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Firefighter

VOL 5 EDITION 1

Autumn Edition

INSIDE

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CONTENTS

EDITOR'S NOTE

2 Leigh Leonard, TNF Editor

NEWS AND VIEWS

- 4 Good fire citizen
- 6 Leadership In Action
- 12 Equine Assisted Therapy
- 16 Behind The Uniform
- 18 When Girls Roar
- 20 Leading Australia's Bushfire Recovery
- 22 World Wildlife Day
- 24 Why Do We Pretend To Be Happy
- 30 PTSD Assistance Dogs
- 34 Foster Care
- 36 Beyond Tough
- 40 Why Tactical Fitness Matters
- 42 Bushfire!
- 44 Emergency Volunteer Respect Act
- 47 Cancer On The Job
- 50 Mental Health Awareness
- 52 What FireFighters Should Know About Today's Lending Landscape
- 54 When Pressure Hits, Leadership Shows
- 56 Strength Under Stress



EDITOR

Leigh Leonard
leigh.leonard@zodiacmedia.com.au

EDITORIAL BOARD

An Editorial Board is in place for the magazine. The Board includes a number of experienced Fire Fighters who offer expertise in various areas of Fire Fighting. The Board's role will be to oversee articles to ensure the content and information is accurate and timely, and to provide advice on direction for the journal.

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Studio Benji

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Zodiac Media
208/365 Little Collins St,
Melbourne, VIC 3000, Australia

CONTRIBUTORS

Suggestions, content ideas or complete articles from readers are welcome and will be reviewed by the Editorial Committee. Simply contact leigh.roberts@zodiacmedia.com.au

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The opinions presented in our magazine are those of the authors of the articles. We enjoy the opportunity to present a variety of viewpoints but do not necessarily endorse them.

ABOUT US

The National Firefighter is a journal delivered to Firefighters and selected universities across Australia. Our mission is to support Firefighters through the sharing of knowledge and information from across Australia, and at the same time aid Firefighters through delivering current information from recognised leaders in the field. We are independent from any employer, associations or groups and our aim is simply to provide current, relevant information to Australian Firefighters.

The National Firefighter will evolve over time with feedback and review from readers and industry peers. The aim of The National Firefighter is to share knowledge and commentary from experts in the field, as well as provide background information.



www.thenationalfirefighter.com.au



Editor's Note

Welcome to this edition of The National Firefighter.

I would like to thank Caleb Geppert and Justin Choveaux for their continuing support of Nat Fire with the interesting and informative articles they contribute. We look forward to many more!

We have touched on AI in this edition, and will expand further in the next edition. This is a subject that I will have to research, because admittedly, my comprehension of this subject leaves much room for improvement. A highly esteemed expert on THIS subject spoke at our church last week and I picked up a few snippets.

"We do not need to be afraid of AI- just careful" A good analogy is the following-We can use a shovel to dig a hole or to hit someone over the head! (guess that says a lot about ME that that sentence resonated with me!) Another example is-if you use a GPS to get to a previously unknown destination and then drive to the same destination WITHOUT a GPS, it would be unlikely that you would remember how to get there.

AI cannot think-it just gives probability,

It cannot feel empathy, sympathy or love. I suppose that AI could write my editorials for me, and that is tempting because not only would this prove time effective, but I have no doubt it would be much better than my own! But this would not be ME warts and all, and my brain needs all the exercise it can get!

The flipside-AI can better diagnose better, medically and better pinpoint the problem apparently.

So there is much to learn! With me, the jury is out at the moment.

It is obvious in past editions that we publish articles on WHY pets are conducive to good mental health, especially in the area of PTSD. And THIS edition is no exception. From personal experience, I fully subscribe to this theory/belief, and the comprehensive research supports this.

Like most of us, as a child I had the various assortment of pets and I followed this tradition on with my own children. Having pets taught ME much-having pets taught THEM much. At that time there really was no spoken about/published correlation between pets and good mental health. Now all that has changed. It has been proven

that animals help with stress, anxiety, depression and PTSD. As a mother of an adult child who suffers from all the above and more, I have seen the difference our two much loved 4 legged family members have made to HIM and to our entire family. I know beyond any shadow of a doubt that they help alleviate mental health issues ,to say the very least. But I will leave it to the experts to elaborate on this subject.

Following on with this, we have introduced Equine Therapy which we will continue with in the NEXT edition.

We wish you all good mental health (and petrol for your tanks!~)

Leigh

Leigh M Leonard
Editor
The National Firefighter

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Good fire citizen

Bush Heritage Australia's path towards best-practice fire management.

Green zigzag-shaped leaves of a Banksia media seedling poke through white sandy soil at Bush Heritage Australia's Chereninup Creek Reserve on Goreng Noongar Country, 140 kilometres north-east of Albany, Western Australia. Charcoal blocks cluster among the ancient Kwongan heath, evidence of a recent prescribed burn by local field staff and conservation not-for-profit's Fire team.

Before the burn, vegetation monitoring showed the heath was declining. Older Banksia media plants were collapsing, or had already, and there was no sign of the next generation. In response, the fire team conducted a targeted prescribed burn – the first known burn on this part of the reserve in 74 years – to encourage recruitment and better understand the species' relationship to fire.

Returning to the four-hectare study site, a post-burn survey found that

the number of Banksia media recruits increased from zero to 46. While this was expected – the species requires fire to release canopy-stored seed – other insights emerged.

“Burning in areas where Banksia media have already senesced led to zero recruitment, so the need for some burning of live plants is required before they're lost in some habitat types,” says Lewi Maar, National Fire Program Officer for Bush Heritage.

“At the right extent and intensity, mature plants can survive low-intensity burns, or can be excluded, to create a mosaic of age classes and build fire-dependent species' resilience.”

This kind of evidence-based burning is only possible to complete with safe fire operations underpinned by a robust risk framework. In the same month as the burn, the organisation's Fire Management Program received endorsement from the Office of Bushfire Risk Management (OBRM), which is

part of the Department of Fire and Emergency Services' Rural Fire Division and has oversight of bushfire risk management in Western Australia.

The endorsement demonstrates Bush Heritage's strong commitment to bushfire risk management, aligns their framework with international risk management standards, and recognises industry best practice. “It's a significant acknowledgement from an independent organisation of the strength of our entire program,” says Rhys Swain, National Fire Program Manager for Bush Heritage.

“Actively and voluntarily seeking this endorsement shows maturity and puts us in a strong position to keep carrying out this work.”

After five years working with OBRM – to review governance and improve every policy, procedure and risk control associated with Bush Heritage's fire operations, including extensive in-field assessments – an endorsed Fire Management Manual and an aligned



training program emerged, both of which have been rolled out nationally.

“It pulls everything into one document that our workers can refer to in the field, offering a robust outline of all the steps we must take before we throw a match, capturing not just risk to staff but organisational and risk to our neighbours,” says Rhys.

Bush Heritage is the first conservation not-for-profit to achieve this endorsement and OBRM will conduct regular reviews of our program to maintain it, ensuring high standards and allowing research like the Chereninup study to be repeated. Now, their team are sharing the framework and conducting trainings with partners that have similar programs.

For, Tom Vigilante, Healthy Country Manager working with Wunambal Gaambera Aboriginal Corporation (WGAC), the opportunity to adopt and adapt Bush Heritage's endorsed policies delivers administrative efficiencies and helps scale best-practice fire management.

“There are a lot of workplace requirements organisations must meet, and fire is a complicated operation. Everyone needs to be trained and follow policies and procedures, which often change and can be difficult for

organisations to keep up with,” he says.

Fire has always been central to Wunambal Gaambera Traditional Owners' management of their Country, which is in the North Kimberley, Western Australia. Supporting its continuation is vitally important both from a cultural and ecological perspective. Bush Heritage have partnered with WGAC for over 14 years, supporting its care of 2.5 million hectares of land and sea Country.

“Rhys' team have also helped during fire season, spending time with the Rangers implementing burns, and building up people's skills and confidence to allow them to take on more leadership roles in the program,” says Tom.

From new Banksia seedlings emerging at Chereninup to landscape-scale fire programs grounded in cultural knowledge and obligation, this work shows how strong systems, shared learning and careful fire management can support both people and Country into the future.

Words by Bee Stephens

Location Across the country
Bush Heritage
www.bushheritage.org.au

Bush Heritage gratefully acknowledges OBRM for the endorsement, and Wunambal Gaambera Aboriginal Corporation and Traditional Owners for inviting the team onto Country and their ongoing partnership. This article first appeared in Bushtracks, a quarterly magazine by Bush Heritage, check it out via: bushheritage.org.au/news/bushtracks-magazine



Leadership in Action - Strengthening the People Behind the Uniform

In emergency services, we spend a lot of time building operational capability.

We train to manage fire, risk, complexity, fatigue, uncertainty, and consequence. We develop doctrine, systems, procedures, and command structures designed to help us perform when pressure is high and the margin for error is low.

But over time, one truth becomes increasingly clear:

The strength of any emergency service is not defined by appliances, systems, or doctrine alone - but by the wellbeing of people behind them.

That was one of the strongest messages I took from the recent Frontline Mental Health Conference on the Gold Coast, where leaders, clinicians, researchers, and emergency service professionals came together to examine how we better support those who serve our communities. The conversation was

not abstract, and it was not soft. It was grounded in operational reality and centred on a critical leadership question:

how do we, as frontline responders, build organisations that remain capable not only when the tones sound and we are called to respond, but long after the incident is over?

As a professional Firefighter with Fire Rescue Victoria, a Disaster Relief Australia volunteer who has led Incident Management Teams (IMTs) on multiple deployments, and someone currently undertaking a Master of Emergency Management and an MBA, I found that question deeply relevant - not just academically, but operationally.

Because whether on the fireground, in recovery operations, or in broader strategic and organisational leadership roles, the same principle applies:

If we want resilient systems, we must first build resilient people - and that

starts with deliberately shaping the cultures that sustain them.

From Reactive Support to Operational Readiness

For many years, mental health support in emergency services has too often been reactive. Help has traditionally arrived after the incident, after the cumulative strain, or after a member has reached visible distress and showed signs of deterioration.

That model is no longer enough.

A major theme from the recent Frontline Mental Health Conference I attended was the shift toward proactive psychosocial risk management - recognising that psychological safety is not a peripheral wellbeing issue, but part of operational readiness itself.

As frontline responders, that matters because what affects people psychologically does not stay neatly contained in a welfare space. It shows up operationally. It influences



judgement on calls, communication across strike teams, trust, adaptability, and recovery both in station and on our days off with family. Increasingly, the evidence and lived experience across emergency services suggest that what ultimately degrades performance and wellbeing is not always the primary trauma exposure of the incidents we attend alone, but often the friction around it: poor support, poor leadership, unresolved stress, disconnection, and the absence of meaningful recovery rituals.

That is a leadership issue.

It means psychological safety should be seen in the same way we view other operational controls: not as a bonus, but as part of the infrastructure that allows people and teams to function at their very best under pressure.

Social Identity Theory - The Human Factor Behind Team Performance

One of the most useful lenses discussed

at the conference was Social Identity Theory - the idea that people derive part of their sense of self from the groups they belong to. In practical terms, it helps explain why teams with strong cohesion, trust, psychological safety and shared purpose often perform better, communicate more effectively, and show greater resilience under pressure.

This is seen strongly across both military fields and frontline responder environments. Research into frontline emergency service organisations has found relatively high levels of social identification and group cohesion, which has implications for performance, leadership, diversity, recruitment, and workforce retention. In one 2024 study of an emergency services organisation, social identification scores were relatively high, with a mean of 5.40 on a 1-7 scale, while group cohesion averaged 7.29 on a 1-9 scale.

That resonates strongly with my own personal operational experience.

During my multiple deployments with Disaster Relief Australia leading IMTs during the 2025 Northern NSW flood response, I saw firsthand how quickly a shared identity can form when people are united by mission. Personnel came from a wide range of backgrounds, locations, and functions - doctors, lawyers, tradespeople, military members and veterans, first responders, retirees, and students.

We even had a zoologist and a marine biologist. And yet, within hours, we were no longer separate professions - we were one team, working in harmony, bound by a shared mission and a collective sense of purpose. Many had never worked together before. But within a short period, something shifted. Roles became clearer. Trust developed quickly.

Communication improved. People stopped operating as isolated individuals and began operating as one team aligned to one purpose.

That matters.

Incident Management Teams (IMTs) do not become effective simply because an AIIMS structure exists on paper. They become effective when people align psychologically behind a shared mission, trust each other's intent, and understand how each of their roles contributes to something larger than themselves. This is Social Identity Theory operating at its most critical point - not as an abstract concept, but in real time, under pressure, where decisions carry immediate and tangible consequences.

In high-risk frontline environments such as Firefighting, that shared identity is not just cultural - it is functional. It underpins not only task completion, but the coordination, trust, and precision required to achieve operational excellence.

What This Means for Frontline Leaders

For those of us leading on the fireground, within IMTs, or strategically across our organisations, the implication is clear - strong teams are not built by structure or chance alone. They are built with intent.

Often, it is in the quiet moments between calls - where we can take off our armour - that identity, trust, and psychological safety are built.

When we as leaders create space for our people to be human, not just operational, we lay the foundation for how our teams will continue to perform under pressure.



Three practical takeaways:

1. Build the “we” before the work begins

Social identity does not happen by accident. Leaders must actively create it - through clear intent, shared purpose, and reinforcing that every role contributes to the mission. Early alignment reduces friction when pressure increases.

2. Prioritise Psychological safety as an operational capability

Psychological safety is not a soft skill - it is a performance multiplier. Teams that feel psychologically safe, have stronger trust, communicate faster, make better decisions, and operate with greater confidence at incidents under pressure. Leaders set this tone through consistency, clarity, and encouraging team members to speak up, while providing a psychologically safe culture where individuals feel safe to try their best and make mistakes.

3. Make roles clear and meaningful

People perform at their best when they understand how their role fits into the bigger strategic picture. Linking individual tasks to an overall mission's

outcome strengthens ownership, accountability, and team cohesion

Because in frontline environments, performance is not just built on capability alone - it is built on connection.

Post Deployment Models - Why the Landing Matters

Another powerful discussion point at the conference was what happens after the protracted incident or operation.

Emergency services are generally strong at mobilisation. We know how to ramp up, organise, deploy, and sustain operational tempo. We are often less effective in how we manage the transition back out of that environment.

During a major incident, prolonged strike team mission, protracted fire, or IMT disaster relief deployment, people operate within a clear structure. The tempo is high. The purpose is obvious. The team identity is reinforced every day through action. Then the job ends, and the tempo suddenly drops.

That “landing” can be harder than many organisations acknowledge or are even aware exists.

Disaster Relief Australia's (DRA) post-deployment wellbeing call model was one example discussed that reframed this not as pathology, but as a predictable human response to coming off intense, sustained operational tempo. The model treats the post-deployment drop in mood, connection, and energy as a foreseeable hazard window rather than a personal weakness. Its aim is not therapy or surveillance, but normalisation, reconnection, and early support.

That perspective makes sense.

From my own experience, the shift from a high-functioning protracted IMT environment back to everyday routine can be significant. The camaraderie, urgency, and shared mission that define deployment life are suddenly gone. For those without a strong role, support network, or sense of continuity to return to, that transition can be particularly difficult.

This is why post-incident and post-deployment care matters. Not as an optional extra, but as part of a strong operational design.

Group Reflective Practice - Beyond the AAR and Debrief



Another strong takeaway from the conference was the distinction between operational debriefs and reflective practice.

Emergency services are familiar with debriefing. After Action Reviews (AARs) and formal debriefs are essential. They improve operational tactics, surface lessons, and strengthen future team performance. Often conducted in the truck on the way back from an incident, or over the mess table. They are often informal, followed by a more structured debrief closely soon after. But these AARs and debriefs do not always address the human experience of the work.

That is where Group Reflective Practice proves its value - providing teams with a structured way to process experience, strengthen trust, and sustain long-term resilience.

As demonstrated through the NSW SES examples presented at the conference, reflective practice differs from operational debriefing in one critical respect - its purpose is not to solve the incident.

That distinction is important. As Firefighters, and frontline responders we are trained to fix problems, control outcomes, and resolve complexity.

Group Reflective Practice (GRP) recognises that not everything we encounter can be solved. Instead, it

provides a structured space for personnel to process their experiences, hear alternative perspectives, and normalise the emotional responses that come with

exposure to difficult and traumatic critical incidents. Where operational debriefs focus on performance, GRP focuses on people. It strengthens connection, builds perspective, and supports frontline responders in environments where there may be no clean operational or technical solution to what they have witnessed or carried.

For emergency services, this is an important distinction.

Reflection is not weakness. Validation is not indulgence. When done properly, it is how healthy teams stay healthy, strong, and resilient - and continue to show up, shift after shift.

Effective leaders should consider incorporating group reflective practices alongside After-Action Reviews (AARs) or operational debriefs. This helps normalise reflection as part of the job - not only addressing the technical aspects of performance, but also the psychological experiences we are exposed to. This will strengthen both operational performance and psychological resilience of our teams over time.

