

HOW TO PROMOTE AND PROTECT THE MENTAL HEALTH OF YOUNG EMERGENCY SERVICE VOLUNTEERS



ABOUT THIS PROJECT

The *Positive mental health in young adult emergency services personnel* project was part of the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC's Tactical Research Fund program. Conducted between June 2020 and March 2021, this project was a partnership of the organisations listed with authors below, as well as key emergency services and the young adult members of the project's Young Volunteers Advisory Committee.

AUTHORS

Dr Amanda Taylor and Dr Jane Cocks, University of Adelaide; Prof Sharon Lawn, Flinders University; A/Prof David Lawrence and Wavne Rikkers, University of Western Australia; Dr Louise Roberts, Flinders University; A/Prof Maureen Ashe, University of British Columbia (Canada) and University of Adelaide; A/Prof Rachel Roberts, Prof Alexander McFarlane, Prof Paul Delfabbro and Holly Caruso, University

of Adelaide; Dr Miranda Van Hooff, Military and Emergency Services Health Australia, Hospital Research Foundation Group and University of Adelaide.

Contact: amanda.taylor@adelaide.edu.au.

SUMMARY

Within Australian emergency services, there is a clear need to investigate mental health outcomes in young adult volunteers, including the practices that can minimise the impact of potentially traumatising events that commonly occur while volunteering. The promotion and protection of positive mental health is an important part of this process.

This project tackled mental health outcomes in young adult emergency service volunteers (aged 16–25 years) to minimise the short- and long-term impacts of exposure to stress and trauma, as well as providing guidance on how to maintain and promote positive mental health and wellbeing more generally in brigades, groups and units.

The resources that this research created – available on the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC website at www.bnhcrc.com.au/resources/volunteer-mental-health – provide an evidence-based and practical starting point for supporting positive mental health in young adult volunteers. These include a *Care4Guide* (including posters and social media images), fact sheets of key research findings, a Young Volunteer Wellbeing Framework and an Agency Implementation Guide (see pages 3 and 4).

These resources have been created for emergency service agencies around Australia (with application that extends well beyond those groups), to assist them in providing informed psychosocial support for the mental health of their young adult volunteers. A focus on maintaining good mental health of this key demographic will contribute to the sustainability of the critical volunteer service among emergency service agencies.

CONTEXT

In Australia, emergency service agencies rely on volunteers to protect local communities. To ensure the ongoing viability of these essential services, it is critical to identify ways to ensure that engagement in these volunteer roles can be sustained across the volunteer career.

In recent years, attention has been given to the importance of mental health and wellbeing for emergency service personnel, as part

of retention and sustainable engagement in the role. A recent study showed that the average age of volunteer fire and emergency service personnel in Australia is approximately 55 years (Beyond Blue 2018), so it is necessary to understand how to best support younger volunteers to ensure that the volunteer force can be maintained into the future.

Despite this need, there is limited knowledge on how to support the mental

health of young adult volunteers specifically, with research, information and practice guidelines applied across the volunteer career. The aim of this project was to understand what can be done at individual, local and organisation-wide levels to minimise the impacts of potentially traumatising events and to support and promote good mental health and wellbeing for volunteers in fire and emergency service organisations.

BUSHFIRE AND NATURAL HAZARDS CRC RESEARCH

This project was conducted between June 2020 and March 2021, and consisted of multiple iterative phases:

Phase one: A rapid systematic review of existing research literature on mental health in young adult (16–25 years) emergency service volunteers.

Phase two: An analysis of existing data from previous surveys focused on mental health and wellbeing in the emergency services, using data available on young adult volunteer and career personnel. Datasets that were re-analysed for the present project were taken from the *Answering the Call* survey of police, fire and emergency services personnel, conducted in 2017 and 2018 (Beyond Blue 2018), and the Mental Health and Wellbeing Survey conducted with Metropolitan Fire Service firefighters in South Australia in 2016 (Centre for Traumatic Stress Studies 2016).

Phase three: A survey of mental health, wellbeing and experiences in the emergency service volunteer role for young adult emergency service volunteers in Australia, conducted between September and December 2020. The survey was completed by 192 emergency services volunteers aged between 16 and 25 (average age 21.1), with complete data available for mental health outcome analyses for 138 participants. All states and territories were represented in this survey, with 62 per cent of participants coming from regional or rural locations – an important distinction, as the factors that challenge and support a young person's mental health are very dependent on where that person lives.

