

# CARE 4 GUIDE

**Your guide to positive mental health and wellbeing as a young fire and emergency service volunteer**

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# Welcome to the Care 4 Guide

Care 4 **Self**  
to  
Care 4 others

## Welcome!

Welcome to the **Care 4 Guide**, your guide to positive mental health and **wellbeing** as a young fire and emergency service volunteer.

This guide is based on **research** and it has been designed in **partnership** with young adult fire and emergency service **volunteers** across Australia.



## Who is this for?

This guide has been designed for **you**, a young adult volunteering in fire and emergency service agencies across Australia.

## What is in this guide?

Your mental health is **important**, which is why this guide is focused on skills and strategies that you can use to care for yourself **first**, so you can care for your peers and your community.



## What is in this guide?

This guide contains information on **positive mental health** and wellbeing, strategies for developing mental health **skills**, and checklists so you can check in on yourself regularly. It is only for informational and **educational** purposes and is not therapy or any form of treatment.

## How do I use this guide?

So, what is here? In this guide you'll find information on **mental health**, tips about how to develop self-compassion, ideas for **everyday mindfulness**, different kinds of coping skills, a mental health **check-in** for yourself, and a guide to help you identify the unique **support pathways** around you. There are also links to more resources on the back page of this guide.



## Make this guide your own

You'll notice that some of the pages have spots for you to write in. We encourage you to **screenshot** these pages, mark them up on your phone, and **save them** so you have them on hand when you need them. You can use these pages as they are or edit them to include strategies you find useful too.

You can also **share** with your friends and family, as they can help you look after your mental health.

Everyday  
Mindfulness

Self  
Compassion

Coping  
Skills

Self  
Check-In

# Positive Mental Health & Wellbeing

## What is mental health anyway?

Mental health is about more than just the absence of mental illness. Instead, mental health is a state of wellbeing where a person is able to cope with normal stresses in their lives and function well at work, with friends and family and make a contribution to their community.

Of course, part of mental health is also noticing the signs that you may be experiencing difficulty and getting help when needed.

*"I'm on this weekend course, and you're like, oh wow, I learnt so much. And then you're really on to it for the next month, and you keep those core skills. But it's like with anything, you need to practise and we practice our...technical skills all the time. Maybe we need to practice mental health [skills], or just at least acknowledge it a little bit more."*

*- young volunteer, age 20*

Many experts suggest that wellbeing is built from multiple elements, or building blocks.

Some of these are personal factors, or things you can build, that include:



Some of the skills in this mental health guide have also been linked to wellbeing.

This is why it is important to identify your wellbeing building blocks, develop mental health skills to deal with problems as they arise, and know how to identify signs that you may need to seek help and support for your mental health.

The next pages introduce some skills that can help support your mental health to help you care for yourself so you can care for others

**What are some examples of the building blocks in your life that enhance your sense of wellbeing?**

Five empty rounded rectangular boxes arranged in two rows: two in the top row and three in the bottom row. They are intended for users to write their own examples of wellbeing building blocks.

The next pages introduce some skills that can help support your mental health to help you care for yourself so you can care for others.

# Protecting your mental health

## You have an important role

As volunteers in the fire and emergency services you have an important role to help keep the community safe and well.

Your role may also help you to build **connections** with like-minded others, do things that you enjoy, and give you a sense of giving back to the community. BUT this role also can be stressful and involve difficult experiences.

In fact, people working or volunteering in the fire and/or emergency services are considerably more likely to experience potentially traumatising events, and are also more likely to experience mental health impacts than the general Australian population.

So, it is important to do things to **protect** your mental health!