Psychological Safety - Leadership Beyond the Incident Ground

Across the two-day Frontline Mental Health Conference, one leadership lesson stood out above the rest:

Leadership in emergency services does

not end when the incident is over - it continues long after the work is done.

And critically, it extends beyond physical safety. It includes the deliberate creation of psychological safety - not as a “soft skill,” but as a tactical advantage in high-risk environments.

Teams that feel psychologically safe are more likely to speak up, share critical information, challenge assumptions, and support one another under pressure. In environments where decisions are time-critical and consequences are high, that is not optional - it is operationally essential.

Team strength, resilience, performance, and operational excellence are not only about making decisions under pressure, commanding resources, or achieving the objective. As strong leaders, it's just as important we shape the culture people work in, the recovery rituals we normalise, the peer systems we invest in, and the conditions that allow people to keep showing up over time.

That is why, to me, mental health is not a side project - it is a core component of operational risk management. We would never send a Firefighter into a high-risk environment without the right equipment - BA, protection, and a charged line.

The same standard must apply to our people and their mental health.

Without psychological safety and support before, during, and after the incident, we are asking them to operate without the full protection they need.

For us as leaders, the implication is clear: it's not just about managing the work in front of us - it's about shaping the environment that protects and sustains our people's resilience, so they can continue to do it.



The most effective leaders do not just manage incidents - they deliberately shape environments that support their teams before the pressure arrives and sustain them long after it has passed.

In the end, being a frontline Firefighter,

member of the military, or emergency services responder will always ask a great deal of us - and of our families.

These organisations will continue to demand operational performance, resilience, and commitment in complex, high-risk, and time-pressured environments.

The question we must ask ourselves is whether we are building organisations strong enough to support our people in return.

Because to me, leadership in frontline environments isn't just about managing the fireground, the disaster zone, or the complexity of an incident - it's about ensuring the people beside you have not only the physical strength, but the psychological capacity to keep showing up.

And for many of us, protecting those people - our colleagues, our teammates, and the families who stand behind them - is one of the most important missions we will ever undertake.

Because ultimately, systems and doctrine don't carry the load - people do.

And how we lead them determines whether they can continue to do it tomorrow.

This is what leadership in action looks like.

As always, see obstacles as opportunities and strive to be 1% better every day.



Caleb Geppert
Leading Firefighter,
Fire Rescue Victoria

AFAC Accredited Incident Management Team (IMT) Leader, Disaster Relief Australia

Bachelor of Business & Commerce

Master of Emergency Management, Charles Sturt University (Candidate) MBA, Deakin University (Candidate)

Sir John Monash Leadership Scholar

Emirates Group Gold Najm Star Award for Bravery, Dubai, UAE

Author Bio:

Caleb Geppert is a professional Firefighter with Fire Rescue Victoria, an AFAC accredited Incident Management Team (IMT) leader, and a volunteer with Disaster Relief Australia. He is currently completing a Master of Emergency Management and an MBA specialising in Strategic Leadership. A Sir John Monash Leadership Scholar, Caleb is a writer and advocate for resilience, emotional intelligence, and psychological safety in high-pressure environments.

Through his 'Leadership in Action' series, he translates frontline experience into practical leadership insights for emergency service personnel and emerging leaders, with his work featured across fire industry magazines, academic platforms, and professional forums, including LinkedIn.

cgeppert@hotmail.com
<https://www.linkedin.com/in/caleb-geppert-339551233/>



That is not soft leadership

That is adaptable leadership.

And, that is responsible leadership.

Key Takeaways for leaders

For Firefighters, emergency service personnel, leaders, and those preparing to enter frontline professions, several key lessons stood out from the Frontline Mental Health Conference:

First, psychological safety is a tactical advantage and operationally imperative. It directly influences communication, trust, decision-making, recovery, and long-term resilience.

Second, shared social identity matters.

High-performing teams do not just share tasks - they share connection, humility, and a common sense of purpose.

Third, the landing matters as much as the launch.

Post-incident and post-deployment transitions must be actively supported, not left to chance.

Fourth, Group Reflective Practice adds a critical dimension to the debrief. It enables people to process their experiences, strengthening not only how they perform, but how they endure traumatic and critical incidents.

Finally, leadership is as much cultural as it is operational.

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EQUINE ASSISTED THERAPY

Trauma can leave deep emotional scars, especially for those who face high-stress, high-risk professions like first responders. And often, in order to be able to perform our duties, we are expected to be compartmentalized and ‘check our emotions at the door’ when attending a fire, accident, natural disaster, or the like. In many cases, this results in unresolved trauma later in life or some years into the job.

And this is exactly why the attrition rate among first responders is extremely high compared to most other professions. Many of the issues we face can be avoided if we learn how to process our emotions and trauma responses in a healthy way. For this reason, people often seek help from counsellors, psychologists and other mental health professionals or join a support group.

While traditional therapy often takes place behind closed doors, there is a growing movement that’s taking therapy out of the room and into the

open air – Equine-Assisted Therapy.

Equine-Assisted Therapy is a powerful method of healing that combines talk therapy with the presence of horses to help people address emotional and psychological challenges. For individuals with trauma, including those experiencing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), and stress, this type of therapy offers a unique way to process complex feelings in a way that feels natural, grounded, and often much less intimidating than traditional room-based therapy. Rather than sitting in a room with a therapist, confined by four walls, and having to open up about our biggest struggles, being out in the open, in a natural environment, makes for a much more welcoming space for honest and open discussion. But, that leaves the question:

WHY HORSES?

Equine-Assisted Therapy is not just anecdotal, or simply a ‘feel good’ therapy. It’s not simply ‘hug-a-horse’ therapy. There is growing scientific

research supporting its effectiveness. Studies have shown that working with horses can help improve emotional regulation, reduce symptoms of PTSD, and increase self-awareness and self-esteem. For example, research conducted by the University of Colorado found that equine therapy significantly reduced PTSD symptoms in veterans and first responders, helping them process trauma in a way that felt more natural than traditional therapies alone.

Working with horses creates an experience unlike any other form of therapy. Horses are large, powerful animals that are highly sensitive to the emotions and body language of the people around them. And in their response, much can be learned and observed by both the therapist and their client. But a number of other, unique aspects are at play here.

In specific, there are two very unique, scientifically established benefits to Equine Assisted Therapy that are not found in any other form of therapy.



The first one lies in the size of the horse itself. They are a large animal. And as much as most people love horses and feel comfortable around them, their size triggers a natural heightened awareness in a person’s brain – specifically the amygdala, the part of the brain responsible for processing emotions like fear and anxiety. This is the part of the brain where our fight-flight-or-freeze response takes place.

But, we might say: ‘I don’t feel comfortable with that moment of fight-flight-or-freeze, so why then intentionally trigger this response?’ And this is where there is a unique difference in the Equine-Assisted Therapy setting. Around horses this heightened awareness isn’t a bad thing. Most of us feel comfortable around horses, we love them. But our brain still registers that size as a trigger to be alert. After all, if the horse moves, we need to move with it. That way, we don’t get stepped on or pushed around. But...

IT IS ALL OF THE AWARENESS, AND ALERTNESS, WITHOUT THE PANIC RESPONSE.

Yes, your brain is alert, and aware, but without the panic that normally accompanies it. And now, it becomes a tool we can use in our work. As you interact with the horses, this activation of the amygdala allows you to become more aware of your own thoughts, feelings, and responses in a calm way. This is especially useful for those who struggle with internalizing emotions

or have a hard time identifying / pinpointing, what they are feeling. The horse’s responses help trigger your own emotional awareness, making it easier for you to recognize and explore your feelings in a more open, grounded way.

However, normally, when we talk about our stressors, triggers and emotional trauma, it can make us feel uncomfortable. And this is where another unique part of working with horses is so beneficial.

When we work with horses, a natural phenomenon called ‘physiological heart rate synchronization’ (or heart-to-heart synchronization) occurs. This is something that is generally experienced as a sense of calm by those being around horses. Rather than this experience or sensation being something ‘magical’ or unidentifiable, it is something scientifically established as a natural response between two beings. Our physical bodies pick up on the heartrate of other creatures around us, human or animal. This is because our heart generates an incredibly strong electromagnetic signal, or field compared to all other organs in our body. In fact, it is up to 100 times stronger than the electromagnetic signals generated by our brain. And our physical bodies self-regulate and synchronize with the heart rate of those around us. And this affects our emotional state.

Now, enter horses into this equation.



Their resting heartrate falls somewhere between 28-35 beats a minute depending on age, weight and overall health. And their hearts are about 10 times the size of a human heart. As a consequence, the electromagnetic field generated is much stronger, much larger and has a much greater effect on us than that of other humans. The key therapeutic benefit of working with horses is this heart-to-heart synchronization with humans.

When clients are in close proximity to horses, they begin to sync their heart rhythms with the horses, which naturally causes the client’s heart rate to slow down. This synchrony leads to a state of calmness that is crucial when working through difficult emotions. A slower heart rate is directly linked to a sense of calm and relaxation, which makes it easier for the client to think clearly, reflect on their feelings, and tackle difficult emotions with a more grounded, open mindset.

TASK-ORIENTED EXERCISES: GAINING INSIGHT THROUGH INTERACTION

In addition to simply being present with the horses, practitioners often guide clients through specific, task-oriented exercises that are designed to elicit/show up emotional responses. These tasks can range from attempting to get the horse to do something specific to observing how the horse reacts to the client’s touch or body language.



Through these exercises, both the client and the therapist can gain valuable insights into the client's emotional triggers and behavioral patterns. Allowing the client to reflect on what they've experienced or observed in these interactions offers the opportunity to make meaning of the situation. This helps both the therapist and the client understand the underlying emotional needs and psychological triggers at play.

For instance, a client might be asked to guide a horse through a simple task, like moving from one side of the paddock to the other. The way the horse responds, and how the client reacts to that response, can offer powerful insights into the emotional state of the client. Through guided reflection, the practitioner can help the client unpack these moments, leading to new understandings of their own behavior and emotional triggers.

GROUNDED THERAPY IN A SAFE, NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Unlike traditional therapy, which often happens in a structured, confined office space, Equine-Assisted Therapy takes place outdoors, in a more relaxed, open environment. The client works with the horse on the ground – there's no need to mount or ride. The horses are nearby, and clients can engage with them in ways that feel comfortable for them, whether that's simply being close by, walking together, or having a conversation while interacting with the horse.

The beauty of this approach is that it's highly adaptable to the needs of any individual. Some clients may prefer to sit and talk while the horses are nearby. Others may want to focus more on interacting with the horse and using the horse's behavior as a mirror for their own emotions. The therapy can be a blend of talking and working with the horses, or it can involve just one or the other, depending on the client's preference.

This approach caters to the unique

needs of each client, treating them as individuals, not as diagnoses. Trauma and mental health struggles do not define a person – they are only one part of who they are. By adapting the therapy to each client's needs, we make sure that healing can happen in a way that feels safe and comfortable for them.

HORSES' EMOTIONAL RESPONSES: GENUINE AND UNBIASED

Horses are not always calm animals; in fact, some horses carry their own trauma and emotional responses, which can be observed and used effectively in therapy. While horses are often seen as symbols of calm, they are complex creatures with their own histories and emotional responses. A horse's reactions to a client can be acute, immediate, and often non-verbal – which is exactly why they are so powerful in therapy. A horse will always respond genuinely, without any emotional reasoning or agenda. It's not influenced by human emotions but

instead reacts to its environment in a way that is natural to them.

Sometimes, a client with PTSD will gravitate toward a horse that carries its own trauma. There's a sense of congruence between the horse's behavioral patterns and the client's own struggles. This alignment offers a unique opportunity for the therapist to observe and reflect on the interaction, helping to identify specific emotional or behavioral patterns that may not be immediately apparent through conversation alone.

When a horse is triggered by something in its environment, it can be helpful for the therapist to explore how the client relates to or reacts to that trigger, especially if the horse's response mirrors the client's own emotional reactions. This dynamic can provide a valuable insight into the client's struggles, which can then be explored and worked through in a therapeutic setting.

THE PERFECT COMPLEMENT TO TRADITIONAL THERAPY

Equine-Assisted Therapy isn't necessarily a replacement for traditional therapy. Often, it works alongside it as a complementary approach. For many people, including those with PTSD or trauma, talking about their emotions in a traditional office setting can be difficult or intimidating. Equine Assisted Therapy offers a unique way to work through those emotions in a more relaxed, accessible environment. The horses provide an immediate, non-verbal feedback loop that can help clients process emotions in real time.

The key to this type of therapy is its flexibility. It's adaptable to each person's needs and preferences, and it's proven to be especially effective for individuals who find traditional therapy environments unhelpful or

uncomfortable.

A NATURAL PATH TO HEALING

Equine-Assisted Therapy is an innovative, scientifically-backed approach to trauma recovery that offers a safe, open, and non-judgmental space for healing. By working with horses, clients not only improve their emotional regulation but also gain a greater understanding of their own feelings and develop healthier coping strategies. Whether you are someone experiencing PTSD, anxiety, or just the stresses of everyday life, Equine Assisted Therapy offers a powerful way to reconnect with yourself and your emotions in a way that feels grounded and natural.

For first responders, especially, Equine Assisted Therapy is a unique way to process the challenges and trauma they face in their line of work. By integrating talk therapy with ground-based work with horses, clients are empowered to take control of their healing, feeling supported every step of the way.

As a counsellor and Equine Assisted Therapy practitioner, I am passionate about this work. We have seen so many clients recover from trauma through this therapy. And even those whose trauma is so deep seated and engrained that full recovery may not be possible, some of the insights gained combined the strategies we have worked on has meant a real discernable improvement in their quality of life.

If you are a first responder, or someone who lives with a first responder, and you are dealing with trauma, why not explore this unique therapy model? There is an ever-increasing number of qualified psychologists and counsellors who are embracing this amazing therapy model. Why? Because it works.



About Sebastiaan

Sebastiaan Scholtens is a registered counsellor and Equine Assisted Therapy

practitioner. He operates a business called Horse Who Heal in Wilton NSW (about half an hour out of Sydney). His practice specializes in Trauma informed therapy and working with ASD and ADHD. They also provide personal development workshops for corporate teams or other groups utilizing the unique way horses respond to us and communicate with us to help you be a better leader, or team member.

Horses Who Heal

<https://horseswhoheal.com>
contact@horseswhoheal.com
 0492 942 842

Behind the Uniform: How Supportal strengthens families and the sector



Emergency service work often involves repeated exposure to trauma, operational stress and unpredictable working conditions. These factors can have a significant impact not only on the workers themselves but also on their families. While they may not wear the uniform or be on the frontline, the families of emergency service members play a vital role in the sector's resilience. They are often the first to notice when something is not right and can carry the weight of trauma at home – yet have not been included in mental health conversations within the sector. Supportal changes that.

“Supportal is about giving families what they've been missing for a long time”

Supportal is a digital platform developed by the Emergency Services Foundation (ESF) to support the mental health and wellbeing of emergency service workers and their families. Accessible via mobile phone, Supportal offers practical guidance, tailored resources, wellbeing activities and a sense of community for the partners, children and extended families who support emergency service workers and volunteers.

It reflects ESF's broader mission to improve the mental health and wellbeing of emergency service workers and their families by translating research, lived experience and sector collaboration into

practical support.

Martine Gilliot, ESF's Family Matters Lead, said: “Supportal is about giving families what they've been missing for a long time – mental health education, connection and clear information on where to seek help – all in the one place. Families are the backbone of our emergency services, and Supportal ensures they're no longer left in the dark when it comes to mental health support.”

The platform will be formally launched at the Emergency Services and Families Day at Gumbuya World on 26 April, where emergency service workers and their families from across Victoria will be invited to access and engage with Supportal.

Inside Supportal

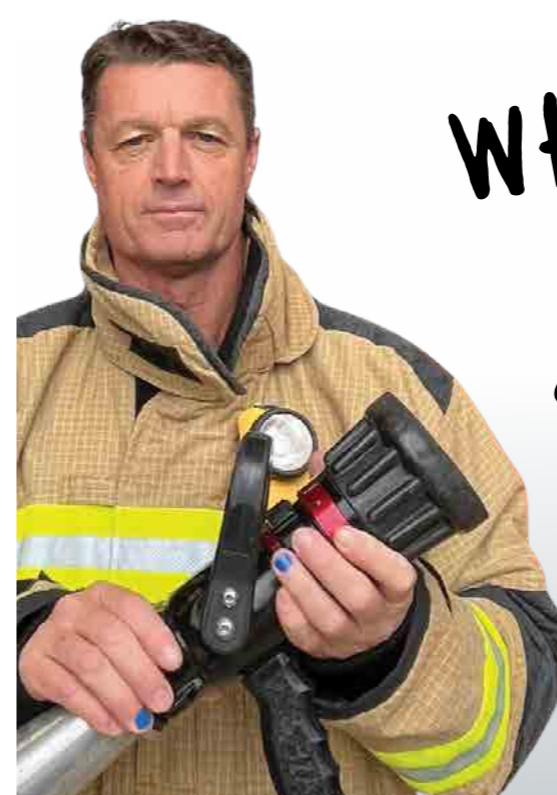
There are three pathways within Supportal – My Wellbeing, Wellbeing for an Emergency Service Worker and Wellbeing for a Child. They each contain targeted resources, education modules and wellbeing tools on a broad spectrum of topics.