Phase four: An environmental scan of existing programs to support mental health and manage psychosocial risks and hazards in emergency service agencies. Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with emergency service agency representatives between October 2020 and January 2021.

Phase five: A series of five focus groups conducted with young adult emergency service volunteer representatives from all states and territories in Australia, held between December 2020 and January 2021. These focus groups aimed to understand the perceived facilitators and barriers to engaging in mental health supports, the differences in support needs for younger versus older volunteers, and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the volunteer experience.

Data collected across these five phases were synthesised with existing practice frameworks for supporting mental health in emergency services personnel, to produce A Wellbeing Framework for Young Fire and Emergency Services Volunteer Mental Health (see pages 3 and 4). This Framework was then reviewed with eight emergency service agency representatives from across Australia, between February and March 2021, to ensure that it was applicable and feasible to be implemented across emergency service agencies.

Findings from the online survey and focus groups were also used to produce the *Care4Guide*, an information guide to support mental health for young adult volunteers, which was co-designed with a young adult cohort through the project's Young Volunteers Advisory Committee.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The volunteer role experience:

The rapid review indicated that exposure to potentially traumatising events is common.

Previous Australian research (*Answering the Call* and the SA Metropolitan Fire Service Health and Wellbeing Survey) identified that 25 per cent of young adult volunteers had experienced an event that affected them deeply during their volunteering, and 80 per cent of young firefighters experienced at least one stressful event in the course of their role.

Three quarters of the young adult volunteers surveyed had an active role in the 2019–20 Australian bushfires, with 44 per cent also living in a bushfire-affected area.

Young adult volunteers generally perceived that their volunteer role benefited their wellbeing via a sense of contributing to the community, but also reported experiencing stressful impacts due to the need to balance multiple roles (for example, work, study and volunteering).

Mental health outcomes:

Elevated levels of anxiety, depression and post trauma symptoms in many young emergency services personnel were found. Previous Australian research (Beyond Blue 2018) showed:

- higher levels of probable post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in young adult volunteers (8.8 per cent) compared to older volunteers (4.7 per cent)
- close to 25 per cent of those young adult volunteers who experienced high psychological distress or probable PTSD did not perceive that they

had a problem requiring support, suggesting the need for improving mental health literacy in this cohort.

The rapid review also found:

- several risk factors for mental health concerns, including exposure to childhood trauma, lower self-worth, lower level of education, regular consumption of alcohol, greater perceived work stress and not accessing psychological support following exposure to a potentially traumatising event
- lower levels of social support from friends and family were also associated with increased risk for mental health concerns
- a number of protective factors for mental health concerns, including high individual resilience and conscientiousness, along with high levels of perceived social support from friends.

This research found additional mental health findings:

- Young adult volunteers reported high levels of psychological distress (20 per cent in the range of concerning mental health) but high wellbeing (95 per cent moderate to high wellbeing).
- COVID-19 impacts were experienced by many young adult volunteers, with 72 per cent reporting negative mental health impacts from the pandemic.
- Self-compassion, mindfulness and using engaged or active (rather than avoidant) coping strategies were associated with improved mental health among young adult volunteers.
- Disengaged (or avoidant) coping was associated with increased risk for mental health concerns for young adult volunteers.
- Young adult volunteers believed that they had good skills for identifying and responding to potential mental health concerns in others, but had less well-developed skills for identifying mental health concerns in themselves.
- Similarly, young adult volunteers reflected that they had strong values in terms of providing care and support for others, consistent with their volunteer role, and that this value of caring for others at times took precedence over caring for themselves (for example, engaging in self-care).

Agency-based support for mental health in young adult volunteers:

The semi-structured interviews with emergency service agency representatives acknowledged:

Culture	Communication	Capacity building
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Address mental health stigma. Normalise and promote support seeking. Prioritise mental health and psychosocial safety. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Diversify communication channels for mental health related information, including provision of information to volunteer friends and family. Promote positive mental health related information across communication channels. Include mental health and support information in operational debriefing conversations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Include mental health related information in induction and training materials. Mental health related information to include a focus on wellbeing skill development. Access to information supports and options for reporting psychosocial hazards to be able to be completed confidentially.

▲ Figure 1: A SUMMARY OF THE KEY GOALS FOR EACH OF THE THREE CONTEXTS RELEVANT TO A WELLBEING FRAMEWORK FOR YOUNG FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES VOLUNTEER MENTAL HEALTH.

