

# Supporting yourself and others after traumatic events

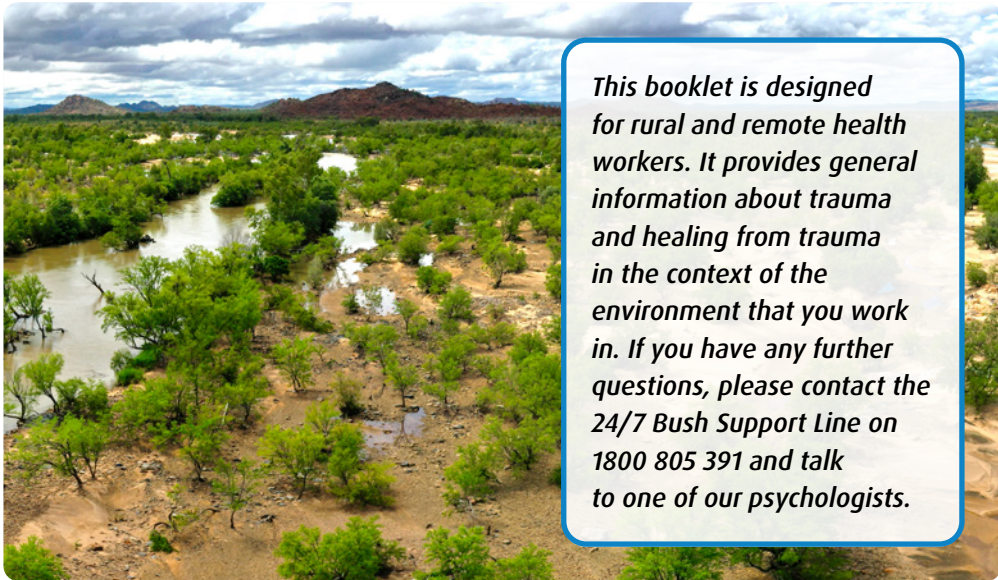
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A guide for rural and  
remote health workers

CRANA

improving  
remote  
health

plus



*This booklet is designed for rural and remote health workers. It provides general information about trauma and healing from trauma in the context of the environment that you work in. If you have any further questions, please contact the 24/7 Bush Support Line on 1800 805 391 and talk to one of our psychologists.*

## Rural and remote health workers are at high risk of experiencing a traumatic event

Traumatic events are common, with up to 70% of the general population likely to experience a traumatic event in their lifetime.<sup>1</sup> As a rural and remote health worker, it is even more likely you will be exposed to a potentially traumatic event. For example, people living in rural and remote areas are three times more likely to die because of a vehicle-related injury than in the city.<sup>2</sup> These accidents can be challenging, as the caring connection that health workers establish with patients is amplified by health workers possibly having long-standing or close connections with members of their community, as friends, family members or colleagues. That connection is often one of the more rewarding aspects of the job, but it is undeniable that you, as a health worker, will be at the front line during traumatic events.

*“As a remote nurse, I thought I needed to ‘just get on with the job’ and ignore my feelings and reactions to these traumatic events. It seemed to be what everyone else was doing. But after a while, I realised I needed to give myself time to process these events and be a bit more compassionate on myself”.*

## Understanding trauma

“There are moments in life that test us. They challenge our understanding of the world and our sense of safety.”<sup>3</sup> Any event involving actual harm or perceived threats to a person’s physical safety, or those around them, has the potential to be traumatic.<sup>4</sup>

Trauma is a person’s emotional response to a distressing experience. Potentially traumatic events can be thought of as those events that are upsetting and intrude into daily life. They are usually experiences that pose a significant threat to a person’s physical or psychological wellbeing and are often sudden or unpredictable.

**Complex Trauma** is a term that refers to trauma that occurs repeatedly over time, has a cumulative effect and is often associated with childhood trauma and abuse. Complex trauma particularly applies to front-line workers in emergency response or human services who are exposed to working in complex, challenging and/or unsafe environments.

**Vicarious Trauma** refers to the indirect, repeated and ongoing exposure to other people’s trauma combined with a responsibility or commitment to help them. For example, listening empathetically to people’s stories about their trauma, such as disclosures from patients or clients about abuse.