The 'My Wellbeing' pathway offers advice for partners and family members on topics such as understanding mental health and recognising warning signs,

building a support network, recovering after a traumatic incident and how to eat well when your partner works the night shift. It also provides guidance on where to turn to navigate complex situations like domestic and family violence or family separation.

'Wellbeing for an Emergency Service Worker' focuses on how to best support the emergency service worker in the user's life - offering practical information, strategies for staying connected and guidance on recognising when and how to seek help. This section explores key mental health topics affecting people in the sector, including accumulated trauma, vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue and guidance on sleep and managing common mental triggers. It also provides advice on initiating conversations when noticing changes in a loved one, such as shifts in mood, energy, sleep, or behaviour.

Franziska Wohlfarth
ESF Communications Officer



WHEN
FIRE
BECOMES A
>>> WEAPON

UNDERSTANDING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE BURNS

You respond to fires. You understand their power. But did you know fire is increasingly being used as a weapon in domestic violence?

Between 2009 and 2022, nearly one hundred women were admitted to Australian burn units due to domestic violence, and that's only those who made it to hospital. The true number is far higher. These aren't accidents. They're deliberate acts of violence, and the data shows they're more severe than accidental burns. Injuries from domestic violence typically require longer recoveries and result in worse outcomes. Many survivors face multiple surgeries, excruciating pain, and permanent disability. Sadly, some don't survive.

Sixty percent involve someone the victim knows, a partner, a former partner, a family member. In New South Wales alone, five people died from fire-related domestic violence between 2019 and 2021, including two children.

The 2020 Brisbane tragedy that claimed Hannah Clarke and her three children shocked the nation and highlighted the devastating reality: fire can be a tool of intimate partner violence. Fire-related violence is often dismissed as accidental, which is exactly what makes it so insidious and underreported.

Queensland fire department's Mark Paton has been a strong supporter of Polished Man because he understands what many first responders know: you're often first on scene. You see the aftermath of violence in ways most Australians never will. You recognise the signs others might miss. You understand that behind every statistic is a person whose life has been irrevocably changed, and families and communities left to pick up the pieces. That

knowledge is powerful. And it's exactly why we need you.

At Polished Man, we're working to change this reality. We raise awareness, challenge the behaviours that enable violence, and support initiatives preventing gender-based violence. Every nail painted blue starts a conversation. Conversations have the power to create change. Every act of awareness helps protect women and children from violence in all its forms, including fire.

Join Mark Paton and Queensland fire department. Sign up or Donate to Polished Man today. You already answer the call when things go wrong, help us stop violence before it starts.

Source: Australian & New Zealand Burn Association

**POLISHED
MAN**

SIGN UP OR
DONATE HERE





When Girls Roar, the World Listens

Embrace the unique. Build confidence. Become resilient.

A wellbeing program redefining what it means to be a kind, courageous and confident teen today.

In every community, there are quiet battles happening behind the scenes, especially for our teenage girls. In a world that too often measures girls by impossible standards, it's easy for them to lose sight of who they are.

The teenage years are often a time of exploration, but they can also be a time of quiet self-doubt. Girls start to internalise messages that tell them to be quieter, smaller, and less themselves and limiting beliefs start to creep in (I'm not enough. I don't belong. I shouldn't speak up) around their identities, lovability, and capabilities. At Girls Who Roar, we believe it's time to change that, and we know communities like yours can help lead the way.

Firefighters and emergency services are known for courage, leadership, and service, values we are passionate about sharing and teaching every day through Girls Who Roar. We know that whether you're on the front lines

or involved in community safety and outreach, you're deeply invested in helping people feel safe, strong, and supported. That's what we want for our girls, too.

We help girls build meaningful relationships rooted in honesty, respect, and empathy. We show them what it means to lead with courage and embrace their strengths, all while building a strong sense of self. We believe every girl deserves a space where she feels safe, seen, and supported.

Our mission is simple but powerful: that girls EVERYWHERE would hear a new and inspiring message that brings them confidence to be themselves and courage to have real and healthy relationships.

A Program with a Purpose

Girls Who Roar is a 6 week self paced online program designed to engage, inspire, and empower teenage girls. Each girl begins their journey with a beautifully boxed Welcome Pack complete with a custom GWR journal, items the girls use throughout the program and a gift to set the tone of belonging and remind them that they are valued.

Over the course of the program,

conversational video sessions cover:

- Uniqueness & Strengths
- Resilience
- Kindness
- Friendships
- Boundaries & Consent
- Gratitude & Dreaming Big

These messages aren't just afterthoughts or extras in a girl's life, they are life skills that can change the trajectory of a young persons' future, equip girls to navigate challenges with strength and integrity.

Why It Matters More Than Ever

Girls Who Roar was born, not just to educate, but to empower. The need has never been greater. As the founder of GWR I have worked in school wellbeing for many years and I've witnessed firsthand the gaps in support for young people. Right now, the reality is stark: waitlists for psychologists and external mental health services are growing longer by the day. Many families are waiting months for professional help, while their daughters struggle in silence.

Girls Who Roar offers an immediate and meaningful alternative - a powerful, positive intervention that can be accessed right away. While it's not a replacement for clinical support,



it provides a crucial bridge in the interim, equipping girls with practical tools, emotional support, and a sense of connection when they need it most.

Kindness, Courage, Confidence aren't just words on a wall. They're the backbone of every module, every conversation, every connection.

We hope that at the end of the program, girls will benefit in a number of ways, including:

- Increased mental and emotional wellbeing
- Improved decision making skills
- Clearer communication skills
- Stronger friendships
- And so much more!

From the Fire Station to the Frontline of Youth Wellbeing

To date, we've proudly partnered with PCYC branches, schools, and youth centres to reach girls from all walks of life.

These partnerships provide girls the opportunity to complete Girls Who Roar, reinforcing the values our community heroes model every day, respect, courage, and care for others.

Whether you're involved in community engagement, youth support, or just

passionate about seeing young people thrive, you have a role to play.

Our Sponsorship Program

Understanding that cost can be a barrier, our sponsorship initiative allows businesses, community leaders, and everyday Australians to fund a girl's place in the program, giving her access to the full 6 week program with no expense.

We believe every girl deserves to know her worth and feel confident, no matter her circumstances.

Let's Roar Together

Whether you're a firefighter, first responder, business owner, community leader or a parent, we invite you to stand with us and champion our girls today. Your support will help us build stronger girls, and in turn, stronger communities. Together, we will build a future where the dreams of every girl are within reach.

Enrol. Partner with us. Share our story.

Because when girls roar, the world listens.



Barb Cowley
Girls Who Roar

girlswhoroar.com.au
Kindness. Courage.
Confidence.

Leading Australia's Bushfire Recovery

Bangerang Ngalan Bitja (Our Fire) Rangers and members of the Warby Range Landcare Group at a cultural burn on a Landcare member's property at Wangaratta South.

When a bushfire is finally contained, and the emergency response transitions to recovery, the spotlight often turns away from a devastated area. However, this is when another frontline continues and increases support. Across Australia, thousands of landcare volunteers, community-led environmental groups and Traditional Owners mobilise to heal the land and people long after the fires have been extinguished. Their work is slower, careful and less visible than the heroic efforts on the fireground, but it is just as critical for long term recovery.

Landcare volunteers and community groups manage activities to help restore habitats, stabilise damaged landscapes, help prevent further environmental loss, and support communities to reconnect. For firefighters who see firsthand the ecological devastation bushfires leave behind, landcare represents the next essential phase of recovery: rebuilding the landscape systems that protect communities, culture and wildlife.

Millie Webber from Landcare Australia explains how landcare is vital in bushfire recovery.

Landcare leads bushfire recovery in local communities

Local landcare groups and volunteers understand their landscape, their community and the native plants and animals that make each region unique. They also know how to mobilise their community to support environmental restoration following devastating bushfires.

Landcare Australia, a national environment not-for-profit organisation, plays a key role in enabling these efforts. Over the past few years, Landcare Australia has managed national disaster recovery programs that support the needs of landcare groups, other community-led environmental groups, farmers and landowners responding to the impacts of natural disasters.

With funding from corporate partners, donors and government, Landcare Australia supports the landcare community to use their local knowledge and expertise to deliver projects that restore essential wildlife habitat, build shelterbelts and fences, support the protection of waterways, manage weeds and feral animals, work

with Traditional Owners and First Nations organisations, and host local community workshops, amongst other recovery activities.

The Victorian bushfires in early 2026 have already burned an area approaching the scale of the 2019 Black Saturday Bushfires, destroying critical habitat for countless native and endangered species. Landcare Australia remains deeply committed to supporting affected communities as they begin the long road to recovery and is contributing \$100,000 to kickstart post-bushfire landscape restoration efforts, made possible through a generous bequest. These funds and other donations made by the public and corporates, will go directly to the community-led projects on the ground that make lasting change possible.

A National Effort After Black Summer

In May 2021, Landcare Australia received funding from the Australian Government to help deliver the Landcare Led Bushfire Recovery Grants program. The program supported recovery projects in seven government-designated regions impacted by the



2019/2020 Black Summer bushfires in Queensland, New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory, Victoria and South Australia.

Delivered in partnership with the National Landcare Network and the Landcare State and Territory organisations, the program saw almost 66,000 Australians including over 10,000 volunteers, working together to deliver 111 impactful community-driven projects and 307,306 plants established.

Project outcomes were both diverse and impactful, for example, Upper Snowy Landcare identified the best eucalyptus seed sources for future revegetation through climate testing.

The South Australian Museum's research contributed to the Kangaroo Island Assassin Spider being listed as Critically Endangered under the EPBC Act, helping secure its long-term protection. These successes highlight the profound ecological and scientific benefits of community-led restoration.

Working together to care for Country

Supporting First Nations community-led landcare restoration projects is a vital part of long-term recovery and bushfire mitigation. In 2024, Landcare Australia and Steadfast Group provided \$55,000 in funding

to support the Bangerang Aboriginal Corporation's Itjumatj Woka 'Healthy Country Project' in Wangaratta, Victoria. The project delivered environmental, Cultural, and social outcomes by strengthening the capacity of Bangerang Ngalan Bitja Rangers and fostered partnerships with local landcare groups.

The grant supported:

- Planning and delivery of two Cultural burn workshops
- Training in the Covram app enabling native vegetation condition assessment and monitoring
- Employment and land management opportunities for local First Nations Peoples

Through the partnership with Warby Range Landcare Group, Bangerang Traditional Owners led the planning, preparation and safe execution of Cultural burns on landcare member properties. Rangers completed fencing and weed control to improve the overall health of Country.

Using Covram, project teams collected detailed data including vegetation condition, habitat type and quality, Cultural heritage and management information prior to the burns. Covram has been used alongside Traditional

Knowledge as a tool to teach the younger generation about reading Country and caring for Country.

To learn more about Landcare Australia's bushfire recovery projects, please visit: <https://landcareaustralia.org.au/what-we-do/disaster-recovery-projects/>



Emeritus Professor Michael Clarke, a zoologist at Latrobe University and a fellow of ISCAST, shares his thoughts around World Wildlife Day and his love of the natural world.

After a minor diversion at the age of six where Prof. Clarke wanted to be a bulldozer driver, he “got back on the rails” and soon followed his fascination for wildlife, devoting over 30 years at La Trobe University in teaching and research, in conservation efforts, and engagement with landowners and policy makers.

“I’ve loved this profession. I’ve had the privilege to study animals in all sorts of places all around the world, and to explore that fascination of what animals are like, what habitats they need, and how to preserve them.”

Supposedly retired, Prof. Clarke has just returned from a field trip to Wilson’s Promontory, teaching 40 enthusiastic young people about conservation. “I’m not very good at retirement.”

The years of this journey have seen Prof. Clarke’s Christian faith merge strongly with his love of the natural

world. “The youth group in my family’s church had a profound influence on me. Then, when I entered university, I had, I guess, a suspicion that perhaps all religions were talking about the same God. But the more I matured in my faith, I realised that the kind of gods those religions envisaged were actually very, very different. My Christian faith has rung true to me as I’ve explored it more deeply as an adult. Over about 30 years, I’ve discovered that God is faithful.”

In view of World Wildlife Day, Prof. Clarke was asked how our engagement with wildlife and the natural world, including a specifically scientific engagement, could deepen our relationship with God.

“The more I’ve studied nature, the more I’m struck by the wonder of it all, the interrelatedness of it all, and how little we understand it.

“At this World Wildlife Day, we live in this weird period in history where collectively we probably know more about nature and wildlife than at any point in time. But experientially, we are probably more disconnected from nature, particularly in the West, than we have ever been. That lack makes

conserving wildlife more challenging. The less connected we are with nature, the harder it is to be motivated to care about it.

“This year is also the 800th anniversary since St Francis of Assisi’s death. He had such admirable emphasis on reverence for nature, and being part of nature, not separate from it. That strong element of his teaching is what we seem to have forgotten or lost. For me, there’s a humility that comes from being made of the same stuff as the rest of nature. Dust. We are just dust when it comes down to it. And when we drift from that and think we are superior, become a tad arrogant or proud, a whole avalanche of problems follow that I don’t think St. Francis would applaud. He was, as I understand his teaching, someone who emphasised humility.

“If we could return to those fundamental understandings in the first chapters of the Bible—of our connections with and our responsibilities for nature—we would be more faithful to the role God has given us on this earth.

“So, for me, the core things that drive my science and underpin my motivation is that the world is God’s,

we’re just tenants, we’re not owner-occupiers. And the Scriptures, as I read them, teach that God loves what he created from the beginning, and wanted it to flourish— all of it, not just humans. All of it has intrinsic value to God, and I think that is reflected in St. Francis’ teachings.

“God has delegated to us all the responsibility to exercise a dominion that reflects the character of the Creator, not our character. It is a humble stewardship, a sacrificial stewardship, of an incredibly precious gift.

“So, I see my science as an outworking of that. If I’m to care really well for nature or wildlife on this World Wildlife Day, then the better we understand that nature the fewer mistakes we might make, or the better we’ll be able to rectify the mistakes we have made.”

Species extinctions is a recurring topic of news these days. Prof. Clarke was asked what degree of positivity or negativity his outlook has on the future of humanity’s care for species to flourish. Does it feel like a losing battle?

“I think the situation is really dire, and I’m not sure enough people grasp how dire it is because of that disconnection with nature.

“The example I use with students is this: there was a TV series called *Offspring* with a character called Patrick who unexpectedly was knocked off in the series. The next day, people in Melbourne took a sick day because they were so mortified that this fictional character had been lost! They were shocked, in mourning. At the same time, in the real world we lost a species on Christmas Island, a little creature called the Christmas Island Pipistrelle, that most Australians had never heard of. Hardly a flicker of notice because we were unfamiliar, we had no emotional connection with that animal. We lose

too much too easily.

“But there are success stories. And I don’t want to underestimate the capacity of creative, imaginative, committed, and brilliant people working together to change things. As a Christian, I deeply believe that Jesus taught us there were and are no hopeless cases. Jesus didn’t give up on people or situations. As an older Christian, I feel an obligation to work to inspire younger people, and people my own age, to care more for nature. I have great hope in both God’s faithfulness and the creativity of human beings. I think there are reasons to hope.

“We’ve made a mess and we need to clean it up. I find the story of the prodigal son surprisingly relevant here. We have trashed the inheritance. But our gracious God looks after us, the prodigal people of this planet, and welcomes us back with open arms. But we’ve got to turn around.”

In finishing, Prof. Clarke gave us “everyday” Christians, those of us who are not as knowledgeable about nature as he is, a “hit list” of realistic, practical ways to bless the natural world.

1. “Support investment globally in the education of girls and women. That, by most measures, has the biggest impact on reducing the destruction of the natural world through giving women options other than bearing children. It also opens up the dormant gifts of half the population through education, to contribute to finding solutions.

2. Be frugal of God’s natural resources. Eat a more locally sourced, sustainable diet. Transition away from fossil fuels. Walk, cycle, use public transport, minimise air travel, pay for carbon offsets that you can find if they’re genuine. Minimise home energy use. Turn lights off, etc. Reduce, reuse, recycle.

3. If we can invest, align our investments with the values we believe God would have us support.

4. Volunteer in organisations like Land Care, Bush Heritage, parks groups.

5. Lobby all levels of society for change to reduce emissions, to stop habitat loss.

6. I’m hoping that Christians would inspire hope and rekindle a spirit of optimism that’s grounded in a gracious Creator. This is urgently needed, particularly with young people who are feeling a crisis of despair ecologically. I think they need role models of people who have not given up, who are keen to make a difference.”



Prof Mike Clarke Emeritus Professor of Zoology, Research Centre for Future Landscapes, La Trobe University.