- the importance of supporting mental health
- that the importance of supporting mental health was acknowledged and prioritised up to the highest level across agencies (right up to the executive level)
- that the degree to which this support was reflected in operational workplace or volunteer role culture varied across brigades, groups and units
- that approaches to mental health within agencies were predominantly reactive (that is, responding to identified risk of mental health concerns) rather than proactive
- that there is less of a focus on promoting positive mental health
- that there is currently no specific mental health strategy or supports specifically targeted to young adult volunteers or personnel.
- Support from family and friends, followed by general practitioners, were the most utilised (and found to be most useful) sources of community mental health related support.
- Social media, although commonly used, was perceived to be a less useful mental health support.
- Operational debriefings, particularly those conducted informally, were valued and perceived as useful but could be enhanced by including information on mental health-related responses to incidents and provision of support options (including the process of normalisation).
- Psychological safety was highlighted as an important discussion point with volunteer peers and colleagues regarding mental health.

The young adult volunteer perspective:

Mental health-related stigma remained present within many brigades, groups and units, particularly for older volunteers and personnel.

- Operational debriefing followed by peer support and employee assistance programs were the most accessed support services provided by agencies.
- Operational debriefing was perceived as the most useful source of agency support, followed by employee assistance programs, peer support and online programs.

Development of the framework:

The data obtained from this mixed methods project was synthesised and adapted in accordance with relevant practice frameworks to produce A Wellbeing Framework for Young Fire and Emergency Services Volunteer Mental Health.

This Framework identifies goals and actions across four pillars – promotion, prevention, protection and intervention – to support mental health

within three specific contexts relevant to the emergency service volunteer role: culture, communication and capacity building. Specific goals and actions for each context are detailed in the Framework and are briefly summarised in Figure 1, above.

HOW CAN THE RESOURCES BE USED?

All of the resources produced by this project are informed by the research data and key findings and are aligned with best practice guidelines in relevant contexts, acknowledging the importance of promotion, prevention, protection and intervention when supporting mental health outcomes.

Together, these resources contribute to the sustainability of the emergency service volunteer service, now and in the future. They can each be used at an individual, local and organisation-wide level to provide informed psychosocial support for the mental health of young adult volunteers. While the *Care4Guide* is designed for use by young adult volunteers themselves, the fact sheets, Wellbeing Framework and Agency Implementation Guide are designed for use by agencies and organisations.

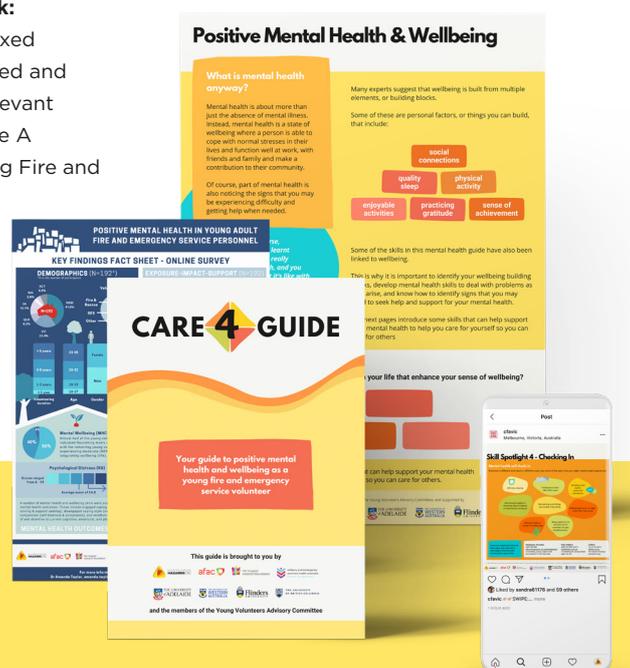
Care4Guide:

The *Care4Guide* is a self-completed guide to positive mental health and wellbeing as a young adult emergency service volunteer. It was developed in close partnership with the project's Young Volunteer Advisory Committee, comprising of young adult

WHERE CAN I FIND THE RESOURCES?

The *Care4Guide*, posters, social media images and fact sheets are available at www.bnhcrc.com.au/resources/volunteer-mental-health.

A Wellbeing Framework for Young Fire and Emergency Services Volunteer Mental Health and the Agency Implementation Guide can be found in the final report for this at www.bnhcrc.com.au/volunteermentalhealth/report.



volunteers across Australia, including regional and remote areas. This is reflected in the layout, content and design – it is succinct and written in plain language, is brightly coloured, and includes the ability to share parts of the guide on social media and through online channels (via posters and social media images, see below).

