

Self-awareness and Resilience: A brief guide to support and promote health and wellbeing amongst first responders

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This guide was prepared by researchers from the Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Research Group at the University of South Australia (Dr Amy Baker, Ms Heather Eaton, Professor Nicholas Procter), Edith Cowan University (Associate Professor Mandy Stanley) and informed by members of the emergency services first responder stakeholder group.

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Introduction

First responders within emergency services do a public service for the community everyday but in doing so, frequently face stressful and traumatic situations. Emergency services first responders are usually the first on scene to respond to incidents that may put themselves or others at risk of death or severe injury, witnessing accidents where death or serious injury cannot be prevented (1), be involved in suicide negotiation (2) and attend suicide deaths (3). Consequently, the mental health of first responders can be greatly affected.

As John, one of the participants in this study shared about his role:

'...you can't pick and choose the jobs you go to. You know you can't say oh it's a suicide... I am not going to it. No, you know your job's your job, and that's what you go to... I can't leave all the dead bodies to someone else.' (John)

Trauma and impacts on mental health can stem from one incident or after many incidents of working in crisis situations. Repeated exposure to trauma and operational stress can lead first responders to experience accumulated stress and trauma, including vicarious trauma (4). Vicarious trauma is the:

'...negative transformation in the helper that results (across time) from empathic engagement with trauma survivors and their traumatic material, combined with a commitment or responsibility to help them' (5).

Challenges can arise from exposure to traumatic incidents as well as other factors often associated with the first responder role, such as shift work and being ready to face unknown stressful situations at any moment. In light of these complex factors, support organisations for first responders have risen to the challenge to fund research into how to best support this population.

The aim of the current project was to better understand the enablers and barriers to help-seeking for mental health concerns among emergency services first responders. As a participatory action research study, the strategies focused on in this project were identified, prioritised and designed in collaboration with first responders, through a process of one-to-one interviews and online focus group discussions.

Development of a resource in the area of self-awareness and resilience, to strengthen mental health and wellbeing, was identified as one priority area to focus on in the online focus group discussions. This choice echoes something that Gary and many other participants shared during the interviews:

'I mean when you break an arm or a leg or something we can repair that but mental health is something that is still, not that openly dealt with within emergency services organisations. We give it a certain amount of lip service, but we don't often walk the walk...' (Gary)

The mental health of first responders is an important issue to society. First responders are at increased risk of mental health concerns for a range of reasons due to the nature of their service to the community. Listening to first responders share their concerns and hearing about their experiences, needs and hopes has been at the core of this research project.

This brief guide has been compiled to assist first responders build self-awareness and strengthen their own resilience. It is important to note that the information in this guide is not a 'one size fits all' nor a tick box exercise and that the ideas are for informational purposes only. The suggestions that follow have come from both first responders who took part in this project and the literature.

Please note, some topics listed may trigger an emotional response. If you experience any distress or discomfort, please seek assistance from a mental health professional, GP, counsellor, psychologist or psychiatrist or any of the supports listed on page 12 of this guide.

Self-awareness

'Self awareness is important because when we have a better understanding of ourselves, we are able to experience ourselves as unique and separate individuals. We are then empowered to make changes and to build on our areas of strength as well as identify areas where we would like to make improvements.' (6)

Becoming self-aware of your strengths and limitations can assist you to respond to stresses, know when to ask for help and apply some strategies to grow in resilience.

Resilience

A resilient person knows their strengths and challenges and when it is time to take care of themselves. People who experience higher levels of resilience and wellbeing tend to proactively look for ways to develop their resilience, increase knowledge and skills about their own needs (7).

How can resilience be built?

First responders tell us that maintaining resilience in a first responder role, requires mental discipline to leave work at work, taking time out to exercise, engaging in hobbies that include your family and keeping things balanced by having a life outside of your job.

The American Psychological Association (8) has a brief and helpful guide to growing in resilience and includes these ideas:

- Make connections
- Nurture a positive view of yourself
- Keep things in perspective
- Maintain a hopeful outlook
- Take care of yourself