Mike is an ecologist and conservation biologist at La Trobe University. He was Head of the School of Life Sciences from 2011 to 2019. He conducts research that informs conservation action on threatened species and threatening processes, especially fire. He is actively involved in ensuring conservation policy and practice is based on the best available evidence. He is a Fellow of ISCAST and Birdlife Australia. He is fascinated by the natural world and passionate about its proper stewardship for future generations.

Emeritus Professor Mike Clarke



Why do we pretend to be happy?

It's time to be preventative, not merely reactive.

Why should we feel like we're failing if we're not happy, when there are over 20,000 emotions to draw from? And when did sadness become an illness rather than just an emotion to experience?

When I suggest to audiences that we are going to share emotions, I almost clear the room! Despite all the efforts to normalise them, judgment and stigma still prevent people from understanding and sharing how they truly feel, leading to increased mental and emotional health issues.

Emotions underpin all thinking, making emotional resilience vital for personal and professional success, teamwork, and most importantly, managing reactions to people and circumstances.

Developing emotional resilience is not about suppressing emotions or forcing positivity. Instead, it is about

understanding how emotions work and learning practical strategies that help you regain control when stress begins to build.

Life rarely unfolds in straight lines. Some days feel smooth and manageable, while others are filled with unexpected bumps, frustrations, and setbacks. Emotional resilience is the ability to navigate these changing conditions without losing control of your steering wheel.

We need a sustainable long-term solution rather than another reactive quick fix.

Why Emotional Resilience Matters

In today's world, uncertainty has become a normal part of daily life. Many factors that influence our wellbeing lie beyond our control.

For firefighters, unpredictability is often built into the job. You now face a diverse array of hazards beyond fires, such as toxic health risks, medical emergencies, and violence. The role has become an "all-hazard" one.

On top of this, you are juggling demanding workloads, financial pressures, technological change, and complex relationships.

When multiple pressures occur at once, stress can quickly accumulate. Without healthy ways to process that stress, individuals may find themselves reacting impulsively, feeling overwhelmed, or experiencing burnout.

Emotional resilience provides a way forward. It enables people to pause, recognise what they are experiencing, and respond more thoughtfully rather than reacting automatically.

Resilient individuals are not immune to stress. Instead, they develop the ability to recover from it more quickly and maintain perspective when challenges arise.

Rough Roads and Smooth Roads

Just as drivers encounter different types of terrain, emotional life also includes different kinds of roads.

Smooth roads represent moments of calm, satisfaction, and enjoyment.

These are the times when life feels manageable and progress feels steady.

Rough roads represent more difficult emotional states such as anger, frustration, stress, anxiety, disappointment, shame or grief.

Many people assume smooth roads are "good" and rough roads are "bad." As a result, they attempt to avoid difficult emotions or quickly escape from them. We're even lifting others off rough roads and placing them on the smooth, thinking we are doing the right thing. The consequences of such actions are that individuals no longer know how to be uncomfortable, so look for someone or something else to make them feel good again. This is w

We need to recognise that rough roads play an extremely important role in emotional growth.

Just as a driver becomes more skilled by navigating challenging terrain, people develop resilience by learning how to manage difficult emotional experiences. Rough roads often provide opportunities for reflection, learning, and personal development.

Avoiding these experiences entirely can actually make people less prepared for future challenges.

Life is not meant to be perfectly smooth. Expecting constant happiness or positivity can create unrealistic pressure.

Consider a heart monitor in a hospital. A healthy heartbeat rises and falls. If the line becomes perfectly flat, it indicates that life has stopped.

Emotional life functions in a similar way. Ups and downs are natural and necessary. A smooth life is actually

unattainable. No wonder so many of us feel like we're failing when it is rough.

The key issue is not which road you are travelling on—it is whether you remain in control of the vehicle.

The Steering Wheel: Understanding Emotional Control

One of the simplest ways to understand emotional resilience is through a driving metaphor.

When you drive a car, you control the steering wheel. While you cannot control every external factor—such as weather, road conditions, or other drivers—you still determine how you respond to those conditions.

Emotions operate in a similar way.

Many people believe that external circumstances control their emotions. For example, someone might say:

"This situation is making me angry."

However, thinking this way hands the steering wheel to someone else. If other people or situations control your emotions, then you have little influence over how you respond.

The consequence of using the language of blame is that you feel powerless. And when you feel powerless, you feel like a victim, which is a very uncomfortable position. Often, to try to regain that power, people revert to retaliation:

- "You hit me, so I'm going to hit you."
- "You cut into my lane, so I'm going to tailgate you."
- "You said something mean, so I will say something mean back."

We are even behaving like that on a

global level!

A more empowering perspective is to say:

"I am choosing to feel angry about this situation."

This subtle shift in language transforms the situation. Instead of viewing yourself as a victim of circumstances, you recognise that you have influence over your emotional responses. These may seem like small changes, but they create profound results. The repetition of these words helps utilise the neuroplasticity within your brain, creating healthier pathways and a healthier you.

Taking back the steering wheel does not mean denying emotions. Anger, frustration, sadness, and disappointment are all natural, human experiences. Emotional resilience simply means recognising that you can decide how to navigate those emotions.

Losing Control: When Emotions Take Over

Everyone experiences moments when emotions temporarily take over. In fact, these moments provide valuable opportunities to practise regaining control.

Sometimes losing control is obvious. Raised voices, aggressive gestures, and heated arguments clearly signal that emotions are running high.

However, emotional loss of control can also appear much quieter.

Someone might claim they are fine after a difficult conversation or situation, yet later lie awake at night replaying it repeatedly. Although outwardly calm, their mind remains stuck on the rough road.

Interestingly, people can also lose control on smooth roads. Excessive drinking, overeating, or risky behaviour sometimes occurs when individuals try to prolong positive feelings beyond healthy limits.

In these moments, clear thinking becomes difficult. Words may come out in ways we later regret, or we may struggle to explain our reactions.

Understanding the brain's role in emotional control can help explain why this happens.

The Brain in Emotional Control

Two areas of the brain play a key role in emotional regulation: the amygdala and the prefrontal cortex.

The amygdala is responsible for detecting threats and triggering survival responses such as fight, flight, or freeze. This system evolved to keep humans safe from danger.

However, the amygdala cannot always distinguish between physical danger and emotional stress. When it detects perceived threats—such as conflict, criticism, or frustration—it can trigger rapid emotional reactions.

This is often referred to as an “amygdala hijack.”

During an amygdala hijack, the brain's reasoning centre becomes less active. Logical thinking, problem-solving, and calm communication become much harder.

The prefrontal cortex, located at the front of the brain, is responsible for higher-level thinking, creativity, and decision-making. When this region is active, people are better able to analyse situations and regulate their emotions.

Emotional resilience involves learning to shift from amygdala-

driven reactions to prefrontal cortex thinking. Techniques such as breathing, reflection, and stepping away from a situation can help restore this balance.

Recognising Whether You or Others Are In or Out of Control

How do you know if you or others are in control? When you or they can:

- take responsibility
- listen
- slow down
- think/reason
- be nonjudgmental
- show empathy
- be tolerant
- be patient
- stay calm

How do you know if you or others are out of control? When you or they:

- harm self or others (physically or emotionally)
- blame others/circumstances
- refuse to listen
- swear/shout
- won't slow down
- judge
- complain

Using Sign Language to Indicate Whether You Are In or Out of Control

Often when we are out of control, we either can't find the words, don't want to use words, or use words that we know are inappropriate. This is when hand signals can be advantageous. They can represent a car's hazard lights, indicating to those around you that you may not be in control, you may not be sure of what is wrong, and you need some space to work it out. This is excellent for children as young as eighteen months right through to older adults.

The following hand signals represent two parts of the brain: the amygdala and the prefrontal cortex:



1. Bend your thumb when you're feeling out of control. When you bend your thumb, it represents your amygdala, which is the reactive part of your brain. It produces the fight,

flight, and freeze reactions you access in stressful situations. When you are reacting from your amygdala alone, it is hard to access the creative and thinking part of your brain.



2. Bring your fingers over your thumb to indicate that you have regained control. The tips of your fingers represent your prefrontal cortex, the

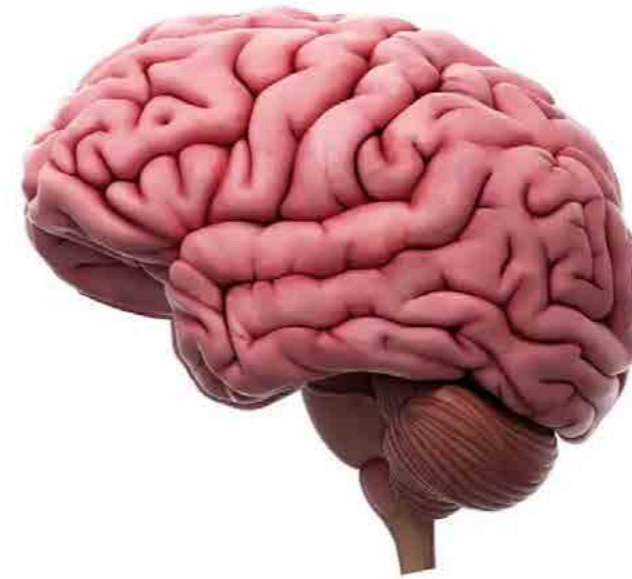
thinking and creative part of your brain. Once in this state, you are in a better position to reason and think more clearly, enabling your mind to regain perspective and access solutions. You can even engage in a rational conversation about what happened as long as you maintain control and don't jump back into your amygdala.

If you are out of control on either road and someone asks you, “Why are you out of control? What made you do that?” it's often hard to answer because you can't think. Bending your thumb is an easy way to indicate to those around you that you are out of control and can't access the thinking part of your brain right now, and you may need some time out.

Instead of yelling, slamming doors, shoving siblings, or disappearing within, using a hand gesture to indicate you are out of control can be far less confronting for everyone.

How to regain and maintain control on any road

Identifying TEPs: Triggers Extra Precaution



One of the most effective ways to build emotional resilience is to identify personal triggers. These are known as TEPs—Triggers Extra Precaution.

A TEP is any situation or event that increases the likelihood of travelling down a rough emotional road or losing control altogether.

Examples of common TEPs include:

- An employee performing poorly
- Conflict with family members
- Financial pressure
- Equipment failure
- Unexpected weather events
- Feeling isolated or unsupported
- Being blamed for something you did not do

Even small daily events can become TEPs. For some people, the sound of a morning alarm clock can immediately create frustration and set a negative tone for the day.

Importantly, a TEP does not force a reaction. It simply signals that extra awareness may be required.

Recognising these triggers allows people to prepare appropriate responses rather than reacting automatically.

The Glass of Stress

To understand why managing stress regularly is important, consider the analogy of holding a glass of water.

At first, the glass feels light and easy to hold. But if you keep holding it for hours, your arm begins to ache. If you hold it for days or weeks, the strain becomes unbearable.

The glass itself has not changed, but the accumulated effort of holding it creates pain.

Stress works the same way.

Individual stressors may appear small on their own. However, when they accumulate without release, they can become overwhelming.

Many emotional breakdowns are not caused by a single dramatic event but by the gradual build-up of smaller pressures over time.

Learning to “empty the glass” regularly is essential for maintaining emotional balance. So, how do you empty that glass daily?

PETs: Personal Emotional Tools

Personal Emotional Tools, or PETs, are strategies or activities that help release built-up stress and restore emotional balance.

PETs vary from person to person. What works for one individual may not work for another.

Some common PETs include:

- Physical activity or sport

- Listening to music
- Reading
- Spending time outdoors
- Meditation or mindfulness
- Deep breathing
- Talking with friends
- Taking a shower
- Enjoying a favourite drink or snack
- Spending time with animals

Some PETs release physical tension, while others calm the mind or strengthen social connections.

It is also important to recognise that PETs should evolve over time. As life circumstances change, people may discover new tools that better support their wellbeing.

Moderation also matters. A healthy coping strategy can become problematic if overused. For example, an occasional drink may be relaxing, but excessive drinking can quickly become harmful.

The goal is to use PETs intentionally to maintain emotional balance.

Understanding the difference between short term stress and long term stress

Short-term stress lasts from minutes to a few hours. When you're stressed, your body releases cortisol, which interacts with your hippocampus—the area important for memory and learning. This response can actually boost your memory and learning abilities temporarily. It's like your brain is telling you to remember what's stressing you so you can learn from it faster and better. But with long-term stress—lasting for days or even months—the brain starts to give up on this fight. It stops sending the chemicals that help upgrade the hippocampus, because it perceives the situation as hopeless. This means your ability to learn and remember can become impaired, making it harder to retain new information. If your job,

circumstances, or relationships cause daily stress, it can significantly impact your ability to learn and recall new things. That's why understanding your daily TEPs and using the right PETs isn't just about relaxing—it's about strengthening your body's resilience against chronic stress. This approach helps keep your hippocampus healthy, so you can learn and remember more effectively.

There are three steps to the stress cycle:

1. Your body senses danger—pressure from life either at work, home, or other.
2. Your body responds to that danger; cortisol levels, blood pressure, heart rate, and respiration all rise.
3. You survive, and your body recovers, lowering cortisol levels, blood pressure, heart rate and respiration.

With all our global challenges, many people are stuck in the second step, with their bodies locked in a response to danger. This can also happen when we experience significant stress (your job, illness, death of a loved one, financial loss, pandemic, etc.). After this event, individuals may return to school or work and realise that they are not learning or remembering at the same level as before the significant stress.

Don't panic! It doesn't have to be permanent. It is just your brain helping to protect you from the memory of the stressful situation. This is where the application of PETs is crucial. Without your body stopping and recovering from the stress response, it may not be able to resume normal functions.

So, are you locked in Step 2?

Often you can't change your circumstances or the people you deal with. Your one powerful choice is how you respond to the people and events in

your life. And that can be life-changing.

If you recognise/admit that you are stuck on Step 2, take a moment to list your current TEPs, along with the appropriate PETs. Keep the list with you (maybe on your phone) and make a concerted effort to include as many PETs as you can throughout your day. You will not only start to feel more in control but also perform better, improving both your work and home relationships.

An Important Reminder about Individual Perspectives

We see things from different perspectives, but often expect others to see and handle situations the same way. We assume everyone would make the same choices under the same circumstances. Using stress as an example, people fall on a continuum from non-talkers to talkers (all positions are OK). Non-talkers prefer silence when stressed, which can frustrate talkers who talk to cope. Talkers may see non-talkers' silence as avoidance. Understanding others' positions is key. For non-talkers, silence may be all they need; for talkers, listening is best—talking often helps them find solutions. If a talker suddenly goes silent, they might be facing a tough situation. This continuum applies to many areas: love, friendship, honesty, sex, body image, expectations, money, success, failure, religion, trust. Recognize your position and respect others' choices without judgment.

Building Daily Resilience Habits

Emotional resilience grows through small, consistent habits rather than dramatic changes.

Just like building a muscle, a simple one-minute practice can help strengthen the brain's emotional regulation systems. Taking three long

mindful breaths on waking and just before sleeping can start to build new neural pathways, leading to destinations that you choose to go, rather than down roads you feel forced to travel.

Examples include:

- Taking three slow breaths upon waking
- Pausing to notice your surroundings while walking outside
- Reflecting on your emotional state when picking up your phone
- Asking yourself what emotional road you are on when you're sitting behind a steering wheel
- Notice what roads others may be on - without judgement

Creating daily routines can also support emotional balance.

For example:

Morning routine: take a few slow breaths and look at the sky before starting the day.

End-of-work routine: shower, change clothes, and take a few quiet minutes to relax.

End-of-day routine: listen to calming music or practise deep breathing before sleep.

These small transitions help the brain shift from activity to recovery.

Building a Shared Language Around Emotions

Emotional resilience is not only an individual skill. It can also be strengthened through supportive relationships.

When families, workplaces, or

communities share a common, non-judgemental language around emotions, communication becomes easier, and conflicts are less likely to escalate.

For example, someone might say:

"I'm on a rough road today."

or

"I'm feeling a bit out of control and need a few minutes."

Simple statements like these create understanding without blame.

Recognising when others may be dealing with their own TEPs also encourages empathy and patience.

Don't be tempted to join others on their rough road and then blame them or the circumstances. If you do end up there, remember that it has been your choice. Just try to remain in control on that challenging road, as that's when you'll build your emotional resilience.

Don't be afraid to have fun with it, as humour often helps us deal with uncomfortable situations.

The Road Ahead

Emotional resilience isn't built in big moments—it's built in small, consistent habits.

Simple actions like taking a few slow breaths before a shift, checking in with yourself after a job, or creating routines to switch off at home, such as taking a shower, changing your clothes and sitting down and really enjoying that beer, can make a real difference over time.

Firefighting will always involve pressure, unpredictability, and exposure to difficult situations. That won't change.

What can change is how you respond to it.

Emotional resilience is about becoming a more skilled driver on both smooth and rough emotional roads, knowing there are no "wrong" feelings.