### Mental health impacts

Those experiences in relation to the fire and emergency service volunteer role that may be associated with risk for mental health impacts include:

- Exposure to incidents or events that involve significant injury or loss of life
- Where there is personal relevance to the incident or event (e.g., a victim is known to you)
- Experiencing an injury yourself during a response to an incident or event
- Experiencing dangerous situations such as becoming trapped yourself when attending an incident or event
- Ongoing exposure to repeated events over time (known as cumulative trauma)

It is normal to be impacted by traumatic or distressing events. Research has shown that the best way to avoid long-term impacts is to discuss your feelings and experiences with someone you trust. If necessary, seek help promptly if you notice changes in your behaviour or feelings or impacts on your relationships with others.

### Reducing the impact

Factors that may help to reduce the impact of potentially traumatising events include:

- Talking with others about your experiences in your emergency services role
- Social support (receiving support AND giving it to others)
- Keeping physically healthy and engaging in physical activity
- Getting enough sleep and eating well
- Engaging with supports and counselling
- Reducing stress in other parts of your life
- Keeping alcohol intake within recommended limits

## Your mental health and wellbeing is important

Volunteering in the fire and emergency services involves developing lots of skills to ensure you can perform the role safely. To be able to function effectively in the role and contribute to your group, unit or brigade, learning and maintaining skills for your mental health and wellbeing is just as important as the operational skills you develop.

Some of the skills to help support mental health, along with tips for how to practice these skills, are included in the next pages of this guide.

***“Those role models that say to you, “It’s OK to speak. It’s OK to not be OK.” I find that that’s a really big thing.”***

***– young volunteer, age 17.***

# Skill Spotlight 1 - Mindfulness

## Mindfulness is more than breathing

Mindfulness is about maintaining a present moment-by-moment awareness of our thoughts, feelings, sensations, and environment, without judgement. Mindfulness has been linked to positive outcomes like better mental health.

Here are a few simple and quick mindfulness exercises that you can do as you go about your day. You don't need to be sitting in silence, or in a particular position to do these mindful activities. You can do them while waiting in a queue, preparing meals, sitting at your desk at work; or just about anywhere. This skill spotlight covers three simple techniques to being more in tune with your body and your mind.

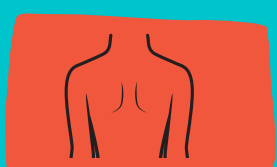
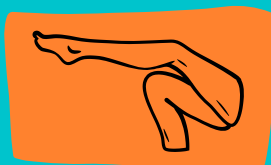
## Scan your body

Body scans are a way for us to pay **mindful attention** to all parts of our body and notice how we feel in the moment. You can do this activity wherever you are standing, sitting or lying down.



Starting from your feet, notice the way they **feel**. Are they touching the ground? Feel the points of contact and pressure that your feet create.

Allow your attention to move upwards to focus on your legs and observe the **sensation** in your legs.



Bring your **awareness** up higher in your body, to your stomach, your chest, and your back. Pay attention to how each part of your body feels.

Notice how your shoulders feel, and notice the sensations in your neck, head, and face. If you notice your **thoughts** wandering, bring your awareness back to your body scan.



Lastly, notice your **breath** as you breathe in and out.

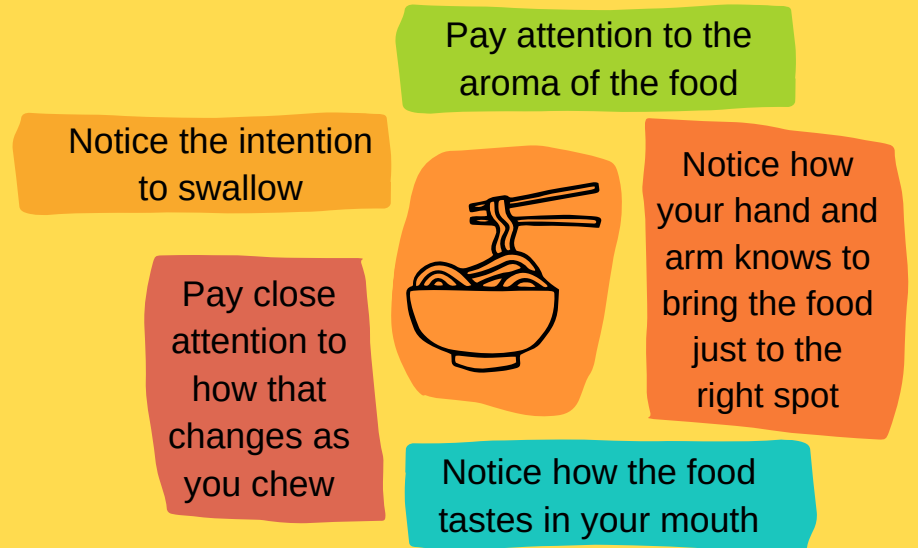
Once you have scanned from your toes to the tip of your head, take a **moment** to notice any differences in how you feel in your body.