**Whilst it is helpful to know about these other forms of trauma, this booklet, when referencing ‘trauma’, refers to trauma resulting from direct exposure to a single event or multiple occurrences of a similar or different nature.**

**Direct Exposure** to traumatic events in the rural and remote health context could include:



Experiencing or being the first responder to serious accidents, physical or sexual assault or abuse.



Exposure to people who are seriously injured.



Repeated or unexpected exposure to a deceased person.



Witnessing or hearing about events occurring to colleagues, friends or their family members.



Threats or actual harm to the personal safety of self or loved ones.



## What am I experiencing?

Experiencing some level of psychological distress following exposure to a traumatic event can be considered a normal response to abnormal events. However, not everyone exposed to the same event will be emotionally affected in the same way, and not everyone will have long-lasting effects. Therefore, it is important to focus on how an individual experiences an event and its impact on them.

### Common responses to trauma can include:

- Feeling anxious, scared, irritable, angry, sad, guilty or numb.
- Experiencing denial – behaving as though it hasn't happened.
- Changes to sleep patterns and/or eating behaviours.
- Having nightmares or intrusive thoughts about the event.
- Having difficulty trusting people.
- Believing the world is dangerous and/or seeing danger everywhere.
- Blaming yourself for the trauma and thinking you should have handled things differently.
- Criticising yourself for your reactions post-event and seeing yourself as weak.
- Constantly being on guard and having a heightened startle response (hypervigilance).
- Experiencing poor memory, concentration or difficulty making decisions.
- Avoiding situations, people or places that remind you of the event or trying not to think about it.
- Lack of interest and pleasure in what you usually enjoy (anhedonia).
- Not engaging in your usual regular behaviours as you did before the event, e.g., showering less often, walking the dog, calling your partner daily.



You will likely find yourself trying to make sense of what happened and may do this by:



Questioning why the event occurred,



How and why you were involved,



Why you feel like you do,



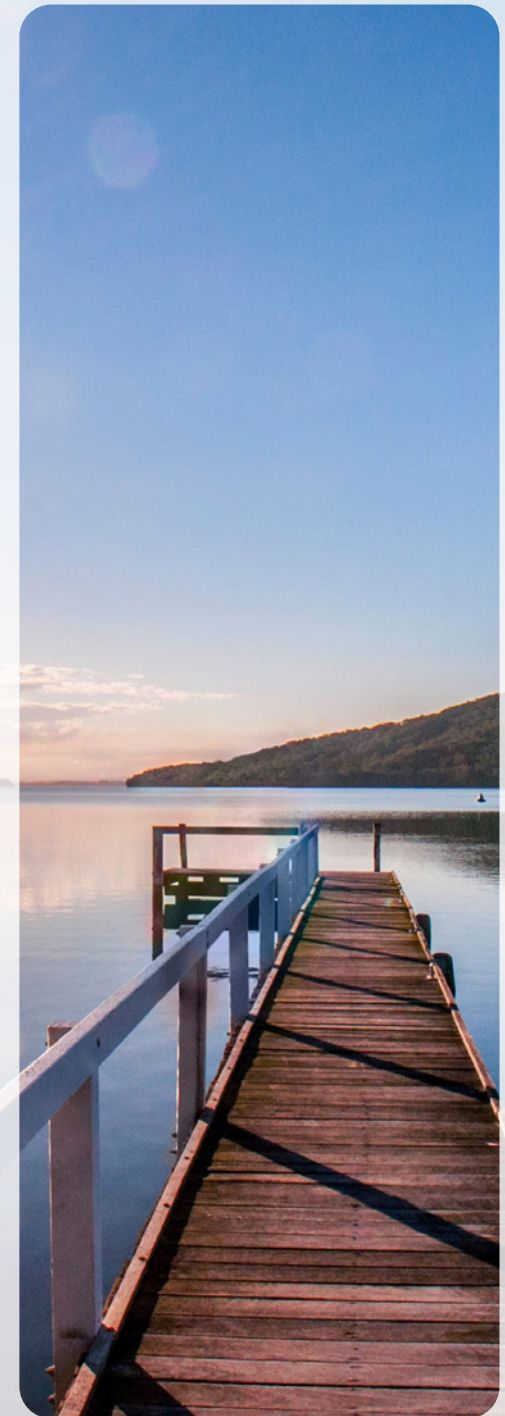
If this is indicative of the kind of person you are and



Challenging your outlook on the world.

