

STAYING WELL – PROMOTING WELLBEING AND RESILIENCE

Te Hauora me te manawaroa o te tangata

A guide for
supporting
firefighters



FIRE
EMERGENCY

NEW ZEALAND



Introduction

Incident response can be not only physically tough but also psychologically tough.

People react to critical incidents or personal stress in a variety of different ways. Some may experience distressing feelings or reactions, while others may just feel tired or exhausted.

There's no right or wrong way to think or feel in these kinds of situations, and most people recover over time. However, we also know a small number of you may experience ongoing issues that affect your ability to function at work or socially.

This guide has been developed with practical tips and examples to help support you in stressful situations, and assist you to access specialist assistance, as needed.

You can look after yourself and your colleagues by being proactive in supporting and understanding each other's psychological wellbeing, and resilience. Please find some time to read this guide and remember that more serious health problems can be prevented with early recognition and treatment.



A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Paul McGill".

Paul McGill
National Commander
Urban



A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Kevin O'Connor".

Kevin O'Connor
National Manager
Rural

Contents

This guide is for you	04
Inducting new firefighters	07
Before responding to an incident	09
During an incident	11
After an incident	13
Other initiatives to support firefighters	15
Staying well – Supporting firefighters’ psychological wellbeing and resilience	17
How can you help?	25
Support services and resources available through Fire and Emergency New Zealand	27
External support services	29

This guide is for you

This guide is the result of discussions with firefighters and health professionals about how to protect and support firefighters' psychological wellbeing and resilience.

References to incidents in this guide refer to call-outs that may involve death or serious injury or threaten firefighters' safety, health or wellbeing. However, sometimes even the smallest call-outs can have an impact on a firefighter.

Every person is different, so how firefighters might react to an incident can be difficult to predict. Sometimes they may not be affected at all. Other times they may be affected due to other factors such as the number and type of previous turn-outs they have attended (often referred to as cumulative effect), or things going on in their personal lives.

What we know is that firefighters who are supported respond to, and recover better from exposure to incidents, and show increased levels of psychological wellbeing and resilience.

What's in this guide

This guide provides examples for firefighters to consider and apply as appropriate.

It offers tips and ideas in the following areas:

- › Inducting new members into stations, brigades and volunteer fire forces.
- › Supporting firefighters:
 - before responding to an incident
(at the station or on the way to an incident),
 - during an incident,
 - after an incident.
- › Other initiatives that can be used to support firefighters, such as:
 - supportive discussions or conversations,
 - the M.A.N.E.R.S model of Psychological First Aid,
 - Fire and Emergency New Zealand Critical Incident & Personal Stress Support (CIPSS), and
- › Looking after yourself.

This guide is based on work undertaken by the Country Fire Authority and the Victorian Ambulance Counselling Unit in Australia and is used with their permission. This guide does not override Fire and Emergency New Zealand Standard Operating Procedures or other guides.



Research has shown that the brain performs better during stressful events if it is well prepared and gets small increasing challenges first.

Inducting new firefighters

There are a number of ways you can help new firefighters get prepared for the job and feel supported including:

- › Providing a welcoming environment.
- › Explaining the types of incidents they may encounter, e.g. jobs involving death or serious injury. This may include incidents that involve people they know.
- › Partnering them with experienced crew to build their confidence and skills.
- › Assigning mentors to assist and support them as they get familiar with the station or brigade and their operational roles.
- › Checking in frequently (especially early on in their induction) and informally to see how they are going.
- › Providing a supportive environment where firefighters are encouraged to talk to you if they have any concerns.
- › Letting them know about support services such as peer support, employee assistance programmes and chaplaincy services.
- › Encouraging them to seek support if they need to.



Before responding to an incident

Take steps to minimise risks to firefighters' psychological wellbeing before responding or on the way to an incident:

- › Make sure firefighters are aware that the job may be challenging and even upsetting.
- › Provide information about what they may be exposed to while on the way to the incident (if details are known).
- › Allocate tasks beforehand, either at the station or brigade, or on the way to the incident.
- › Encourage firefighters to speak up if they feel uncomfortable.
- › Provide reassurance and support.



Remind firefighters to talk things through and that peer support can be requested.

During an incident

At the scene, you can do a number of things to support firefighters:

- › Stop, talk about and plan the initial response after size-up.
- › Allocate tasks around the incident scene after making sure firefighters are comfortable with the tasks they've been assigned.
- › Limit firefighters' exposure to the incident scene and rotate members through roles where possible.
- › Check in regularly and ask how they are doing.
- › Give all firefighters worthwhile tasks, including those not in close proximity to the incident scene.
- › Be clear on each firefighter's role and ensure the crew show respect for each other and those involved in the incident.
- › Support firefighters to speak up at any time if they feel out of their depth.



