Bushfire trauma preparation and recovery – enabling the emergency services sector

This is a summary of the information and insights presented and discussed in the webinar on 13 November 2020 on bushfire trauma preparation and recovery for leaders of emergency services organisations.

What are the known impacts of disasters?

Research suggests that approximately 75% of Australians will experience a potentially traumatic event at some stage in their lifetime. Typical individual reactions following a traumatic exposure can include feelings of fear, anxiety, sadness, guilt or anger. Trauma-impacted individuals may also experience changes in behaviour, thoughts and physical symptoms such as feeling tense or 'jumpy', as well as sleep and appetite disturbances. In most cases, these symptoms of distress will subside in the days and weeks following the event as people make use of their usual coping strategies and support networks to come to terms with the experience. However, for some, these symptoms persist and develop into posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

There is limited evidence on prevention and early intervention strategies, however, developing mentally healthy communities and workplaces, improving mental health literacy, and promoting individual resilience are strategies endorsed by experts.

How can leaders of emergency service organisations support their teams?

Disasters can create challenges for leaders. You and your team may experience emotional stress, physical injury, grief or disruption of normal routines. At the same time, the team may face new responsibilities — caring for its own members and facilitating community recovery. The following can help leaders, managers, and supervisors structure their response.

- Take care of your people. Locate your team and support them in accessing medical care and other necessities so they can be effective in the workplace. Be flexible with office rules and procedures where possible. For example, dress codes, rules about children in the office, and restrictions on using telephones for personal use, may need to be adjusted after a disaster.

- Take steps to prevent accidents or illness. Exhaustion can mean people forget to take necessary steps to prevent injury and illness. Review the workplace for physical risks recognising that individuals' capacity for attention may be less than usual. Reminders and retraining can be valuable.

- Prevent overwork or exhaustion. After an initial crisis period during which overtime may be necessary, develop procedures to assure that staff and volunteers do not work too many hours without rest. Exhaustion and lack of sleep can decrease alertness, impair judgment, and make people more vulnerable to accidents.

- Attempt to provide adequate staffing. Prior planning and training can make a big difference. Set clear priorities, including identifying work that does need to be completed in the short term. Ensure that no person has an essential task that no one else knows how to do, as that person will likely become overworked.

- Train managers and supervisors to monitor their teams. Ensure that personnel are not working excessive hours, and check for signs of exhaustion. Managers and supervisors should model healthy behaviours and monitor their own tendencies to overwork.

- Encourage and facilitate healthy, safe behaviour. Remind staff and volunteers of the importance of getting adequate sleep and rest, drinking enough water, and taking steps to avoid any potential hazards in their environment.

- To facilitate the recovery process, individuals may need to talk about what they have gone through, understand their reactions, exchange information, and provide one another with support and consolation. The most effective way is to make it easy for people to talk when they feel ready, and not to pressure them to talk about the traumatic situation.

- If you have a mental health service available, such as an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), make that service known and available to the team. Most people will not require extensive individual counselling, but will appreciate information and advice. A few people may need more extensive mental health support. EAPs and local general practitioners (GPs) will be well informed and resourceful about locating professional care for those who need it.

- How leaders and managers behave and communicate during stressful situations can make a significant difference to how people respond and react. It may also influence whether leadership is strengthened or diminished. Communicate clearly and in an optimistic manner, but be sure to identify mistakes clearly for yourself and others and correct them.

What training programs does Phoenix Australia have available for emergency service organisations?

Supported by funding from the *Australian Government under the Mental Health Supports for Bushfire Affected Australians* package, Phoenix Australia is providing training to emergency services personnel:

- **Psychological First Aid** - for emergency service leaders to support their people who have been affected by the bushfires, and to wsupport their own resilience and wellbeing

- **Trauma-Informed Care** - resources and training for emergency service workers and volunteers

What are some self-care strategies for leaders of emergency service organisations?

In disaster and other high stress situations, leaders should remember to use self-care strategies to manage their own stress. In order to take care of others, leaders must also take care of themselves. The following tips can help to reduce the impacts of disasters such as bushfires on mental health and wellbeing.

- It is important to lead by example and demonstrate how to reduce the impact of stress.

- Establish a work-rest schedule for yourself and ensure you follow it.

- If possible, return home to eat and sleep. Drink and eat on a regular schedule — take every opportunity to assure that you are hydrated. Avoid smoking and beverages containing alcohol.

- When you notice that others are stressed, check in with yourself to see whether you are also stressed.

- Identify a trusted colleague who can evaluate your level of effectiveness, and consult with them on a daily basis. Provide a similar service to a colleague who trusts you.

Find out more

To find out more or register your interest for the training visit **www.phoenixaustralia.org/bushfire-recovery**

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