sheets) are available for you to access on various topics. These have been created to provide you with practical tools to support your health and wellbeing.

The tools have been developed with a focus on emergency response. Topics include maintaining and improving your mental and emotional wellbeing, nutrition, physical activity, sleep, the effects of smoking and alcohol on wellbeing and common mental health issues such as post-traumatic stress.



ffm.vic.gov.au/reachout/wellbeing-resources-toolkit



External Support Services

There are many free services available to you and your family that can assist with several different issues. If you're not sure where to start, or what you need, your GP is a good starting point who can provide an initial assessment and refer you on to an appropriate health professional.



headspace provides young people aged 12–25 years with general and mental health advice, education, employment, and help with alcohol and drug issues.

Visit: [headspace.org.au](https://www.headspace.org.au) for more information.



Advice and support via telephone 24/7. Daily webchat between 3pm -12am. Email support is also available.

Visit: [beyondblue.org.au](https://www.beyondblue.org.au) for more information.

Phone: 1300 224 636



13YARN is an Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islanders crisis support line. Available 24/7. No shame, no judgement, safe place to yarn.

Visit: [13yarn.org.au](https://www.13yarn.org.au) for more information.

Phone: 13 92 76



QLife offers free, anonymous LGBTI peer support and referrals in Australia daily from 3 pm to midnight for discussions on sexuality, identity, gender, bodies, feelings, or relationships via phone and webchat.

Phone: 1800 184 527



Anonymous, confidential 24/7 crisis support for all personal difficulties, including suicidal thoughts, via phone, online chat, or in person.

Phone: 13 11 14



Telephone and online counselling available 24 hours every day to people who are affected by suicide.

Phone: 1300 659 467



The department offers programs to help Victorians create safe and caring homes and communities for all families and children.

Self-Care

Self-care takes many forms and is different for everyone, so it's important to find something that works for you. Whether you prefer solo activities or spending time with friends and family, setting aside some time for self-care is essential for managing stress and supporting your health and wellbeing. Start by taking small steps to form healthy habits and setting limits on your daily tasks. Below are some example of what self-care looks like.



RELAX AND RESET

Meditation can be good for mental health and wellbeing by promoting relaxation, reducing stress and anxiety, increasing self-awareness, and fostering a sense of inner peace and calm.



MOVE MORE

Regular exercise and movement release endorphins, the "happy hormones" that can reduce stress and anxiety, improve mood and sleep, boost self-esteem and confidence, and promote a sense of wellbeing.



SLEEP WELL

Getting at least 8 hours of sleep and avoiding screen time for 30 minutes before bedtime can help regulate your mood, reduce stress and anxiety, and improve brain function.



GO OUTDOORS

Getting outdoors and soaking up some sunshine can improve mood, boost vitamin D levels, reduce stress and anxiety, increase physical activity



GET CREATIVE

Look for activities that bring you joy and happiness. Being creative and doing fun activities can improve mental health by reducing stress and promoting mindfulness



EAT WELL

Eating well and staying hydrated with water provides essential nutrients that support brain function, regulate mood which promotes better mental health and overall wellbeing

Wellbeing Self-Assessment Tool

Just as you would do a quick assessment of your vehicle before embarking on a long road trip to ensure that everything is in working order, it's important to be aware of the common reactions to stressful situations. Symptoms such as increased heart rate, difficulty sleeping, and changes in appetite are normal responses to stress, and they often subside after a short period of time. However, in some cases, these symptoms can persist and lead to significant distress or disruption to your daily life. The following checklist can help you recognize and manage these symptoms, promoting overall wellbeing and resilience in the face of stress.

Have you experienced any of the following in the last month?	Circle your response	
1. Having more difficulty sleeping than before	No	Yes
2. Increased physical health complaints like fatigue or pain	No	Yes
3. Having difficulty returning to previous work or home routine	No	Yes
4. Finding it hard to take minor personal criticisms	No	Yes
5. Reluctant or anxious about attending future incidents	No	Yes
6. Moodiness that is out of character	No	Yes
7. Relationship problems	No	Yes
8. Feeling that personal effort is not recognised or supported	No	Yes
9. Talking about any worrying experiences constantly	No	Yes
10. Avoiding thinking or talking about your experiences	No	Yes
11. Keeping yourself busy to avoid remembering the emergency	No	Yes
12. Increased use of alcohol/drugs	No	Yes
13. Nightmares and/or flashbacks of stressful experiences	No	Yes
14. Repeated, disturbing memories or thoughts of the stressful incidents	No	Yes
15. Loss of interest in food or pleasurable activities	No	Yes
16. Difficulty with concentration	No	Yes
17. Increased irritability and frustration	No	Yes
18. Spending less time with friends and family	No	Yes
19. Staying at home from work or school	No	Yes
20. Physical reactions such as heart pounding, sweating and trouble breathing when reminded of the stressful experience	No	Yes

If after completing this assessment, you have identified any ongoing responses that are causing significant distress to you or those close to you, or if they are impacting your ability to function effectively in your daily life, it's important to seek appropriate help and support such as your GP, mental health provider, or other support services as mentioned in this guide.