The *Care4Guide* focuses on skills and strategies that volunteers can use to care for their mental health. It includes information on positive mental health and wellbeing, strategies for developing mental health skills, tips about self-compassion, ideas for everyday mindfulness (for example, body scanning), examples of coping skills and how to use them (for example, slow breathing), a mental health check-in template, a guide to help identify the unique support pathways that exist for volunteers individually, and a page of mental health resources. In addition to being used by volunteers themselves, it is also designed to be promoted by brigade, group and unit leaders.

Included in the *Care4Guide* is the suggestion to share the information, particularly the support pathways and resources, with family and friends, reflecting the importance of family and friends in providing support to young adult volunteers.

Care4Guide posters and social media assets:

In addition to the full *Care4Guide* booklet, researchers have created one-page posters based on the contents of the *Care4Guide*, as well as several social media images. These can be shared on both internal channels and with the community via social media channels.

Fact sheets of key findings:

There are four positive mental health fact sheets that summarise the key findings of the research:

1. Knowledge synthesis
2. Key findings online survey
3. Leadership perspectives
4. Young volunteer perspectives

These are designed for use and promotion by agency and organisation leaders, to

promote the latest information and data about positive mental health for young adult volunteers within the organisation.

A Wellbeing Framework for Young Fire and Emergency Services Volunteer Mental Health:

The goals of the Framework, as described on page 3, are intended as a 'best practice' guide for agencies to support practices already in place, or provide new options, to promote and maintain young adult volunteer mental health.

Agency Implementation Guide:

Guidance for implementation of the Framework has been provided in the Agency Implementation Guide. The implementation indicators in the guide are intended as examples of possible agency practices and are not exhaustive; agencies may put in place their own specific actions to assist in meeting relevant goals within the framework.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The resources from this project were recently rolled out to emergency service agencies around Australia, through AFAC, to promote mental health through training, recruitment and via internal channels (such as agency intranet or shared via social media platforms). The findings and resources are already being used to inform the NSW Rural Fire Service's new mental health policy, with many other agencies having expressed interest. There is also potential for this research to be used more widely by other groups that have cohorts of young adult volunteers. As such, the CRC are currently sharing and promoting the research and resources with key non-agency stakeholders.

The CRC have also expanded the project's funding to include the development of a digital toolkit that will be based on the current resources. This interactive digital toolkit, which will be developed in 2021, will be used by agencies and volunteers to further support maintenance of strong mental health across the sector.

END-USER STATEMENT

"The great thing about this project is that the resources created are not only evidence-based, but they were also developed with young volunteers, for young volunteers. The extraordinary and unique perspectives that our young members bring to the emergency management sector are clearly evident in their contribution to this very important research. The *Care4Guide* gives young volunteers what they need to begin thinking about and protecting their own mental health, while the Framework and Implementation Guide are a great start for fire and emergency service agencies to more effectively support young members' positive mental health, which is so important for a sustainable volunteer service."

Trina Schmidt, Executive Director People & Strategy, NSW Rural Fire Service

FURTHER READING

Taylor A, Cocks J, Lawn S, Lawrence D, Ridders W, Roberts L, Ashe MC, Roberts R, McFarlane A, Delfabbro P, Caruso H & Van Hooff M (2021) Positive mental health in young adult fire and emergency service personnel, final report, Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC, accessible at www.bnhcrc.com.au/volunteementalhealth/report.

Beyond Blue (2018) Answering the call national survey: Beyond Blue's national mental health and wellbeing study of police and emergency services – final report, accessible at <https://resources.beyondblue.org.au/prism/file?token=BL/1898>.

Centre for Traumatic Stress Studies (2017) MFS health & wellbeing study, University of Adelaide, accessible at <https://bit.ly/3v7eot3>.

The Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC is a national research centre funded by the Australian Government Cooperative Research Centre Program. It was formed in 2013 for an eight-year program to undertake end-user focused research for Australia and New Zealand.

Hazard Notes are prepared from available research at the time of publication to encourage discussion and debate. The contents of *Hazard Notes* do not necessarily represent the views, policies, practises or positions of any of the individual agencies or organisations who are stakeholders of the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC.

All material in this document, except as identified below, is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0 International Licence. Material not licensed under the Creative Commons licence:

- Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC logo
- All photographs.

All rights are reserved in content not licenced under the Creative Commons licence. Permission must be sought from the copyright owner to use this material.