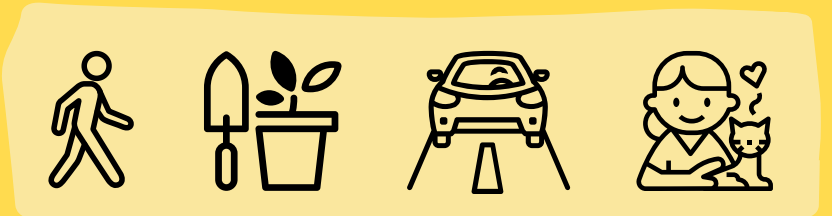
## Everyday mindfulness

Try activities that you do in your everyday life, but do them 'mindfully'. This means to focus on the activity and the sensations, moment to moment, as you do them.

Let's try mindful eating...

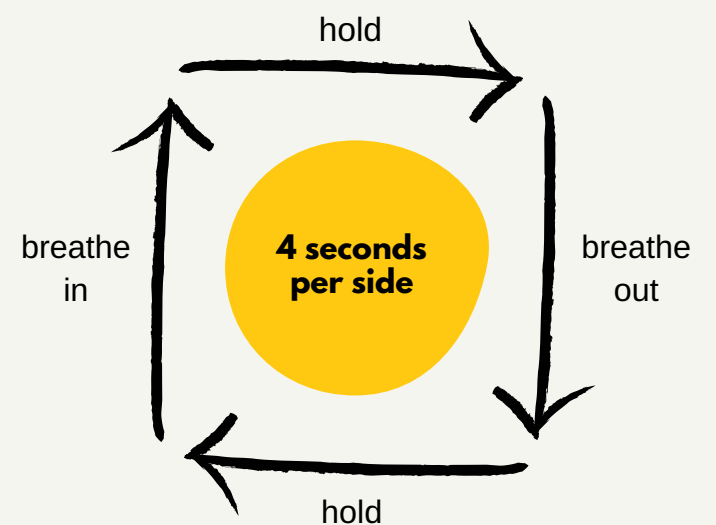


You can do this with lots of different activities in your everyday life, try these!



## Mindful slow breathing

This exercise is something you are already great at – breathing. The aim is to slow and regulate your breathing through **square breathing**. Each side of the square should take four seconds.



Notice the sensations in your chest, stomach, and nostrils as you breathe

# Skill Spotlight 2 - Self Compassion

## Treat yourself as you would treat a friend

Caring for yourself is an important part of helping you care for others in your role as a fire and emergency service volunteer. Practicing care and compassion for yourself helps you to have the emotional resources you need to support and care for others, including in your volunteer role – think of it like putting the oxygen mask on yourself in an aeroplane before helping others.

Research done with fire and emergency service volunteers aged 16-25 years showed that self compassion was connected to higher wellbeing as well as lower levels of psychological distress.

But self compassion is more than just being nice to yourself! An important part of self compassion is practicing skills to help ourselves during difficult times and struggles. In fact, self compassion is itself a skill that can be developed with practice.