The above are just some of the common responses to trauma. Be assured this is just your mind and body's way of processing what happened.

*"I found I couldn't sleep, couldn't focus, and I started worrying about the level of care I could give my patients".*





## Healing from trauma

Most people find their emotional distress settles within a few days to a few weeks following the event with the support of friends, family and colleagues. Through our internal and external strengths, coping strategies, resilience, and supports, most of us will find any psychological stress or distress experienced in relation to the traumatic event will resolve over the coming weeks.

***All too frequently, health workers normalise their traumatic experiences and see them as a normal part of living and working in rural or remote environments. This normalisation invalidates the experience, is an unhealthy coping strategy and can negatively impact the healing journey.***

To encourage your healing journey, here are some strategies to support yourself and others in your journey over the weeks ahead:

- Don't try to normalise your experience of an abnormal event. Acknowledge that you have been through an extremely stressful event and the distress it is causing.
- Attend to your basic needs, and solve any problems that require immediate attention.
- Don't throw yourself into work or activities to avoid painful thoughts or feelings, however;
- Return to your routine as soon as you're able, ensuring you take it easy.
- Permit yourself to feel terrible whilst remembering your strengths.
- Rest, using whatever strategies work specifically for you.
- Eat regular, balanced meals and move your body. Looking after your physical health helps your mental health and vice versa.
- Cut back on tea, coffee, soft drinks, chocolate and cigarettes (in fact, any stimulants).
- Try to avoid any drugs and manage your alcohol intake, as these can exacerbate existing challenges.
- Tap into those self-care strategies that have worked for you in the past, such as mindful meditation, walking, or catching up with friends.

***"What helped start the healing was acknowledging and accepting what had happened and showing myself compassion given what I had been through".***



## Supporting others towards healing

It can be challenging to know how to support colleagues or friends when they have experienced trauma, and it's normal to want to 'fix' the problem or take away their distress. Just being present for support can make them feel less alone. It is also important to remember that although you may have experienced the same event as a colleague or friend, people's reactions to the same event can be very different, and we need to allow for that.



## Supporting colleagues or friends

- Reassure the person that their reactions are normal.
- Be there. Make time to be with that person and make it obvious you are available and there to listen.
- Listen to them, and don't take things to heart should they act out of character.
- Ask them how you can support them; don't make assumptions.
- Support with problem-solving and decision-making.
- Offer practical help, such as making meals or cleaning up.
- Advise them not to make big decisions at this time as their judgement may not be at its best.
- Bring additional support on board if necessary, i.e. if they are experiencing suicidal ideation or behaviour.



***"I found talking about the incident with people who understood or shared the experience really helpful".***



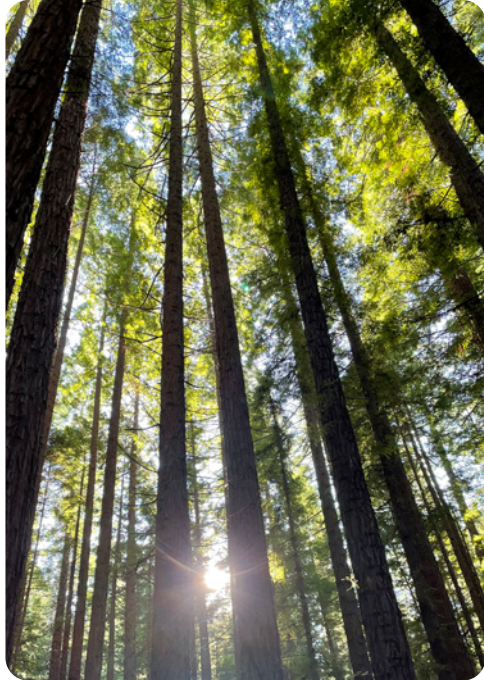
## Supporting your workplace

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Some research has found that critical incident debriefing after an event can be unhelpful or even harmful.<sup>5</sup> However, studies have found that employees should feel supported after an incident and know that management and the organisation care about them.

### Ways in which the workplace can support employees include:

- Be mindful of how trauma can affect individuals differently and respond with compassion.