You will have tough days and experience rough emotions. That doesn't mean you're failing—it means you're human.

The key is remembering how to regain and maintain control on any road, as only you hold the steering wheel.

By recognising your TEPs (triggers), using your PETs (tools), and supporting each other as a crew, you can empty that glass of stress and perform at your best—on and off the job.

Play with it. Make a joke of it. Normalise the language and remove the judgement and stigma.

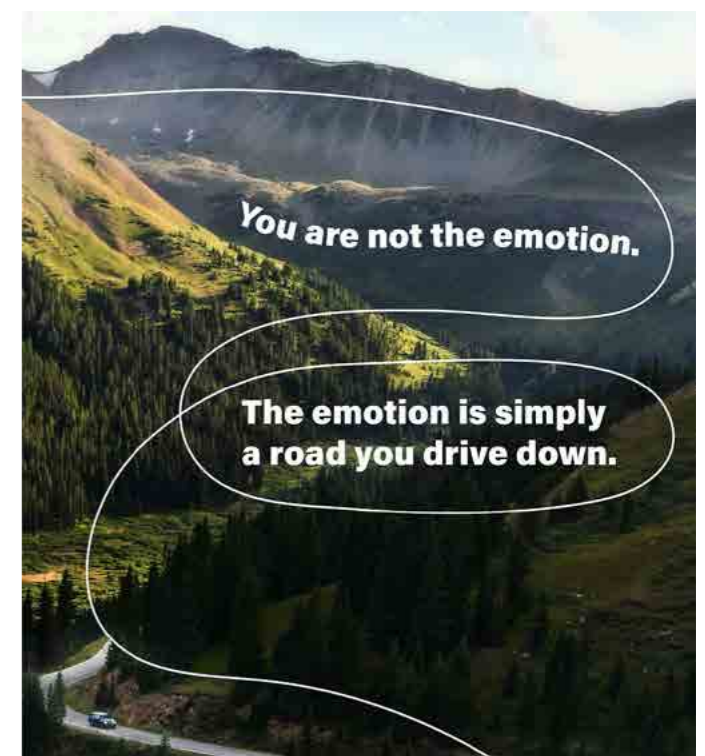
One deep breath, one call, one shift, one moment at a time.

Your steering wheel. Your choice.



Dr Jane Foster is a leading educator, researcher, presenter and author of "It's in Your Hands; Your Steering Wheel, Your Choice". Combining

her educational skills with neuroscience and positive psychology, Jane equips people with strategies to help manage their daily stresses, successfully changing perspective and creating new neural pathways. For more information, visit www.emotionalresiliencetraining.com.au





PTSD Assistance Dogs:

How They Support Firefighters and First Responders Living With Trauma

FIREFIGHTERS and other 000 First Responders face extraordinary pressures running into danger when everyone else runs out, witnessing severe injuries, death, destruction, and moments of overwhelming human vulnerability. Over time, these repeated exposures can lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, emotional burnout and a loss of freedom. Research shows that up to 30% of First Responders develop behavioural health conditions, including PTSD and depression, due to relentless exposure to trauma.

As clinical resources struggle to meet growing demand and perceived stigma continues to discourage many from seeking help, PTSD Assistance Dogs has emerged as an effective, compassionate, non-judgmental tool supporting the mental well-being of 000 First Responders.

PTSD Dogs Australia Ltd is a Not For Profit charity created in 2018 after Air Force Veteran Roger Weeks shared his exit strategy with his wife Angela Weeks. They had been seeking a PTSD and Medical Alert Assistance Dog for 4 years with no success. Angela shares "at this

very point in time, I knew we needed to be part of the solution and not part of the problem".

Angela's passion for rescuing death row Pound & Shelter dogs lead to building relationships and acquiring shelter dogs and training them as PTSD Assistance Dogs. Word spread quickly amongst service personnel. The trained dogs were then matched and gifted to current and retired Veterans and 000 First Responders clinically diagnosed with PTSD and other comorbid conditions.

Roger and Angela's experiences and the people they support proves trained dogs are life changing and lifesaving!

Why PTSD Assistance Dogs Are Needed

The emotional and physiological toll placed on Firefighters and First Responders is significant.

- Repeated exposure to life-threatening or distressing incidents
- Chronic stress and hypervigilance
- Guilt or emotional detachment
- Sleep disruptions and nightmares
- Difficulty transitioning home after shifts

According to mental-health analyses, long-term exposure contributes to PTSD, anxiety, clinical depression, and chronic sleep issues impacts that often accumulate gradually rather than stemming from one single event.

Many First Responders also report feeling uncomfortable openly discussing their struggles. Therapy dogs and Assistance Dogs help bridge that gap by offering immediate emotional relief without stigma.

How PTSD Assistance Dogs Help

PTSD Dogs Australia's Assistance Dogs for Firefighters and other First Responders are highly trained working partners, not pets. They perform specific, evidence-based tasks that mitigate the symptoms of trauma and once certified have full public Access Rights under the Federal Governments DDA (Disability Discrimination Act 1992), and GHAD (Guide Hearing Assistance Dog Act 2009).

1. Grounding During Flashbacks or Panic Episodes

PTSD Assistance Dogs learn to:

- Interrupt escalating panic
- Provide deep pressure therapy
- Establish physical contact to re-orient their handler

These actions help calm the nervous system and prevent symptoms from spiralling.

2. Improving Sleep and Nightmares

Nightmares and sleep disruptions are common in trauma-affected responders. PTSD Assistance Dogs can:

- Wake the handler during a nightmare
- Turn on lights
- Provide calming reassurance

This support leads to better rest and reduced fear around sleep. Partners report better sleep hygiene as they sleep deeper, knowing the dog will wake the handler reducing the likelihood of being hit during a night terror.

3. Creating a Sense of Safety in Public

For Responders dealing with hypervigilance:

- Dogs act as a barrier in dense or crowded areas
- They provide perimeter checks or enter rooms first
- Their presence reduces constant scanning for danger
- Can lead person out of shops and back to vehicle

These tasks help Responders feel safer and more confident navigating daily life, which in turn supports a sense of freedom!

4. Reducing Stress and Regulating Emotions

Assistance Dogs are shown to:

- Reduce cortisol (stress hormone)
- Increase oxytocin (bonding and calming hormone)

This physiological effect helps counteract the chronic stress Firefighters and Emergency personnel face.

5. Medical Alert and Physical Support

Some First Responders develop comorbid medical conditions linked to traumatic stress. Assistance Dogs can be trained to assist with:

- Cardiac alerts
- Diabetic monitoring
- Balance or fainting disorders
- Seizure alerts including Dissociative seizures
- Physical support with retrieving items

These abilities make Assistance Dogs invaluable medical partners and reduce the need of support from loved ones in turn restoring a sense of freedom and independence.

The Emotional Connection: A Critical Part of Healing

Beyond their task training, PTSD Assistance Dogs offer:

- Unconditional companionship
- Non-judgmental presence
- Daily grounding and routine

For Responders who often feel isolated, even from loved ones, this bond can be lifesaving. Many Firefighters report that having an Assistance Dog gives them the confidence to return to work, reconnect with family, and participate in daily activities they had once avoided.

PTSD Dogs Australia's Animal Assisted Smiles program visit fire stations with the in-training Assistance Dogs, providing moments of calm in high-stress environments. These visits help reduce stigma by giving Responders a low-pressure, approachable way to engage in mental-health support.

Dogs quietly interact with the Responders who are taught to slowly and gently stroke the dog head to tail, helping to reduce Cortisol and engage the Parasympathetic nervous system helping to calm the nervous system.

A New Path To Healing: Train Your Own Assistance Dog

Many people already have a beloved pet who provides them with comfort, stability, and emotional grounding especially those living with PTSD. For these individuals,



the idea of rehoming their pet or replacing them with a pre-trained Assistance Dog can feel heartbreaking. PTSD Dogs Australia recognise this deeply personal bond and offers a unique solution through its Train Your Own Assistance Dog program, which allows suitable applicants to transform their existing dog into a government certified PTSD Assistance Dog. PTSD Dogs Australia recently created the Train Your Own Assistance Dog program making these life-saving life changing dogs more accessible, reflecting the organisation's commitment to meeting growing national mental health needs. This inclusive approach acknowledges that healing often commences with a dog whom a person already trusts, one who has been by their side through fear, flashbacks, and the long road of recovery.

The Train Your Own program provides participants with expert-guided behavioural and Assistance Dog training, comprehensive learning modules, structured assessments, and ongoing trainer support to ensure both dog and handler develop the skills required for certified assistance work. Applicants must meet criteria such as working with a psychologist, having a clinical diagnosis of PTSD or related conditions, and owning a dog with the right temperament and traits necessary for Assistance Dog training. By empowering handlers to be part of the process, the program not only strengthens the working partnership but also boosts confidence, independence, and emotional resilience – all key components in long term PTSD recovery. This model allows individuals to retain the loyal companion who has already been part of their healing while gaining the life-changing benefits of a fully trained Assistance Dog. Find out more <https://trainyourown.ptsddogs.org.au/>

Why These Dogs Matter Now More Than Ever

Modern fire and rescue services are seeing increased call volumes, more complex emergencies, higher community

expectations, and greater emotional strain. Reports show trauma linked mental health diagnoses among emergency personnel have nearly doubled in recent years.

While clinical therapy and peer-support programs remain essential, PTSD Assistance Dogs offer:

- Immediate, 24/7 support
- Non-pharmaceutical intervention
- Long-term companionship
- A stabilizing presence during and after crises

For many current and retired Firefighters and First Responders, a PTSD Assistance Dog becomes a trusted partner, one who helps them reclaim their life, their confidence, their freedom and their sense of purpose.

The Healing Journey of Team Maisie

Grace is a medically retired Fire Communications Officer for the Qld Fire Department, discharged in 2023. In 2025 She sought assistance from PTSD Dogs Australia due to her struggles with PTSD, anxiety and depression and a great feeling of loss. The weight of these circumstances forced Grace into isolation, severing her connection to daily life and taking a heavy toll on both her and her family. Grace joined in the Train Your Own (TYO) program to assist in training her own dog Maisie to become her PTSD Assistance Dog.

Their journey began with a suitability assessment by Head Trainer Angie to ensure Maisie had the temperament and aptitude for the job. The recognition from PTSD Dogs Australia on Maisie's suitability for the program reassured Grace that she was the right fit and now known affectionately as Team Maisie.

Through completing the online modules, training at home and attending weekly face-to-face sessions, Team Maisie are working toward achieving Grace's medical goals and mitigating Grace's PTSD and

anxiety. Once the Team completes the program successfully, Maisie will graduate with official GHAD certification, granting Maisie the legal rights to support Grace in all public environments.

The powerful bond between Maisie and Grace is a big part of the team's ongoing success, with the continued support of the TYO program and Grace's dedication to training it is allowing them to build their skills, experience and confidence to navigate the world together.

Conclusion

PTSD Dogs Australia's Assistance Dogs are transforming how current and retired Firefighters and First Responders manage trauma. By offering specialised task support, emotional grounding, and constant companionship, these dogs fill a critical gap in mental health care. Their impact is both practical and deeply personal, helping our everyday 000 First Responders navigate the invisible wounds of their work.

As awareness continues to grow, PTSD Dogs Australia Ltd Assistance Dogs remain a powerful tool in supporting the mental health, resilience, and well-being of those who dedicate their lives to protecting others. Together as a collaborative effort Freedom is reinstalled!

Author: Angie Weeks
CEO/Head Trainer PTSD Dogs Australia
admin@ptsddogs.org.au
www.ptsddogs.org.au
<https://trainyourown.ptsddogs.org.au/@ptsdassistedogs>

To support the work of PTSD Dogs Australia

Give \$2 to Save 2: Saving the next generation 1 Rescue Dog 1 First Responder

Would you shout your mate a beer a month? When 5,000 people donate the cost of just \$2.00 per week, we can save the life of one death row pound dog and train them to become a PTSD Assistance Dog.



That dog then goes on to change, and often save, a human life by restoring something PTSD so often takes away: freedom.

Scan the QR code to help create freedom.

Fire fighter connects with his kids through The Fathering Project

Firefighter Adam Murphy experienced the benefits of The Fathering Project program in his child's school.

"Because of the shift work involved in firefighting, I've had the privilege to regularly attend the program at Oatley, my kids' school.", said Murphy.

"Changing children's lives" is an outcome and vision The Fathering Project seeks to achieve.

"I talk to Dads at school pick up, who have never been on the school grounds, and not experienced the connections I've been given with my kids through The Fathering Project", Murphy said ruefully .

"I can see my kids more confidently connected to school and their challenges, partly because I've engaged closely with their experiences."

Oatley Public School in Sydney's southwest hold regular events for Dads and Kids. **At their Term 1 activity, 200 Dads and kids connected over Paper Planes and Pizza.** Principal Debbie Hunter commented that with the growing numbers of engaged Dads on campus, there are also more Dads attending parent-teacher nights, with more kids better engaged with their learning.

Though he's yet to experience The Fathering Project's Corporate Program, Murphy can see the opportunity for a supported, interactive professional development program in Fire Services units.



Check out what other dads have to say about The Fathering Project at their child's school! Scan the QR code to listen.

About The Fathering Project

The Fathering Project is a secular not-for-profit organisation, operating nationally. Our mission is to educate, connect and empower fathers and father figures across Australia to prevent long term social, emotional and cognitive difficulties and create the conditions for children to thrive. Through resources, programs, events and community intervention programs we ensure all dads are best equipped to care for their children as they need.



To learn more, visit thefatheringproject.org or scan the QR code to view a variety of program offerings in early learning centres, schools and workplaces!





'You become their safe and happy place': How opening your heart and home can help foster a brighter future for children and young people

VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTER Jayden Limbrick remembers the absolute joy, wonder and pride he felt watching the little girl his family had fostered toddling towards him on unsteady feet as he arrived home after a fire call.

The little girl, who had come to live with them when she was about six weeks old, had been learning to walk and was grinning from ear-to-ear as she "thump, thump, thumped" towards him to give him a big hug.

"We had a lovely bond," Jayden, from Tasmania, said.

"Sometimes my own children would just smile and wave then move on when I got home, but - especially when she started walking - she would come barrelling through the house giggling and try to find me."

Prior to having children, Jayden and his wife Clrys had travelled around the

world and spent months volunteering in villages in Uganda and Thailand when they started thinking about becoming foster carers.

On their return, Clrys spotted a Life Without Barriers stall at AgFest encouraging people to find out more about foster care.

"Three months later, we were doing the training course," Jayden said.

Across Australia, more than 45,000 children are unable to live with their families for a variety of different reasons.

But sadly, the number of children needing care far outweighs the number of foster carers, with around 8000 foster carer households across Australia.

For Jayden and Clrys, they had two young biological children when they received a call to see if they could

provide care for a newborn baby girl.

The baby became an integral part of their family for more than a year before she was reunited with her mother.

"It was a really good outcome for her to be able to go home to her mum and her family," Jayden said.

"That's the whole idea of foster care - being able to offer a safe, loving and nurturing home for children until they can return to their family. You sign up knowing that there is potential for that to happen.

"We were completely open to having her stay with us forever, and while we still miss her and think about her and saying goodbye was genuinely hard, being able to give her the love and support she needed at that critical time in her life was incredibly rewarding.

"She'd needed to nap, she'd needed to feed, she'd needed a routine - as well

as love and support - and we feel really lucky that we were able to provide that for her when she needed it most."

While Jayden and Clrys are "still on the books", they are not currently caring for a foster child.

"Being able to provide a child or children with a stable and fun home environment while they are going through a rough time - whether they understand that or not - is such a privilege, because you become their safe and happy place."

"We had a really positive experience. Don't get me wrong, we had our ups and downs.

"They are still children. They can wake up in the middle of the night, they can misbehave and carry on while they are learning, but for us, the good far outweighed the bad - and we got so much out of being carers."

Jayden said Life Without Barriers had provided great training and support throughout their care experience, including during an incredibly frightening trip to Hobart hospital via helicopter when their foster child was having some breathing problems.

"It was 3am, and we called the 24-hour support line for advice," Jayden said.

"It was just so reassuring to know someone is always available and will pick up when you need them."

He would highly recommend other people who have space in their hearts and homes to consider foster care - whether that be short term, long term or respite care.

"If you can help somebody, why not? There are a lot of different ways to help," Jayden said.

"That's why I really enjoy firefighting.

MENTAL HEALTH

People's lives and livelihoods can be on the line, and to be able to help people through what could feel like the worst day of their life is a great privilege.

"It's a bit the same with foster care, when a child is in a spot where it feels like a tough time in their life. Being able to step in and help them turn that around by putting some positivity and excitement back into a difficult situation feels like you're doing something that could make a big difference."

"Significant" demand for foster carers nationally calls for urgent action

Life Without Barriers' Deputy Chief Executive of Child, Youth, and Family services, Carly Jacobitz, said there continues to be a big demand for foster carers nationally.

"Lots of families go through hard times and there are about 45,000 children needing the support of the foster care system across Australia at any given time," Ms Jacobitz said.