## So, what is self compassion?

It has three main components

(NEFF, 2012)



## Try this self compassion check

There are lots of ways to practice self compassion, but one example is to do a brief self compassion check when you notice difficult thoughts or feelings coming up. This takes three steps.



Notice the difficult thought or feeling and that this is a moment of suffering

**THIS HURTS**



Remember that you are not alone in suffering, many people in the world are suffering at any point in time

**I AM NOT ALONE  
IN THIS**



Consider what you can do to express warmth and understanding to yourself in this moment. What would you say to a friend who was struggling?

**WHAT DO I NEED IN THIS  
MOMENT TO TAKE CARE  
OF MYSELF?**

# Skill Spotlight 3 - Coping

## There are many ways to cope

Life sometimes involves difficult situations and problems, especially when you are a fire and emergency service volunteer. During these times your coping skills can help.

To start with, we need to understand the two broad ways people cope. There are all kinds of ways to cope, some healthier than others, but they fall under two broad categories.

**Engaged** coping is actively responding to the problem, along with your thoughts and feelings

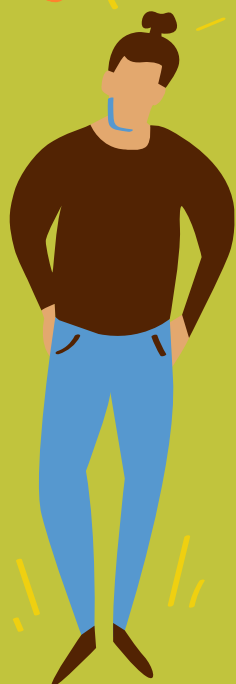


**Disengaged** coping is about avoiding the problem and your emotions

Research shows that engaged coping is linked to higher levels of wellbeing.

Today was tough, I'm going to call my friend and tell them about it

Feelings? What feelings? I'm fine and I don't want to talk about it



Help Alex choose: engage or disengage?

Engaged coping strategies can sometimes involve **confronting** the problem head-on and working towards finding solutions.



Another engaged way to cope is through seeking social support, such as **connecting** with your friends and family.

You can even cope in an engaged way through expressing or **communicating** your emotions, which might involve journaling or peer debriefing.



Disengaged coping involves – you guessed it – avoiding the problem, and sometimes your feelings about it too. Some difficult situations and problems can't be resolved, and negative feelings may arise, this is a normal reaction to a stressful situation. But practicing engaged coping strategies can help you connect with support, express your emotions, and seek solutions when possible.

## Here's how I stay engaged

Fill these boxes out with your own engaging coping strategies.

**Confront**

**Connect**


**Communicate**

# Skill Spotlight 4 - Checking In

## Mental health self check-in

Everyone is different and reacts in different ways, but some of the signs that you might need to seek support are:

- Difficulty sleeping 
- Not wanting to do things you usually enjoy doing
- Avoiding social events and social interactions 
- Distressing thoughts or memories about incidents or experiences coming up
- Feeling teary more often than usual 
- Feeling keyed up or on edge more often than usual
- Feeling irritable or acting in irritable ways 
- Being vigilant or on the look out for reminders of past stressful events

  
**If you have checked off some of these signs, and would like to seek support, please engage with your support pathways**

You can identify the supports available to you and your unique support pathways on the next page

## Stress check pit stop

Take a moment to notice your heart rate, your muscle tension, and your breathing rate:

Do you notice you are tense?



Actively relax your muscles

Heart racing, or breathing fast?



Slow down your breathing with mindful slow breathing

*If I just am sitting at home doing nothing in particular, reading or listening to music and there's that little thought in the back of my head, "What if this? What if that? What if I had done this," or just going back over that again and again and again. That's when I start to say, "Stop, maybe something's not right," and I try to reach out to someone*

*- young volunteer, age 19*



# My Support Pathways

You can fill in this template by screenshotting it on your phone and using the markup function. Or you can print it out, fill it out by hand, and then take a photo of it, so you always have it with you. Share it in your volunteer community and help each other identify your own support pathways.