- Acknowledge what has happened and that these are normal reactions to an abnormal event.
- Create or advocate for opportunities for employees to talk about their feelings or needs should they wish to. Individuals can choose to talk and debrief with friends, colleagues, or management, but if someone does not wish to talk about it afterwards, that's okay too.
- If they do wish to talk to you, listen with compassion and give them a safe place to talk and process.
- Ask each person individually how you can best support them.
- Promote the availability of other supports and resources, such as the CRANaplus Bush Support Line, GP, Employee Assistance Programs (see *Other helpful resources* section) and organisational leave policies etc.
- Encourage taking a break from work if necessary, even if it's for half an hour, to promote self-care and wellbeing.
- Check in with people regularly, be aware of signs of distress or changes in behaviour and help them to seek appropriate support.

*"I plan breaks, so I know when I'll have downtime and something to look forward to".*

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Ensure you know, and acknowledge, the complexities of experiencing trauma in rural or remote communities. For example, team members may feel unsafe either at work or home as the perpetrator or their family may live in the same community. Support the person to feel safe in a way they need right now. Make reasonable adjustments, where practicable, such as flexible working hours or increasing clinical supervision sessions whilst required.

Around four weeks after the incident, when people have had a chance to process the event, a reflective practice session for the team may provide an opportunity to share insights and learnings, as well as an emotionally supportive element. This must be done with the agreement of everyone, including those who wish to be excused. Let people know this is an option, and ensure you follow through if people are agreeable.

The goal is to make staff feel safe, heard and supported in their work environment. Nurture a culture that is compassionate, responsive and supportive of each other's mental health. It's important to remember that what the person is experiencing is not permanent, and recovery is likely with the proper support. Be your authentic self when having the conversation, and advocate for the needs of your team.



*"Spending time with family and friends, just being 'me' without work pressures, allowed me to truly relax and start healing".*

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## When to reach out for professional support

For some, the effects of this trauma may be longer-lasting. It is estimated that around 5-10% of Australians who experience a traumatic event will go on to develop post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>6</sup> The encouraging news is that there are evidence-based interventions available to help. Getting professional guidance and support as soon as possible can help prevent symptoms from getting worse and help you on the road to recovery.

### So if you find yourself experiencing any of the following:

- Feeling very distressed after the event,
- Feeling like you're not coping with the intense feelings or physical sensations,
- Feeling that things aren't getting back to normal after three to four weeks,
- Continuing to have physical symptoms or disturbed sleep,
- Deliberately avoiding anything that reminds you of the event,
- Finding that relationships with family and friends are suffering,
- Using more alcohol or drugs,
- Becoming more accident-prone,
- Unable to manage responsibilities or return to work,
- Having no one to share your feelings or concerns with,

You can contact the **free 24/7 CRANApplus Bush Support Line on 1800 805 391** and chat with one of our psychologists who can help you to navigate finding the most appropriate support. You can also talk to your GP about what you have been experiencing so they can discuss the options available, for example, if you are eligible for a Mental Health Treatment Plan.

Many mental health professionals now offer telehealth appointments that can be done virtually, so you're not limited to seeing someone in your geographical location, if someone is even available locally.

***"Talking to a professional really helped. They made me realise what I was going through was normal and gave me hope things would get better".***



## Other helpful resources

Below are just a few resources available on the CRANApplus website that you may find helpful. It's also a good idea to ask around your support networks, such as family, colleagues and local services, to see if they have any suggestions:

- **Wellbeing for the Bush: A Guide for Health Workers**  
This booklet provides information on a range of topics to support your wellbeing, including managing stress and self-care, workplace relationships, communication, sleep, living and working remotely, and trauma.
- **Mindfulness Techniques**  
Take a moment for you. Discover a simple exercise to help bring you into the present moment.
- **Self-Care Planner**  
Access a digital or printable planner to help identify signs of stress and plan strategies to help you manage stress or emotions.

[crana.org.au/wellbeingresources](https://crana.org.au/wellbeingresources)

For more information on understanding trauma, visit Phoenix Australia, the National Centre of Excellence in Posttraumatic Mental Health [www.phoenixaustralia.org](https://www.phoenixaustralia.org).



### References

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*Many of the images shared throughout this  
booklet are entries from the 2023 CRANApus  
Mindful Photography Competition.*

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