"Many children are unable to live with their families for a lot of different reasons, but having the right support at the right time can have a huge impact on a child's health, happiness and wellbeing.

"The more foster carers we have ready to support our children right across the country, the more likely children will be able to stay close and connected to their kin, community, schools and friends."

Life Without Barriers has been supporting children, young people and families in the foster care system, with teams working in hundreds of communities across Australia seeing first-hand the positive impact of a safe, stable and loving home.

"Having that support and stability

during a particularly difficult time can really help change the trajectory of a child's life," Ms Jacobitz said.

"We have seen it happen. We have seen some incredible outcomes for both the kids and the carers.

"The carers we support often tell us they get just as much out of the experience as the children and young people and find it to be incredibly rewarding.

"Caring can come in all shapes and sizes, and there are a lot of ways to help. While there are long, medium and short-term options, offering respite care for a weekend or a month is another way people can support our children and young people.

"You can be a single person, a couple, a same-sex couple and a person of any age.

"If you have space in your heart and home for a child or young person who needs some stability, love and support, we would love to talk to you about what is involved and how you may be able to help."

People interested in becoming a foster carer can find out more by visiting the [Life Without Barriers website at lwb.org.au](http://LifeWithoutBarriers.org.au) or emailing: carers@lwb.org.au.



Beyond Tough – How Mindarma Protects Firefighter Mental Health

If you are a firefighter, chances are you are exceptionally tough. After all, you signed up for a job that involves walking into burning buildings, when you could easily have chosen to be a florist, an accountant or one of those annoying people who spray passers-by with perfume at the department store.

MOST FIREFIGHTER training is about safety. Thousands of hours are spent learning precisely what to do when things might fall down, blow up or go all together pear-shaped.

Not every danger however is physical. Mindarma has made it their mission to protect psychological health for the many thousands of people who don't walk away from the tough stuff.

One very important finding from research conducted by Mindarma Principal Psychologist and co-founder Dr Sathbh Joyce, is that being tough is very different from being psychologically resilient.

“Psychological resilience is not about people able to push things aside and push on through. Instead, it is about having the skills to adapt well in the face of challenging situations and events,” said Dr Joyce. “

“Despite their unquestioned toughness,

the firefighters in our study measured slightly lower than the general population on a scale of adaptive psychological resilience. A significant proportion recorded low or low-average resilience, which was found to put them at greater risk of later experiencing depression or PTSD. Rather than suggesting that these firefighters take a few more spoons full of concrete, we tried equipping them with a range of vital psychological skills.”

As part of a randomised controlled trial run in conjunction with UNSW Medicine, the Black Dog Institute and FRNSW, an online resilience training program was developed. The program taught a range of psychological skills and strategies known to enhance resilience.

It worked.

Firefighters who received the program not only became significantly more resilient, they also used healthier coping strategies, were more likely to reach out for support and had increased optimism.

Following this research Mindarma was created. This evidence-based program has since been rolled out to thousands of workers who perform some of Australia's toughest jobs.

Across many frontline agencies, it is playing a critical role in helping reduce risk. As well as firefighters, paramedics and police, Mindarma is supporting child protection workers, prison workers, educators and others who are exposed to psychologically challenging situations as part of their daily work.

Across all these groups, Mindarma has continued to measure adaptive psychological resilience. The results show just how important this preventative training can be. Data from 1166 Mindarma learners shows that following training, less than half of participants remained in the most at-risk group. More than double the number of participants had become highly resilient.

For firefighting organisations, evidence-based resilience training can help protect against the risks that are impossible to eliminate. It may mean less injuries and fewer mental health claims. For firefighters it can mean a whole lot more. Being taught the right skills can result in a career with less suffering. It can also provide a clear plan of what to do when the going inevitably gets tough.

Dr Tara Lal is a retired firefighter

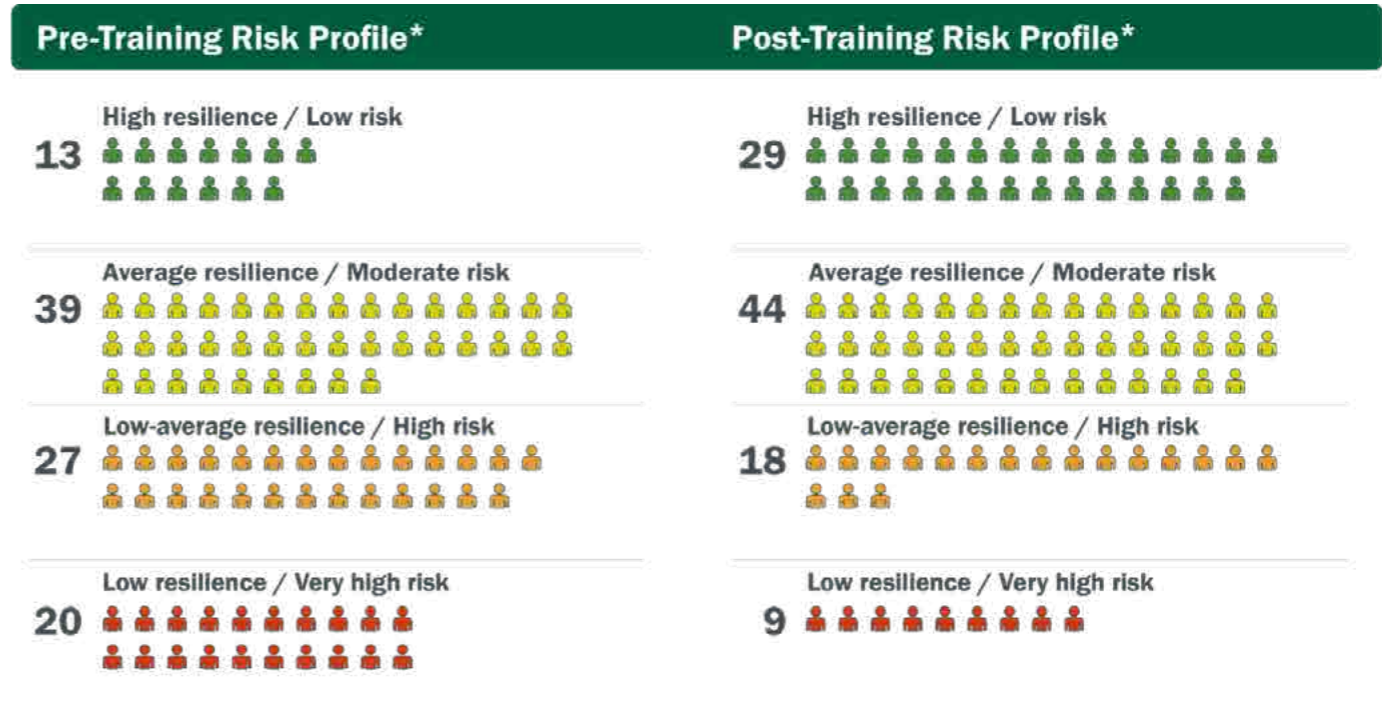
who has served as a peer supporter and completed doctoral research related to suicide amongst firefighters. She says, “As firefighters we are continuously under assault from so many different physical, psychological, social, operational and organisational stressors. Not understanding or having access to the psychological tools to help us manage these stressors can have a profound impact on our physical, emotional, mental, and relational health.”

Being equipped with the right psychological skills can have highly positive impacts upon ongoing mental health. Determined to reduce the amount of suffering among all those who serve, Mindarma would like to see this evidence-based training made available to every firefighter, including those in training, service and retirement.

As a social enterprise Mindarma collaborates with organisations to provide affordable access to leading mental health resources. In addition to

an evidence-based e-learning program, Mindarma also offers an expert-curated continuous learning platform. This contains hundreds of help resources including guided mindfulness audio exercises, videos, podcasts, articles, book recommendations, research and more. Throughout the year, Mindarma runs a full schedule of webinars, including psychologist-led skills sessions and events featuring leading experts addressing specialist mental health topics.

To discover more about Mindarma visit [Mindarma.com](https://www.mindarma.com)



* Per 100 workers. Data extracted from the Mindarma database on 14 October 2025, analysed using GNU PSPP 1.6.2.

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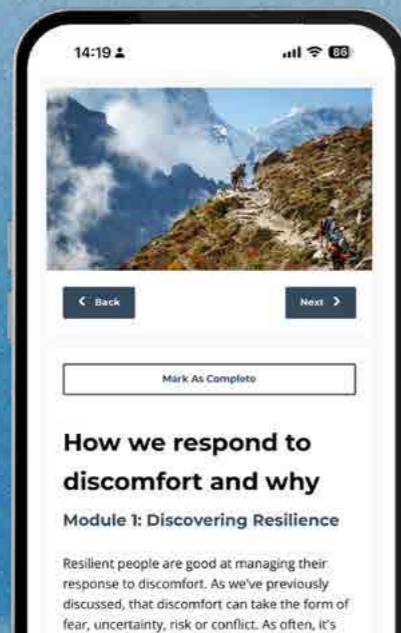
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Bush Fire Support Service

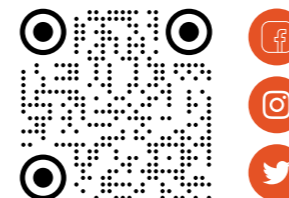
Feeling worried about bush fire season?

Australia's emergency service workers keep our communities safe. Encountering unprecedented levels of stress when responding to crises is part of the job, so it's understandable that you may be feeling stressed or anxious. It's important to note, that mental health challenges following stressful or traumatic events are normal, common and treatable.

The Bush Fire Support Service has been designed to provide free and confidential mental health support for Australia's emergency service workers and their families.

Get help now:

- One-on-one psychological mental health care sessions available free of charge via Telehealth
- Access a quick and confidential mental health assessment to check-in on how you're feeling
- Information and resources on managing your symptoms



Visit blackdoginstitute.org.au or email bushfiresupport@blackdog.org.au

Train For The Job: Why Tactical Fitness Matters For Firefighters

Firefighters operate in one of the most physically demanding professions in our community.

You may be required to carry heavy equipment up multiple flights of stairs, drag hoses, force entry into buildings, lift casualties, or work for extended periods in extreme heat while wearing heavy protective gear. These situations don't happen in ideal conditions. They often happen while you are fatigued, under stress, and required to make critical decisions quickly.

Because of this, firefighters don't just need to be "fit". They need to be operationally fit.

This is where the concept of tactical fitness becomes important.

Tactical fitness refers to physical preparation designed specifically for professions that operate in unpredictable, high-risk environments. Firefighters, military personnel, police officers and rescue teams all fall into this category. The goal is not just to build muscle or improve general health. The goal is to ensure you can perform under pressure when it matters most.

Unlike general fitness, tactical fitness can quite literally become a matter of life or death for you, your crew, or the person you are trying to rescue.

Lessons From High-Risk Environments

I served 17 years in the Australian Army, including time working in

airborne operations and supporting Special Forces units. Throughout my career I saw firsthand how physical fitness directly influenced operational performance.

One of the biggest stand-out lessons came during demanding field exercises where soldiers were operating under food and sleep deprivation. These conditions are designed to simulate the stresses of real operations.

Very quickly it became obvious who was physically prepared and who was not.

The soldiers who lacked physical conditioning struggled to perform even basic tasks. Decision making slowed, attention to detail dropped, and simple jobs became difficult. This didn't just affect them individually. It affected the entire team.

In a tactical environment, when one person becomes physically compromised, it places additional stress on everyone else.

Those who were well conditioned handled the same environment far better. They were still fatigued, but their bodies had the capacity to continue functioning under stress. Their physical fitness helped keep them sharp when it mattered most.

The same principle applies to firefighting.

The Difference Between Gym Fitness and Tactical Fitness

Many people train regularly in the gym, which is excellent for overall health. However, the way many people train doesn't necessarily prepare them for the demands of operational environments.

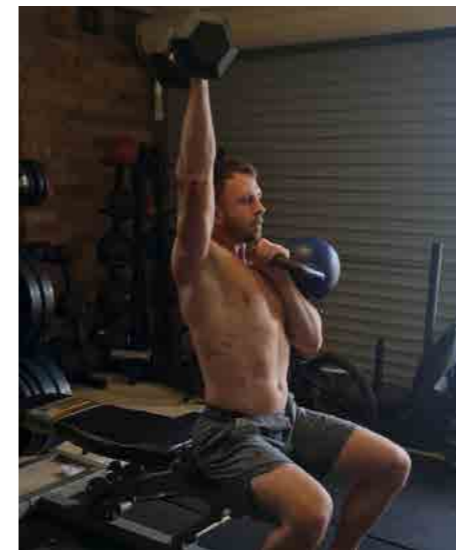
Traditional gym training often focuses on aesthetics or isolated strength movements. Tactical professions require something different.

Firefighters need a combination of:

- Strength to move heavy equipment and casualties
- Work capacity to perform repeated physical tasks over long incidents
- Muscular endurance to operate under fatigue
- Grip strength for handling tools and hoses
- Aerobic fitness to maintain performance over extended periods
- Durability to reduce the risk of injury

You may not know what your next callout will involve. One job might require climbing stairs in full gear, while the next might involve lifting debris or carrying a patient over uneven terrain.

Because of this, tactical fitness focuses on preparing the body to handle multiple physical demands across unpredictable scenarios.



Training for Real-World Demands

When training tactical professionals, I often focus on movements and training methods that better replicate real-world tasks.

Some examples include:

Loaded carries

Sled drags

Stair climbs

Grip strength work

Aerobic conditioning under load

These types of exercises help build the kind of strength and endurance that translates directly to operational environments.

Equally important is developing a strong aerobic base. Good cardiovascular fitness allows firefighters to manage fatigue more effectively and maintain clear thinking under pressure.

When your heart rate is elevated and the environment is chaotic, physical conditioning helps you stay composed and focused.

Longevity and Injury Prevention

Another important aspect of tactical

fitness is longevity.

Firefighting is a long career, and the physical demands can accumulate over time. Poor movement patterns, weak supporting muscles, and inadequate conditioning often contribute to injuries.

Structured training can help strengthen the body, improve mobility, and reduce the risk of common injuries seen in physically demanding professions.

The goal is not only to perform well today, but to maintain the ability to perform for many years to come.

The Bigger Picture

Physical training is not just about performance. It also supports mental resilience.

When you know you are physically capable of handling demanding situations, it builds confidence. That confidence carries into stressful environments where quick decisions and clear thinking are required.

Firefighters already possess the mindset required to run toward danger when others are running away. Tactical fitness simply ensures the body is capable of supporting that mindset.



In my work today, I help tactical professionals across Australia prepare for the physical demands of their roles. Whether someone is preparing to join a service or already serving in a demanding profession, the principle remains the same.

Train for the job you do.

Because when the moment comes that someone needs help, your preparation may make all the difference.

Brodie Locock

Founder – Outperform Fitness
Australian Army Veteran | Tactical Strength & Conditioning Specialist

www.outperformfitness.com.au

@outperformfitness



Prescribed burning in south-west jarrah/marri eucalypt forest.

Bushfire!

THERE ARE few events that excite our media more than a raging bushfire, with flames leaping high above a forest canopy, mushroom-shaped clouds of smoke filling the sky and aircraft spilling their loads of red dye.

Vision of such scenes is quickly followed by grim-faced politicians and fire chiefs sympathising with families who have fallen victim to the disaster, hailing the efforts of firefighters, blaming the event on climate change and promising more firefighting resources.

But should we accept this as the norm in 21st century Australia, a country which has evolved over millennia and been shaped by fire, a country featuring tall forests with highly flammable eucalyptus oil-drenched leaves, a country whose original human occupants consistently used fire to clear vegetation for hunting and other purposes?

I suggest we should not, and without wanting to be too parochial, I suggest that Australia should take a leaf out of the policies and practices adopted in Western Australia for the past 70 odd years.

Prior to the middle of the 20th century, West Australian forest and land managers, like the rest of Australia, tried to eliminate fire from the landscape. However, that flawed practice culminated in the megafires of 1961 when a significant proportion of WA's south-west native forests was burnt and the bush towns of Dwellingup, Nanga and Holyoake were destroyed. The subsequent Royal Commission called for fuel reduction burning - which was in its infancy at the time - to become routine and for the WA Forests Department to expand the practice to ensure similar disasters were prevented in future.

The Forests Department carried out its mission effectively, developing landscape scale prescribed burning techniques using aircraft and pioneering the use of spotter planes to detect fires, resulting in the number and severity of nasty bushfires falling significantly. To the credit of all WA State governments since, the policy has remained firm, despite constant sniping from critics who falsely claim that a well-managed and strategic prescribed burning program threatens biodiversity.

Today, the agency responsible for managing the State's forests, parks and reserves aims to maintain a fuel age of less than six years since last burn in at least 45% of the south-west public forests. This equates to an annual burning program of about 200,000 hectares over the roughly 2.5million-hectare estate which consists primarily of eucalypt forest. Meeting that target is challenging and WA still experiences some bad bushfires, but nothing to compare with those suffered by "t'othersiders".