## My friends and family

Who are your immediate social supports in your family and friends?

## Peers in my unit/group/brigade

Who are your social supports within your volunteer unit, group, brigade?

## People in my community

How about the broader community?

## Leaders in my wider agency

How about leaders and other people in your wider agency?

## Support phone numbers

What about other agency supports, like chaplains and support phone numbers?

## Formal peer support program

How do you access your formal peer support contacts?

## Psychologist / employee assistance

Where can you seek treatment, e.g., with an employee assistance program or a psychologist?

*"We volunteer because we want to do something for others and give back to our communities, but we have to be in a good spot to do that first. Looking after ourselves is what lets us in turn look after others. I read books, listen to music and play video games. They can often help me get perspective or work through things before I put on my uniform again."  
- young volunteer, age 24*

Please share this support pathways document with those that support you (like your family and friends)

# Mental Health Resources

## Support lines and websites

### Headspace Australia

1800 650 890

<https://headspace.org.au/eheadspace/>

Counselling, group support chat, and toolkit for 12-25 year olds.

### Kids Helpline

1800 55 1800 (24/7)

[kidshelpline.com.au](http://kidshelpline.com.au)

Counselling for young people aged 5 to 25.

### Lifeline

13 11 14 (24/7)

[lifeline.org.au](http://lifeline.org.au)

For anyone having a personal crisis.

### Beyond Blue

1300 22 4636 (24/7)

[beyondblue.org.au](http://beyondblue.org.au)

Anyone feeling anxious or depressed.

### MensLine Australia

1300 78 99 78 (24/7)

[mensline.org.au](http://mensline.org.au)

Men with emotional or relationship concerns.

### Suicide Call Back Service

1300 659 467 (24/7)

[suicidecallbackservice.org.au](http://suicidecallbackservice.org.au)

Support for anyone thinking about suicide.

### MindSpot

1800 61 44 34

[mindspot.org.au](http://mindspot.org.au)

Free service for people with stress.

### QLife

1800 184 527

[qlife.org.au](http://qlife.org.au)

Anonymous LGBTIQ+ peer support.

### ReachOut NextStep

<https://au.reachout.com/urgent-help#nextstep>

Personalised support in 3 steps.

### SANE Australia

1800 18 7263

[www.sane.org](http://www.sane.org)

Support for those with mental illness.

## Apps & interactives

### R U Triple OK?

<https://www.ruok.org.au/triple-ok>

Resources and community for police, fire, and emergency service workers and volunteers.

### Smiling Mind app

<https://www.smilingmind.com.au/>

A free mindfulness app for practicing daily meditation.

### MoodMission app

<https://moodmission.com/>

An app for dealing with stress, low moods and anxiety.

### Self-Compassion resources

<https://self-compassion.org>

Guided meditations, exercises, training, and self assessment, by Dr Kristin Neff.

### myCompass web-based tool

<https://www.mycompass.org.au/>

A personalised self-help tool for your mental health, by Black Dog Institute.

### ReachOut Breathe app

<https://au.reachout.com/tools-and-apps/reachout-breathe>

Smartphone app to teach mindful breathing.

Keep track of your favourite resources, links, and apps here

## Useful websites for families and friends of young volunteers

### Are They Triple OK?

<https://www.ruok.org.au/triple-ok>

Resources and community for police, fire, and emergency service workers and volunteers, and their family and friends.

### Headspace Australia

<https://headspace.org.au/friends-and-family/mental-health/>

Information for family and friends to learn about how to support emerging health problems.

### Beyond Blue

<https://www.beyondblue.org.au/the-facts/supporting-someone/>

Information for family and friends supporting someone with a mental health condition.

### ReachOut

<https://parents.au.reachout.com/>

Information about mental health, community forums, and support for parents of young adults.



# References & Acknowledgements

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