After an incident

A range of measures can be used to support firefighters after responding to incidents:

- › Acknowledge and reinforce what the crew did well and how they contributed to the response.
- › Where possible, provide opportunities for people to wind down, discuss the incident and talk in an informal and supportive way.
- › Keep personal information about an incident within the brigade or station and maintain confidentiality.
- › Access peer support if needed.
- › Remind firefighters of the support available to them.

Other initiatives after an incident:

- › After a long duration or critical incident, consider using brigade members who weren't at the scene to help make up the truck. This gives the returning crew time to wind down and rest.
- › Check up on firefighters the following day, particularly after a critical incident.
- › Watch out for changes in individual firefighters' behaviour and act on any reports or concern.
- › Reflect on incidents and share appropriate information at station or brigade meetings.
- › Encourage firefighters to limit their exposure to any media (including social media) where incident details may be publicised and discussed.



Zealand
**RE
SCUE**
Whakarātonga Iwi

Other initiatives to support firefighters

Other ways to support firefighters and help build camaraderie:

- › Encourage firefighters to look out for each other.
- › Encourage open, honest and genuine discussions around the station and at meetings to build trust. Make time to talk and listen.
- › Encourage experienced firefighters to share appropriate information, knowledge and stories about their experiences and ways of coping.
- › Look out for each other and talk to firefighters who might be struggling, particularly where changes to their 'normal' behaviour are observed.
- › Encourage all firefighters to get involved in events, such as Open Days and fundraising to strengthen team unity.
- › Arrange CIPSS or Peer Support Awareness training at the station or brigade so firefighters know who to call on if they need help.
- › Invite family members along to CIPSS or Peer Support Awareness training so they know how they can assist their loved one and are aware of the support options available.
- › Support firefighters to speak up at any time if they don't feel comfortable attending a traumatic scene.
- › Promote welfare-related activities by selecting a firefighter to oversee tasks such as phone calls to partners for long duration incidents, hospital visits or transport to and from medical appointments where necessary.



Staying well – Supporting firefighters’ psychological wellbeing and resilience

Psychological First Aid

Psychological First Aid is a tool to enable people to stay well after a tough situation. The M.A.N.E.R.S model of Psychological First Aid was first developed by the Victorian Ambulance Counselling Unit to provide support for emergency service personnel.

Here are the six stages recommended to provide support. It does not have to be used prescriptively. One or two stages may be applied initially and another stage or stages when needed. Stages need only to be applied when they are appropriate to meet the needs of the firefighter.

- M** Minimise exposure
- A** Acknowledge the event
- N** Normalise reactions
- E** Educate as required
- R** Review, restore, or refer
- S** Self-care

M

Minimise exposure

Goal

To help minimise stress and anxiety levels and to allow the recovery process to begin.

Actions:

- › As much as possible, minimise a person's exposure to distressing sights and sounds.
- › Introduce yourself and speak calmly to members of the public.
- › Move anyone who appears distressed to a place of calm and safety.
- › Stay with the person or ask someone else to sit with them.

A

Acknowledge the event

Goal

To acknowledge the event to those involved and provide an opportunity to identify anyone experiencing problematic reactions.

Actions:

- › Ask: "That looked like it was a tough job, how are you doing? Do you want to talk about it?"
- › Respect a person may not want to talk about the incident.
- › Listen and be available if a person wants to talk.
- › Keep your acknowledgement and responses genuine and simple.

N

Normalise reactions

Goal

To let the person know that it is normal to respond in a variety of ways following a critical incident.

Actions:

- › Reassure the person that it is the incident that is abnormal, not their reaction to it.
- › Acknowledge the person's feelings without judgement.
- › Allow the person to process the incident in a way that's most comfortable for them (e.g. to talk informally, have a break, connect with crew and family).

E

Educate as required

Goal

To help those involved in an incident understand stress responses and to encourage them to use their existing coping skills.

Actions:

- › Talk about stress responses.
- › Encourage the person to consider how they have dealt with other stressful events in their life.
- › Talk about what helps you manage tough jobs.
- › Gather relevant information from other services at the scene so you can answer questions about an incident.
- › Provide factual information about the incident.

R

Review, restore, or refer

Goal

To review how a person is doing, restore them to their normal duties, or refer them for additional assistance.