After the 2019-20 "Black Summer" bushfires, the Bushfire Front, an organisation of foresters, land managers and researchers with extensive knowledge and experience in forests and rangeland fire management in WA, made a submission to the Royal Commission. The submission included seven essential background truths which can be summarised as:

1. Australia's climate is renowned for its periodic droughts and hot, dry summers, conducive to the occurrence of bushfires;
2. Australia's vegetation is highly flammable, dominated by species which

ignite easily and burn fiercely;

3. Bushland fuels accumulate and increasing fuel results in increasing fire intensity;

4. Fire-prone ecosystems are adapted to fire and there is no evidence that low intensity planned fire regimes cause any long-term harm to biodiversity;

5. Fires will always be ignited every fire season, whether by humans (accidental or deliberate) or by nature (lightning);

6. High intensity fires cannot be stopped by firefighters if fuels are heavy and terrain is difficult; and

7. Reducing bushland fuels is by far the most effective weapon against killer bushfires.

When these essential truths are understood and accepted, it is incumbent on governments to then ensure an effective "Bushfire Management System" (BMS) is established and maintained. The Bushfire Front's submission listed seven key elements of an effective BMS:

1. Leadership: Clear-headed leaders are needed to devise policy, assign priorities, build capacity, fight for budgets, oversee outcomes and ensure feedback and correction. They must insist on proactive rather than responsive bushfire management.



2. Consistent policy: All levels of government and all agencies must accept that prevention of bushfire damage is a key priority, over-riding all other land management and environmental policies.

3. Prevention and mitigation of bushfire damage: There must be significant investment in mitigating bushfire damage and in preparing communities and bushland in the expectation of fire. Reducing bushfire fuels through a well-planned, science-based prescribed burning program with, for example, 8% of bushland treated annually, is the fundamental underpinning of a BMS. Prevention is better than cure!

4. Firefighting capability: An effective BMS demands the maintenance of efficient fire detection, good bush access, rapid response from well-trained and equipped firefighters, a managed collaboration between land management and fire response agencies, and the capacity to call on experienced, trained incident teams to command firefighting operations and to fight fires.

5. Bushfire resilient communities: Local Government Authorities must develop tenure-blind risk management plans that identify threats and priorities, and measures to reduce risks and threats. Fuel age plans must be publicly available. Implementation of the plans will use funds raised through

NEWS AND VIEWS

an Emergency Services Levy, with all landowners required to comply.

6. Economic and financial decision-making: State Treasuries must ensure that taxpayers' money is spent where it will be most effective; that is, in the prevention of bushfire disasters rather than dealing with them after the event. Cost/benefit analyses must be used to inform decision-makers about alternative approaches and technologies.

7. Promotion of excellence: Continuous improvement through investment in recruitment, mentoring, training, education and bushfire research is essential. Young people need constantly to be brought into bushfire operations, absorbing appropriate culture and gaining experience and an understanding of bushfire science.

There is no doubt that many lives and billions of dollars would be saved if these Bushfire Management System principles were to be adopted in every State of Australia.

John Clarke
Chair, Bushfire Front Inc





Emergency Volunteer Respect Act

A LONG SERVING STAFFER in the fire service headquarters recently pointed out to me - "The Queensland Fire Department is not legislatively or industrially obliged to talk to any external organisation that is not a union."

This statement is undeniably true, and this statement encompasses why brigade membership numbers are falling and local empowerment of volunteers is disappearing.

In 2024 there was wholesale legislative and detrimental change to all the Rural Fire Brigades in Queensland without real or honest consultation. An action that would not have been permissible to paid staff covered under industrial agreements or instruments. A Emergency Volunteer Respect Act would have stopped this bad legislation from being rammed through the state's parliament.

Emergency volunteers are not amateurs

who step in to save the day. We are the frontline of everyday emergency response and recovery, through Rural Fire Brigades, State Emergency Services, Coast Guard, Volunteer Marine Rescue, St Johns Ambulance and more.

Modern emergency volunteers are men and women who train to the highest standards and deal with modern threats, like hazardous materials, burning plastics, fire suppressant foam, terrorist threats and meth labs. In addition to bushfire, cyclone, flood and storm.

We use digital communications, breathing apparatus, chemical suits, defibrillators and infra-red cameras. Run air bases, logistic chains, evacuation centres and meet the emergency needs of our communities to the best of our abilities and beyond.

To put that in context; Australia's fire services alone have almost a quarter of a million volunteers, from the front line

to the highest levels of Incident Control, and in many specialist and support roles. Our labour in fire alone is worth billions every year, and that is before we consider the uncountable cost of the lives and property saved.

While the hazards we combat and the methods we use are well into the 21st century, the law's recognition and protection of emergency volunteers is generation's out of date, and hard legislation in the form of a Volunteer Respect Act is the answer.

A Volunteer Respect Act would provide the legal framework that is necessary to ensure that emergency volunteers keep volunteering well into the 21st century.

It would guarantee emergency volunteers certain legal rights and protections as we go about our duties, consultation on issues that affect us, the resources to get the job done, recognition of skills, and protection for employers and others who support us.



It would give clear direction to State and Federal Governments on all matters, Acts, Legislation, regulations, deeds, contracts and enterprise agreements that at present have negative impacts on volunteers' rights; the work that volunteers can do; and the opportunity for volunteers to have a genuine and equal say on matters that affect us.

With a Volunteer Respect Act, Parliament can protect and support the volunteers who provide essential modern emergency services, and it can recognise the value of their skills, experience and contribution to the community.

The Volunteer Respect Act must be hard legislation. It's easy to say thank you, and thanks are certainly due, but real recognition of the value of volunteers, real respect for the expertise and contribution of volunteers needs to be demonstrated by ensuring volunteers' rights are protected; ensuring volunteers are not disadvantaged through their volunteer contribution; ensuring volunteers are not discriminated against in any way; and ensuring efforts are focused on making it easier to volunteer, not harder.

Changes in Industrial Relations, litigation and Occupational Health and Safety requirements mean volunteers need a modern legislative framework to protect them, to remove barriers and to allow us to keep protecting our diverse community's needs.

We must make the law recognise modern emergency volunteers, guarantee us all reasonable rights and protections, support our volunteering choice and prevent other legislation from handicapping us as we train, provide day to day emergency response and serve in our tens of thousands during major emergencies.

The Emergency Volunteer Respect Act

(EVRA) would:

- Ensure consultation with Emergency Volunteer (EV) organisations happens as there currently is no requirement for consultation;

- Enable Government to communicate or enquire on Emergency Volunteer (EV) organisations as there is currently no ability for them to do so;

- Be non-operational;

- Ensure that correct process were followed.

- Ensure Emergency Volunteers have a voice that is recognized;

- Identify potential issues early and internally;

- Support a process that brings Emergency Volunteer representative organisations together;

- Decouple money from having a voice;

- Provide advice and feedback to Minister for Volunteers and Government;

- Increase in Emergency Volunteer recruitment.

WHAT IS AN EMERGENCY VOLUNTEER?

The inclusivity of the EVRA will be driven by defining what an "Emergency Volunteer" is and by doing so will:

- Develop parameters for form and function of Emergency Volunteers a representative associations;

- Will include agencies that meet interpolative guidelines;

- Ensure inclusive and adaptable voice;

- Allow for associations to migrate in/out as form and function changes.

EMERGENCY VOLUNTEER RESPECT ACT (EVRA) WOULD HAVE AN EMERGENCY VOLUNTEER (EV) COUNCIL THAT:

- Will refer to appropriate established dispute processes;

- Is an environment which is apolitical, performing its functions in an impartial and professional manner;

- Is not a complaints process;

- Will ensure that most matters will be dealt with at local service committee level;

- Provide greater active voices for Emergency Volunteer Associations;

- Will have EVRA staff to support all EV Associations in finding their voice and to promote their EV organisation;

- Report annually to Parliament.

PRINCIPLES

- Respecting rights

Respect the rights of emergency volunteers to enable them to perform their roles without discrimination, no loss of legal standing, no disadvantage or loss of integrity and provide for all persons a means to volunteer according to their capacity without discrimination;

- Consultation

Enshrine for emergency volunteers the right to be consulted with, in advance on any matters which might impact on volunteer rights or duties and have agreement between the parties on any matters which might impact on emergency volunteers;

- Integration with legislation

Ensure all subsequent legislation, deeds and contracts as far as is permissible by law, is reviewed to ensure compliance

with these principles does not unfairly impact on the rights of emergency volunteers in the performance of their duties;

• Resources

Enables emergency volunteers to have reasonable adequate resources to be able to perform their roles in a manner that is safe and without risks to their health;

• Education

Provide for an education fund for emergency volunteers to assist with enhancing skills of volunteers directly for the public good;

• Compliance

Enable breaches by persons or organisations to be properly dealt with according to Law;

• A fair go without hardship

Where not already provided for, to establish a emergency volunteer hardship support fund to assist emergency volunteers who meet certain criteria, to provide for their personal costs and losses incurred as a part of their volunteering efforts;

• Skills recognition

Provide for recognition of emergency volunteers' skills to agreed national competency levels and where an emergency volunteer has been competently assessed, not discriminate against a volunteer in any way including the basis of qualifications and experience.

• Out of pocket expenses

Where otherwise not expressly provided for, provide for the reimbursement for out of pocket costs incurred by emergency volunteers as a direct cause of them volunteering if

they so wish to claim;

• Immunity from prosecution

Provide for immunity from prosecution for emergency volunteers and those who are directly supporting emergency volunteers whilst performing their duties and acting within the law and in good faith.

“Brigades and volunteers, Australia does adore; in time of crisis, but not before.”

Justin Choveaux
General Manager / RFBAQ
gm@rfbaq.org 0428218507

Cancer on the Job:

Firefighters' Presumptive Rights to Compensation Explained

FIREFIGHTING holds a proud and enduring place in Australia's history. For generations, the skill, commitment and bravery of both career and volunteer firefighters have protected Australian communities and safeguarded lives.

Every day firefighters face significant risks, and State Governments around Australia have introduced legislation that genuinely honours the dedication and sacrifice of our firefighters.

A growing body of evidence unfortunately shows that firefighters are more vulnerable to certain cancers because of the conditions they work in. Legislation known as presumptive legislation recognises that reality by giving both career and volunteer firefighters a presumptive right to compensation for occupational diseases linked to their service.

Presumptive legislation – what is it?

Presumptive legislation recognises that certain cancers are strongly linked to firefighting. If a firefighter is diagnosed with one of the diseases covered, it is automatically treated as work related, giving the firefighter a direct pathway to compensation, unless there is clear evidence showing otherwise. It streamlines the worker's compensation process, providing necessary financial support and peace of mind to firefighters and their families during treatment and recovery.

Who is covered under presumptive legislation?



Generally, career and volunteer firefighters are covered under the presumptive legislation.

To qualify, firefighters generally must:

- be diagnosed during service, or within the permitted period after ceasing service, and
- have completed a qualifying period being the required years of active firefighting, which vary depending on the cancer type and the state or territory.

What types of diseases are covered?

Each State and Territory has enacted its own presumptive legislation, setting out its own schedule of covered diseases. The breadth of these schedules varies between jurisdictions, with some providing more extensive coverage than others. The list below consolidates all diseases recognised across the various jurisdictions and is not specific to any single state or territory. Accordingly, a disease that appears on this list may be covered in one jurisdiction but not in another. It is important to obtain legal advice to determine whether a particular disease is covered under the legislation

applicable to ones State or Territory.

- Malignant mesothelioma
- Primary site lung cancer
- Primary site ovarian cancer
- Primary site laryngeal cancer
- Primary site bladder cancer
- Primary site brain cancer
- Primary site breast cancer
- Primary site cervical cancer
- Primary site colorectal cancer
- Primary site kidney cancer
- Primary site leukemia
- Primary site liver cancer
- Primary site lung cancer
- Malignant mesothelioma
- Multiple myeloma
- Non-Hodgkins lymphoma
- Primary site ovarian cancer
- Primary site oesophageal cancer
- Primary site pancreatic cancer
- Primary site penile cancer
- Primary site prostate cancer
- Primary site skin cancer
- Primary site testicular cancer
- Primary site thyroid cancer
- Primary site ureter cancer
- Primary site uterine cancer

What compensation entitlements are available?

Compensation entitlements and systems are different in each state and

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territory. Firefighters may also be able to access, through the claim, funding for a professional carer or for help with tasks such as cleaning or gardening.

Though it varies, the compensation entitlements usually include or cover the following types of compensation:

- Pain and suffering or a statutory lump sum for permanent impairment (in some instances, both).
- Loss of wages or profits.
- Care for nursing and home help services, including costs for childcare.
- Medical expenses and treatment costs.

What is the process for making a claim?

Each state and territory has a different process for making a compensation claim.

Speaking to a lawyer who specialises in disease claims will be of benefit to assist with gathering information to make a compensation claim.

The first appointment, which is usually one to two hours, is an opportunity to ask questions and understand how a claim will apply to one's personal circumstances.

What if a firefighter does not meet the requirements?

If a firefighter has been diagnosed with cancer but does not meet the presumptive criteria, it is still important that they seek legal advice to understand their rights and available options. This applies regardless of whether the presumptive requirements are met.

There are still pathways for both career and volunteer firefighters who are not covered by presumptive entitlements. Support may also be available to the families and dependants of firefighters who have developed work related conditions.

We ask firefighters to put themselves in harm's way to protect our communities. It is only right that, as a society, we stand by them later in life when they need support.

By Ross Sottile
Associate
Maurice Blackburn Lawyers

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Mental Health Awareness



MARGO BLACKLAW is passionate about mental health and the importance of early intervention to reduce the impact of mental illness. The more people understand and are aware of mental health issues, the more positively they can contribute to reducing stigma.

Margo is the owner of Mental Health Awareness, with a goal of educating people about what mental health issues are, how to recognise early warning signs in ourselves and others, and what to do when those signs appear.

With over 30 years' experience as a trainer, Margo understands the importance of engaging participants to ensure her courses are relevant and interesting. She also ensures that groups feel safe, as some topics can trigger difficult emotions for participants.

I began my career as an Economics teacher after studying at university, majoring in Economics, Psychology and Sociology. After 12 years of teaching and publishing two economics dictionaries for HSC students, I joined the NSW Government and began my career as a corporate trainer.

Eventually, I went out on my own and established a training business,

which I ran for around 11 years. At its peak, we delivered approximately 300 courses a year with a team of nine trainers and marketers—operating from my cosy lounge room. I sold that business in 2019. Although I offered a wide range of training courses, I found it increasingly difficult to fit in what was my absolute passion: supporting people with mental health issues.

In 2019, I established Mental Health Awareness and travelled to Perth to become an instructor in Mental Health First Aid (MHFA). It is one of the best courses I have ever completed, and I love delivering it to participants who genuinely want to be there. On a personal level, throughout my life I have supported people experiencing anxiety, psychosis, bipolar disorder and addictions such as alcohol.

A few years ago, I completed a two-year counselling course with Aurora Hammond, and it truly changed my life. Aurora believed that to become a good counsellor and effectively support others, you must first work on yourself. During those two years, I learned a great deal about myself—particularly about vulnerability and how it allows deeper, more meaningful connections with others.

Since then, I have delivered many Mental Health First Aid courses and refreshers in Perth, Canberra and Sydney. I honestly have no idea how many people I have trained—lots! I love these courses because of the important conversations that take place. Participants often feel safe enough

to open up and share their stories, discussing experiences such as anxiety, depression, panic attacks, suicide attempts and bipolar diagnoses. While the course is not a therapy session, it is a powerful educational experience supported by case studies, videos and meaningful discussions.

Over the past six years, I have also developed a range of mental health courses. My most popular is a three-hour manager course focused on supporting staff with mental health issues. This course can be delivered as a half-day or full-day option for time-poor managers. We explore what mental health is, how to support team members, friends and family, what to do if someone you manage is not okay, and how managers can look after their own mental health. Burnout, in particular, is becoming a major issue.



Over the last five years, I have travelled frequently to Perth to partner with Sally Coleman and Aus Group (now Altrad) to deliver MHFA courses. Sally's enthusiasm combined with my training experience saw us train around 150 staff. We also ran several morning teas with short talks reminding staff how they can support others experiencing mental health issues. I also recall travelling to Darwin to present a mental health talk to 140 staff. More recently, we have partnered with Kingara to deliver MHFA courses to their employees.

Pandora, the jewellery company, has also trained its senior staff and directors in supporting employee mental health—an incredibly dedicated group committed to creating a positive workplace culture.

I am now very privileged to be contracting with Sports Medicine Australia, St John Ambulance and Surf Lifesaving delivering MHFA courses, refresher sessions and our mini manager course. Please feel free to contact me if you would like us to deliver a course in your organisation.

I am also fortunate to have a twin sister who runs her own consultancy focused on motivation and positive retirement. Together, we present to groups on how to live their best lives—whether in retirement or at any stage of life. She is also a qualified hypnotherapist, and hypnotherapy is a powerful tool for recovery and wellbeing.