<https://www.apa.org/helpcenter/road-resilience.aspx>

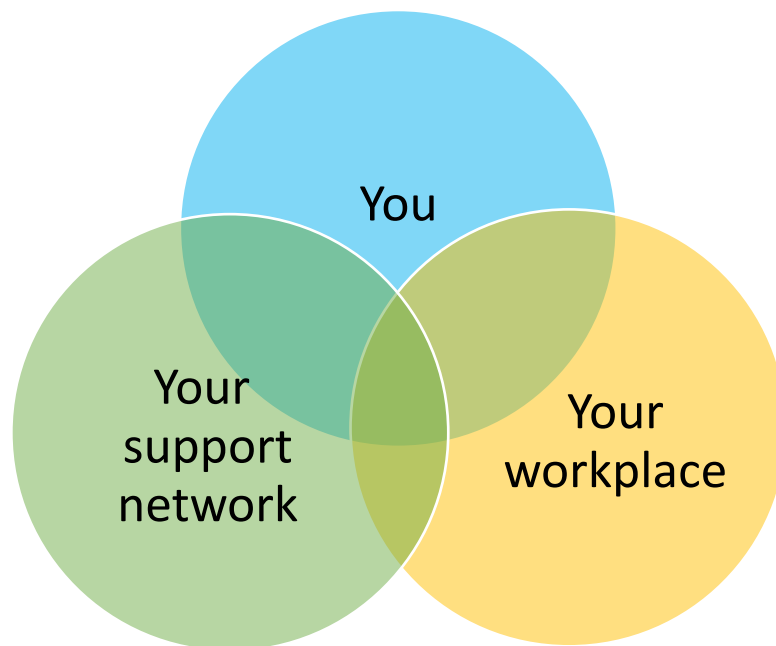
Build a Resilience Toolkit

You can help to grow and maintain resilience by creating a Resilience Toolkit. The toolkit works like a road map to assist you to plan helpful activities, engage with supports and create a personal resilience plan.

Resilience is often described as something that is the sole responsibility of an individual. Support for the first responder is not just about the individual caring for themselves. Research shows clearly that organisational stress is a barrier to resilience for first responders (7, 9).

Both the organisation you work in - through a positive, supportive working environment - and your support network, such as family, friends and others, can greatly contribute to your resilience, as shown in the diagram below.

Diagram 1: Resilience comes from the individual but also needs external support



This diagram also shows that you are *more than* either your job or other aspects of your life. A number of first responders in this project spoke about how closely their identity was connected to their profession, such as Coolbreeze:

'Your identity is actually when you go into work. For me it's when your belt kit goes on so your firearm, cuffs, baton, spray all the stuff that, like the tools for your job. So for me I am a police officer.' (Coolbreeze)

Although identity is often aligned with your career, you are much more than your position at work. Broadening your view of yourself will assist you to keep a balance between all the different areas of your life.

Consider and take stock of the different parts of your life, including your other strengths as a person and your hopes for the future. When something is not going well in one area of your life, try to draw on the other areas.

If you created this diagram for yourself, would you have different or more or less headings? What are the things that are important to you which you could list under each of your headings?

Diagram 2: Take stock of the different areas of your life



Looking at the different aspects of your life is a good starting point to help you design and develop a resilience toolkit.

The diagram below shows some ideas of what you could include in a resilience toolkit. Each of these will be explained in more detail below.

Diagram 3: Examples of what can go in a resilience toolkit



Self-awareness

As described earlier, self-awareness is about understanding yourself - your strengths and limitations - and your preferred ways of coping. This can assist you to respond to stresses, know when to ask for help, including seeking help early:

'...it's realising when stuff is starting to irritate and obviously cause problems what you can do to self-treat, self-manage and then go seek some help so you don't actually end up at that tipping point.' (Coolbreeze)

Some of the ways that you can help build self-awareness include:

- Taking the time to reflect on your strengths as a person, areas you feel less confident with and taking stock of your supports and different aspects of your life. There are many ways of doing this and some include: writing your ideas in a journal or diary, sharing and discussing your thoughts with loved ones;
- Attending training about warning signs for situation-induced trauma and how to assess and monitor your own stress levels that arise from attending critical incidents - some workplaces offer this training but there are external options too;

- Building an awareness of your own coping habits, including recognising ones that are not helpful in the long term and knowing when to seek help.

There are many resources available - such as published books, online interviews, web pages and articles - which contain useful information to help in building self-awareness related to your role as a first responder. Some of these resources can be found in a separate document produced in this project (*Resources and Supports for First Responders*).

Being able to recognise health concerns and seek help is an important part of becoming resilient, as John Peter and Gary explained:

'...we have had a few people... who have gone out and sought help... they are quite brave about it they put their stories out there through our association and everyone gets to read and so... it's slowly becoming a bit more normalised about seeking help... [speaking of one first responder who has shared their story publicly] I think he's demonstrated resilience because yeah, he...self-recognised the problem and [has] gone and sought help.' (John Peter)

'...the main thing is actually getting people to recognise themselves that they are not traveling well and getting them to engage and that's the difficult stage because, a lot of people don't see it like you see it sometimes.' (Gary)

Actively seek help

You can have ownership of your own health and welfare. Choosing your own psychological support worker to find the 'right fit' is important, as John explained:

'...a lot of people don't realise that your GP, if you have got a really good relationship with them, it's the key to getting all the other services. I didn't realise how important it was until obviously it happened to me, so I would say yeah first touch base with your GP...I was in a really bad place and so I've got that trust with [my GP]... I find I can tell her everything and you know yeah just one of those GPs who genuinely cared...' (John)

Health professionals who are the 'right fit' are likely to understand the nature of your job and the unique challenges that you face as a first responder. Together with a suitable health professional, there can be genuine exploration of your needs, reassurance and help in taking the next steps to improve your wellbeing:

'Give me a professor or a doctor or a psychology expert something that knows the steps that you need to take, because we all know it is generally a matter of time and exercise and endorphins and those usual things that we all know about. We just need somebody to help us take those first few steps.' (Samantha)

'...just [someone] to reassure you that it's pretty normal and it's okay, it's okay. You're not weak, you're not going crazy, you're not soft.' (Susan)

For more information on seeking help see the *How to seek help* section at end of this document.

Activities to look after yourself

Plan to engage in activities that bring you a sense of well-being, enjoyment and satisfaction. These can be hobbies, interests, exercise or anything that contributes to your well-being and helps to balance your life, as Gary explained:

'I also like to have other interests because I find that being involved in other things causes me to change my focus, so... I don't dwell on it as much as what I would if I just sat and watch telly all day. So, I tend to be reasonably active...I am a big fan of exercise, I am a big fan hobbies, I am a big fan of having a life outside of the job...things to actually balance your life.' (Gary)

Each day, find some time to do something that is just for you. Set aside time to engage in an activity that is not related to work or a daily errand – something purely for your enjoyment. Noting that every person will have different needs and preferences, here are just a few examples of things you can do to help look after yourself:

- ◆ Listen to music that you love
- ◆ Get outdoors, e.g. bushwalking, camping, walking on the beach
- ◆ Unplug from technology - spend time without your computer or phone
- ◆ Do something physical, e.g. go for a bike-ride
- ◆ Immerse yourself in a crossword or puzzle
- ◆ Spend time in a garden, taking in the smells, sights and sounds
- ◆ Go to an art gallery, museum or somewhere that brings you joy
- ◆ Watch the stars, clouds, sunrise or sunset
- ◆ Read a good book
- ◆ Go for lunch with a good friend
- ◆ Develop a relaxing bedtime routine
- ◆ Go for a massage or facial
- ◆ Prepare a meal or bake something
- ◆ Have a hot shower or warm bath
- ◆ Learn and try mindfulness techniques
- ◆ Take a nap or sleep in on your day off
- ◆ Try out a new hobby
- ◆ Make and enjoy a cup of tea or coffee
- ◆ Spend time with a pet or loved one
- ◆ Stretch your body

Finding the right strategies for you is important, as is being compassionate towards yourself. As John Peter suggested, being compassionate to yourself is a key step in being able to assist others:

'...if you are compassionate towards yourself you are going to be compassionate towards your peers you are going to be compassionate towards other people around you and then that will filter on.' (John Peter)

Develop and maintain a support network

A broad support network will give you options to reach out for support as needed. Many people who are struggling reduce or disengage from their usual supports for various reasons. By developing a support network, you can choose to engage with people as needed and still be in control of what support you are tapping into.

Supports can come from many places. Some examples include family, friends, trusted colleagues and the wider community. As Lily pointed out, often close colleagues can be a great source of support:

'You know so often I think my coping mechanisms have been with working partners that I feel comfortable talking to and vice versa...I would say, number one would be colleagues.' (Lily)

Darren and others also spoke about the importance of support from team members, as well as having a wider support network such as family and friends:

'I have got my own support network, which is really important and I think from experience a lot of first responders do and sometimes that's your immediate team which is always the first place. Outside of that it will be family and a close network of friends both inside and outside the job...' (Darren)

Support for family

Family members and close friends can be a critical part of the support network for many first responders. However, there is still a lot to be done to support those who are closest to first responders, to support their health and wellbeing too, as Darren recognised:

'There almost needs to be support the families of first responders or an awareness that that support is available, from each service. We do it a little bit, we don't do it at a training level and we don't do enough. If you look at the divorce of police, fire and ambos that's sky high and it's because of what they take home.' (Darren)

Family members may find it helpful to connect with other first responder family members for support or attend training and education sessions to increase understanding about the challenges they and their first responder loved ones may face. In doing so, family members can seek out information and connections to help build their own wellbeing and resilience. As a first responder, there are things you can also do to help support your relationship with loved ones. Identifying a time, place or ritual to help you to leave work at work, ready to be fully present at home is one strategy that may help, which Gary described as helpful:

'I have got a process when I go to work I walk to work and I walk home, and I have got a bit of a marker on the way home where I package my day and when I get home, I've packaged it so I try not to dwell on things like that, so I use sort of mind techniques if you like to package my day...' (Gary)

Contribute to a supportive workplace

Although we may not feel we can influence others in the organisation we work within, there are some small steps that can be taken to help build your own resilience and contribute to a more resilient workplace, including:

- Identify those around you who you feel are supportive and who you can trust:

'As a colleague or a supervisor, if you can pick a quiet moment that's discreet you can often talk to people about, you know, how they are travelling or how they are feeling about some of those issues.' (Gary)

'...if you had that relationship and you trusted people you could talk to them...you would have to really trust your supervisor. That supervisor or manager would have to have that reputation of integrity and confidentiality.' (John Peter)

Be aware that colleagues may have their own challenges, and try and offer them support as needed too. Encouraging confidentiality and support among your team mates can start with a question, showing that you are listening or on a wider level, team debriefs which can be formal or informal:

'...support on a team mate level, because you're the person that you sit in the car with them for 8 hours a day, you're the one that says "Dude is everything alright at home?" Or, "you've told me this exact same story 25 times and it only quarter past eight. What are doing about it? How can we move forward from this? For my benefit and for yours"' (Rebecca)

'... the first step is a team debrief if we have had a particularly rough week you will sit there at the end of the week and you know have an hour or more usually after shift with a barbie or a meal or a cold drink, not necessarily alcoholic these days, which is good. We will just talk and destress and debrief.' (Darren)

- Attend communication training to help build empathetic communication in the workplace.
- Importantly, managers and supervisors play a critical role in creating a safe and supportive environment:

'Managers need to be more attuned and supervisors need to be more attuned and stamp down effectively on workplace bullying...managers need to see that and say "yeah that's not helpful, that hurts", that's why people don't step up. Managers need to crack down on that really hard, really quick and make sure that that kind of belittling behaviour, the sniggering just gets stamped on as absolutely unacceptable because that's what stops people from coming forward [for help], that sense of shame is if I speak up that's what going to happen to me.' (John Peter)

Have a personal resilience plan

‘...it’s me [thinking] I’m not going to let this beat me, what can I do?’ (Coolbreeze)

Having a personal resilience plan can be a helpful tool to remind you of strategies that can be used as needed. This can be created with a partner, close friend or health professional. It is good to keep this plan somewhere where you can easily access it. This plan can be updated as needed. You may not want to include all of these categories - choose the ones that work for you. As part of your resilience plan, list activities or supports which will encourage positive action and give you a plan of action to follow as needed.

	Explanation	Current strategy	Longer term strategy
Strategy (colleagues)	A strategy with your trusted colleagues - this could be something you do together or a way you could help a colleague.		
Strategy (personal)	A personal strategy is something you could do to care for yourself that includes anything you do personally i.e. music, physical exercise, beach walk, warm bath etc.		
Strategy (family)	A family strategy is something you could do with a family member or a close friend, e.g. have lunch together, go to a movie together, walk together etc.		
Strategy (community)	A community strategy is something you could do in the wider community that would contribute to your wellbeing, e.g. sport, hobby, volunteering etc.		
Strategy (organisation)	An organisational strategy is something you could take up from any of the services offered by your organisation.		
Strategy (health professional)	A strategy involving a health professional - this could be, e.g. GP, counsellor or allied health such as occupational therapists or physiotherapist.		
Other	This is for any other strategies not already covered above.		

How do I know if and when I need help?

There are many resources to help with knowing when it might be time to seek further assistance. Some of these can be found in the additional *Resource and Supports for First Responders* document. When in doubt, speak to a health professional.

How to seek help

Each person will seek help in way that is suitable for them. Some people like face-to-face support whereas others prefer the anonymity of phone, texting, online chat or email options. The availability of out of hours assistance is something that is needed for first responders due to the nature of the shift work they are often required to do.

Below are some support options should you need to contact someone for assistance:

- Lifeline Australia – 13 11 14 or <https://www.lifeline.org.au/> (available 24/7);
- Suicide Call Back Service – 1300 659 467 or www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au (available 24/7);
- Beyondblue – 1300 22 4636 <http://www.beyondblue.org.au/> (available 24/7);
- MensLine Australia – 1300 78 99 78 or <https://www.mensline.org.au/> (available 24/7);
- Mental Health Triage – 13 14 65 (available 24/7); or
- Your local GP.

'The help is there...you are supported by your peers and...

there is no shame in going for help...' (John)

References

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