Actions:

- › Encourage the person to re-engage in normal activities and duties as soon as possible.
- › Arrange a follow-up phone call the next day (and again later if required) to check how they're doing.
- › Refer and link with peer or other support if required.
- › Monitor the person's wellbeing over time.

S

Self-care

Goal

To encourage all firefighters to be involved in ongoing self-care and to minimise the likelihood of supporters developing secondary trauma.

Actions:

- › Maintain a healthy lifestyle with sleep, exercise, nutrition and work/home life balance.
- › Encourage openness in talking to colleagues, friends and family.
- › Model a healthy lifestyle.
- › Identify your own trigger factors and know when you are most vulnerable.
- › Engage in normal daily activities as much as possible.
- › Access peer support or professional assistance when you need to.
- › Give yourself permission to relax and enjoy doing things on your days off.



How can you help?

- › Talk about the dangers of using alcohol or drugs to cope.
- › Support people to talk about their experiences if they want to.
- › Don't probe for details about incidents to satisfy your own curiosity and don't allow other people to do this.
- › Refer for professional assistance sooner rather than later if a person continues to experience distress.
- › Speak openly to help to reduce stigma, and encourage others to seek help when they need it.
- › If you're worried about someone, the first thing you should do is talk to them. Let them know you're concerned and find out how they'd like to be supported.
- › Opening up about how you feel may be difficult. The sooner a person receives appropriate support, the sooner they can recover.
- › When you talk with a colleague make sure the conversations are sensitive, respectful and confidential.



Support services and resources available through Fire and Emergency New Zealand

- › Your **Region Safety, Health and Wellbeing Advisor**, your manager or a colleague
- › **Welfare Liaison Officer**
- › **Māori Liaison Officer:** your regional Māori liaison officer can assist all staff with tikanga Māori based support services. These services recognise the “Te whare tapawhā” model of holistic wellbeing viz. Physical, Spiritual, Family and Mental wellbeing
- › **Peer Support:** an initial point of contact for support and guidance. Many Peer Supporters are career or volunteer firefighters so they understand the pressures of the job. Peer support can be accessed through COMCEN, the Region Safety, Health and Wellbeing Advisor or by contacting a Peer Supporter directly
- › **Professional health providers** such as general practitioners, counsellors, clinical psychologists and psychiatrists are also available for specific personal support and can be accessed confidentially through your Region Safety, Health and Wellbeing Advisor
- › **Chaplains:** chaplains provide non-denominational pastoral care including spiritual, physical, psychological and emotional care
- › **Employee assistance programmes**
- › The Fire and Emergency New Zealand **Injury and Illness Management Unit (IMU)**
- › **Learning Station**
 - DVD Introduction to CIPSS and M.A.N.E.R.S model
 - Introduction to Critical Incident and Personal Stress Support (CIPSS) Programme
 - Staying Well using the M.A.N.E.R.S model



External support services

› **Alcohol Drug Helpline**

0800 787 797

www.alcoholdrughelp.org.nz

› **EAP Services**

0800 327 669

www.eapservices.co.nz

(Employee Assistance Programme)

› **Depression Helpline**

0800 111 757

www.depression.org.nz

› **Gambling Helpline**

0800 654 655

www.gamblinghelpline.co.nz

› **Healthline**

0800 611 116

www.health.govt.nz/your-health/services-and-support/health-care-services/healthline

› **Kidsline**

0800 54 37 54 (0800 kidsline)

(for young people up to 18 years of age. Open 24/7)

› **Lifeline**

0800 543 354

www.lifeline.org.nz

› **Rural Support Trust**

0800 787 254

www.rural-support.org.nz

› **Samaritans**

0800 726 666

www.samaritans.org.nz

› **Shine**

0508 744 633

www.2shine.org.nz

(confidential domestic abuse helpline)

› **Skylight**

0800 299 100

www.skylight.org.nz

(for support through trauma, loss and grief; 9am - 5pm weekdays)

› **Suicide Crisis Helpline**

0508 828 865

› **Supporting Families in Mental Illness**

0800 732 825

(for families and whānau supporting a loved one who has a mental illness)

› **Women's Refuge Crisis Line**

0800 733 843 (0800 REFUGE)

› **Your family doctor** or General Practitioner (GP)

› **Youthline**

0800 376 633

www.youthline.co.nz

› **Vitae**

0508 664 981

www.vitae.co.nz

(Employee Assistance Programme)

The information provided here is not intended as a substitute for professional medical advice. If you have any concerns about your wellbeing, please refer to a qualified health professional such as a doctor or psychologist.

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