I have delivered one-hour talks to groups such as National Seniors, Probus, libraries and schools. They are wonderful audiences to work with. I strongly believe that some parents, in particular, need greater education around teenage mental health. Parents are often an under-utilised resource, despite being on the frontline of their children's lives. Knowledge truly makes a difference.

Key Lessons I Have Learned on My Journey

- 1. Nip it in the bud early.** Don't ignore mental health concerns when you notice them. Seek help early whether that's talking to someone you trust or seeing a GP who understands mental health. Early intervention is critical.
- 2. Validate people's experiences and feelings.** Saying "that must be hard" goes a long way. Our instinct is often to cheer people up, but validation must come first.
- 3. You can't help someone who isn't ready.** You cannot force someone to give up alcohol or seek help if they are not ready. Continue to support them, but don't exhaust yourself trying to change them.
- 4. Support means staying connected.** Call or text every few days, ask "How are you going?", make a meal, and—most importantly—listen.
- 5. Many people simply need someone to listen.** Often, that alone is enough. Can you be that listening ear?

- 6. Avoid giving advice too quickly.** People often jump to advice when listening is what's needed most. Often the people giving advice are the ones that need the help!!
- 7. Don't hijack someone's story.** Responding with "That happened to me too..." This is not connection as it shifts the focus away from them and on to you.

- 8. Listening and validation deepen relationships.** With friends, colleagues or teammates, nothing builds connection more effectively. It can't get

any better than that.

9. Life is a journey, not a destination. We all fall off the path at times and need support to get back on track. We are all on our recovery journey.

10. Stay present. Looking back too much can lead to regret and depression; looking too far ahead can create anxiety. Mindfulness keeps us grounded in the only moment we truly have—the present.

My strength lies in empowering people on their road to recovery.

To book a course or organise training for your workplace or community group, please contact

Margo Blacklaw

Margo@mhawareness.com.au

0448 991 076

Beyond the Base Salary: What Firefighters Should Know About Today's Lending Landscape

By Quinto White - Q Financial



FOR MANY FIREFIGHTERS, conversations about property happen the same way they do for most Australians – between shifts, over a quick coffee, or somewhere in the middle of an already busy week.

Rates are still high enough to bite. Property prices remain stubborn. And for many people in emergency services, the question is not just can I buy? but how will a lender actually assess my income?

That matters more than most people realise.

Over the years working in finance, I have found that many firefighters are in a stronger position than they think. The challenge is not always income itself. More often, it is how that income is viewed by the lender.

From the outside, banks can seem fairly similar. Rates are public. Loan products look much the same. But behind the scenes, policy can vary significantly, especially when income is made up of more than just a base salary.

For firefighters, that is often the key issue.

Shift allowances, penalties, overtime, weekends and public holiday work can make up a large part of total annual income. In many cases, they are not just occasional extras, they are a meaningful part of how a firefighter earns.

And this is where lender choice matters.

Some lenders take a more practical view of overtime and shift income when there is a strong history and

clear supporting evidence. Others are far more conservative. The result is that two firefighters with very similar earnings can end up with very different borrowing outcomes, simply depending on where they apply.

That difference can affect borrowing power, loan options and overall flexibility.

It is one of the biggest misunderstandings I see in lending. Many people assume the result comes down to what they earn. In reality, it also comes down to how that income is assessed.

That is why the right lender is not just about the lowest rate. It is about the right fit.

Firefighters work in a profession that



is stable, respected and essential. That helps. But it does not mean every lender will automatically assess firefighter income in the most favourable way. The detail still matters, payslips, income history, consistency, and how the application is presented from the outset.

And sometimes, that presentation makes all the difference.

There is also another point worth knowing. While there is not generally a firefighter-specific Lenders Mortgage Insurance waiver, there can sometimes be broader LMI waiver options or more flexible policy pathways available depending on the lender and the scenario. These are not universal, and they are not available everywhere, but they can exist.

The important thing is knowing where to look.

Without that knowledge, many borrowers simply proceed under standard terms and never realise a better option may have been available.

That is why strategy matters so much in this space.

A strong lending result is not just about getting over the line. It is about making sure your income is properly understood, your application is well structured, and the lender chosen actually suits the way you are paid.

That applies whether you are buying your first home, upgrading, refinancing or looking to invest.

Pre-approval, for example, is more than a box to tick. Done properly, it can give clarity around borrowing range and confidence before you start seriously shopping. Refinancing is not just about rate either. It can be an opportunity to improve structure, reduce financial pressure, or set yourself up better for the next stage.

For borrowers with income made up of several moving parts, that structure can matter just as much as price.

And that is often where good advice earns its keep.

Firefighters already work in a role that demands discipline, reliability and calm under pressure. The lending process should not add unnecessary confusion on top of that. It should feel clear,



strategic and well managed.

In my experience, most people in professions like this are not looking for hype. They want straight answers, a realistic path forward, and someone who understands how to match the right lender to the right scenario.

Ultimately, property finance is not just a numbers exercise. It is a policy exercise too. And when income includes shift work and overtime, policy can make a very real difference.

Firefighters spend their careers protecting people, property and communities.

When it comes to your own property goals, it is worth making sure your finance strategy is working just as hard for you.



When Pressure Hits, Leadership Shows

By Pip Scott Allen

In high-risk environments, technical skill matters. But leadership and culture decide whether teams hold together

In high-pressure environments, we often promote the best operator, the most experienced person, or the one who knows the job inside out.

That makes sense. Technical skill matters.

But skill alone does not make someone a strong leader. Just because you can spray down a flare-up, doesn't mean you know how to motivate a team.

In firefighting and other high-risk settings, leadership development is essential. Because when pressure rises, people rely on more than procedures. They rely on trust, communication, respect, judgement and culture.

And your culture will either strengthen your team or break it.

Leadership starts before the title

One of the biggest traps in high-stress teams is assuming leadership begins with rank.

It doesn't.

Leadership is a mindset before it is a role. If we want stronger station officers, confident team members and overall healthier teams, we need to build leadership capability before promotion, not after it. By the time someone steps into formal leadership, they should already be developing the human skills that sit alongside technical ability. If you can't lead when it's easy, how do you expect to lead when the temperature rises?

That means learning how to communicate under pressure, manage conflict early, regulate emotion, and hold standards without losing the team.

Why I believe this

My respect for first responders is personal.

I have close family and friends across policing, firefighting and paramedicine, and I've seen the pressure these environments place on people, leaders and cultures. Earlier in life, I studied bushfire mitigation, learned how to fight bushfires, and was involved in incidents during university and early in my career.

I also worked as a waterfront director, lifeguard and instructor, responsible for training teams and managing high-pressure situations involving potentially missing or injured children. Add in wilderness guiding and wilderness first aid, and one lesson became clear very early:

"Pressure does not create culture. It reveals it."

Culture is built before the crisis

Culture is not built in the big moment. It is built in the everyday.

In how feedback is given. In whether people speak up. In whether tension is addressed early. In whether leaders bring clarity or confusion when stress rises.

That is why leadership and wellbeing cannot be separated. The way leaders communicate affects trust, performance and recovery. Sometimes care looks like empathy. Sometimes it looks like accountability. Both matter. And leaders must hold themselves and their team to these standards

Why outside support matters



High-pressure industries can become insular without meaning to. Habits narrow. Blind spots grow. The status quo starts to feel normal.

That is why outside leadership development matters. Not because external support replaces operational experience, but because it challenges assumptions and brings a broader lens. Strong leaders upskill themselves and their teams by learning from other capable people around them.

That is not weakness. That is leadership.

When I coach leaders in high-pressure industries, and I ask them "Why" it's not to question their actions, but to have them reflect and articulate the reason behind their actions. And if you answer, "It's what we've always done", that's a gold coin donation.

Final word

For firefighters, station officers and leaders in any high-risk environment, leadership development is not optional.

Because when pressure hits, culture will reflect what has been built over time.

And that culture will either strengthen the team — or crush it.

My team and I from Premier Team Building support leaders and teams in

high-pressure environments through leadership coaching and team development designed to strengthen culture, judgement and performance under pressure.

If you're unsure of what your next steps are in leadership and culture, reach out to Australia's Premier Team Building Company and let's start the conversation.

Pip Scott Allen

Director & Lead Facilitator Of Awesome Premier Team Building | 02 4044 5095
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Firefighter practising Transcendental Meditation (TM) in-station. (Image supplied Courtesy DLF US).

Strength Under Stress

Training the nervous system for recovery in Australia's fire services

David Lynch Foundation Australia | Feature for The National Firefighter

The hidden load you don't see on the news

Firefighters face what most people spend their lives trying to avoid. You run toward chaos. You witness trauma up close. You carry responsibility not just for equipment and tactics, but for human lives – including your own crew.

The public sees courage. What it rarely sees is the physiological load that accumulates call after call, year after year: high alert, interrupted sleep, irregular shifts, exposure to trauma, and the quiet expectation to “handle it”.

Across Australia – from busy metropolitan brigades to regional crews and volunteer units responding to bushfires – the pattern is similar: your nervous system is asked to surge into

action, then stand down, then surge again. The activation saves lives. The unfinished recovery costs them.

This feature introduces a practical, evidence-based approach that has been used internationally with first responders and veterans: the Transcendental Meditation® (TM®) technique, delivered in Australia through David Lynch Foundation Australia. This isn't philosophy. It's physiology.

“We lose more firefighters to suicide than to line-of-duty incidents.”

— National Fallen Firefighters Foundation (U.S.), Fire Hero program

Australia's picture: suicide and mental health in the workforce

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) reports that in 2024, 3,307 deaths were classified as suicide, with a crude rate of 12.2 per 100,000 people and an age-standardised rate of 11.8 per

100,000. The ABS also notes that over three-quarters (76.5%) of people who died by suicide were male.

Firefighters and other emergency service personnel are not the only Australians affected by suicide – but their work patterns and exposures place them in a higher-risk occupational context. Australian research examining police and emergency services employees (including fire and rescue) has found elevated rates of psychological distress and probable PTSD compared to the general adult population, alongside measurable levels of suicidal ideation and hazardous alcohol use.

STAT SNAPSHOT (AUSTRALIA)

2024 suicide deaths: 3,307 (preliminary).
Crude suicide rate: 12.2 per 100,000 people.
Age-standardised suicide rate: 11.8 per 100,000 people.
76.5% of people who died by suicide were male.

Sources: Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), *Intentional self-harm (suicide) deaths, 2024 (released 14 Nov 2025)*.

The job runs your stress response — and it doesn't always switch off

Firefighting demands immediate performance under pressure. When the pager goes off, your nervous system does exactly what it's designed to do: adrenaline rises, cortisol spikes, heart rate increases, perception narrows, reflexes sharpen. That response saves lives.

But when activation is constant – and recovery is incomplete – the body never fully resets. Over time, chronic stress exposure can contribute to sleep disruption, irritability, hypervigilance, anxiety and depression, cardiovascular strain, and symptoms consistent with post-traumatic stress.

First responders are not weak. They are over-activated.

The practical question is simple: how do you switch the system off effectively and consistently – in a way that fits real shift work?

What is TM? (and what it is not)

Transcendental Meditation is a simple, standardised mental technique practiced for 20 minutes twice daily while sitting comfortably. It does not involve concentration, visualisation, breath control, monitoring thoughts, or belief systems.

Unlike approaches that train the mind to focus, TM allows the mind to settle naturally to a quieter state while the body enters a level of deep rest. In research settings, TM practice has been associated with reductions in stress physiology and improved autonomic balance – the core “rest-and-recover” systems that firefighting constantly taxes.

Let's be direct: TM is not religion, group therapy, or a breathing technique or a

mindfulness practice. It's taught one-to-one by certified instructors over a short course and then becomes self-sufficient – with follow-up support available.

What the science says — including The Lancet Psychiatry

“A non-trauma-focused-therapy, TM, might be a viable option for decreasing the severity of PTSD symptoms in veterans.”

— Nidich et al., The Lancet Psychiatry (2018), PTSD trial abstract (PubMed)

In 2018, a randomised controlled trial published in The Lancet Psychiatry compared the non-trauma-focused practice of TM with prolonged exposure therapy and health education in veterans with PTSD. The authors reported that TM was significantly non-inferior to prolonged exposure on change in PTSD symptom severity, and concluded that TM may be an efficacious alternative for those who prefer not to receive – or do not respond to – traditional exposure-based treatments.

Veterans are not firefighters, but the operational overlap is obvious: repeated exposure to high-intensity events, sleep disruption, and a nervous system conditioned to stay ready. The value of this research for fire services is not “TM replaces clinical care”. It's that TM is being studied as a structured, non-trauma-focused approach that targets stress physiology – a pathway highly relevant to first responders.

A real-world fire service example: FDNY and recovery support

In the United States, TM has been incorporated within multiple fire service wellbeing initiatives – including FDNY and LAFD – as a practical recovery tool.

Within the FDNY Addiction Transition

Program, the David Lynch Foundation taught TM to 14 firefighters and received follow-up survey responses from 12 (86%) one month after learning. The most compelling findings were clear:

- 92% reported feeling less stressed
- 83% reported sleeping better
- 100% reported TM was helpful with their recovery

These are self-reported outcomes, not clinical endpoints – but they are the outcomes firefighters care about: stress, sleep, and staying functional in recovery.

“I wasn't going to recommend it unless I tried it myself... I slept better at night and felt better during the day.”

— Commissioner Salvatore Cassano (Ret.), FDNY (quote sourced from Resilient Responders program materials)

Why this matters for suicide prevention and substance use

Suicide, substance use and PTSD are not “one problem” – but they often share a common upstream driver: a nervous system locked in threat mode with too little recovery.

Traditional wellbeing advice – exercise, talk to someone, take time off, stay connected – helps. But much of it operates at the level of behaviour. Firefighters already have discipline. What is often missing is a repeatable physiological downshift that can be done regardless of mood, schedule, or appetite for “processing”.

TM is positioned as a complementary tool: it does not replace peer support, counselling, EAP, or clinical treatment. It aims to improve baseline stability so those supports work better – and so the



Firefighters participating in a group TM session. (Image supplied courtesy DLF US.)

body has somewhere to go other than alcohol, isolation, or hypervigilance.

How it fits station life

One of TM's advantages is practicality. It requires no equipment and can be practiced quietly in 20 minutes. Many first responders schedule one session before duty and one after, or before sleep.

Learning involves an introductory session, personal instruction with a certified teacher, and follow-up checks to ensure correct practice. After that, the technique is yours for life.

A note on culture: resilience is recovery, not denial

Firefighting culture is built on competence and reliability. Admitting strain can feel like letting the crew down.

But unmanaged stress does not make you tougher. It narrows capacity, affects decision-making, and bleeds into home life. Resilience is not denial. It is recovery.

Learning TM isn't a sign of fragility. It is a performance tool – no different in principle from strength training, breathing apparatus drills, or tactical simulations. You train the nervous system the way you train the body.

David Lynch Foundation Australia: programs for high-stress roles

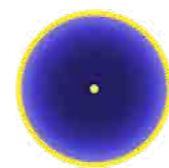
David Lynch Foundation Australia supports TM programs for high-stress and trauma-exposed groups, including first responders. Programs can be delivered individually, within departments, or as part of wellbeing initiatives, including supported scholarship models designed to remove cost barriers.

If you're responsible for crew wellbeing, think of TM as a baseline stabiliser: counselling helps process experience; peer support builds connection; physical training builds strength; TM targets recovery capacity.

In a profession defined by action, the ability to access calm and clarity – reliably, without belief or performance – may be one of the most useful tools a firefighter can carry.

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For more information contact:
Beth Eager Director DLFA
0439 007 108
e: beth@davidlynchfoundation.org.au

David Lynch Foundation Australia Ltd
| Level 5, 65 York Street, Sydney NSW
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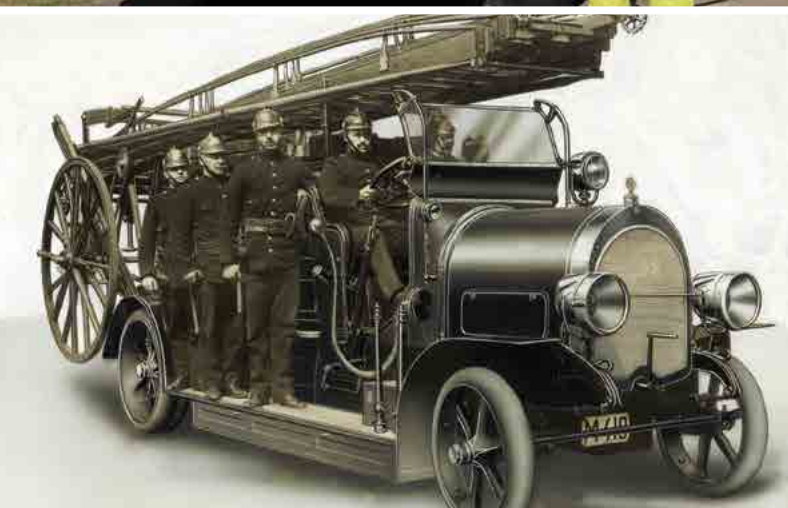
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