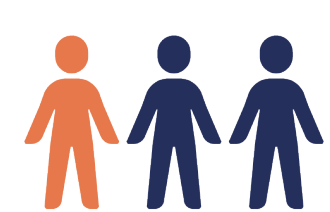


Supporting the personal impact of frontline disaster response on Australia's first responders

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Australia's first responders are the cornerstone of our nation's disaster response, answering the call – often at immense personal cost – to protect communities in times of crisis. But these extraordinary humans face their own challenges. As natural disasters become more frequent and severe, the men and women who make up this vital frontline workforce are increasingly pushed to their limits, experiencing rising levels of exhaustion, burnout, and psychological distress.



1 in 3 first responders, both paid and volunteer, experience high psychological distress. When compared to the general adult population, they face higher rates of:

- mental health diagnoses
- PTSD
- suicidal thinking and planning.



Families are also affected by their loved one's work and mental health issues.

Meanwhile, our paid and volunteer agencies face increasing challenges around resourcing, recruitment and retention. These workforce shortages places additional operational pressure on the remaining first responders, who are already managing extended deployments, highly complex disaster conditions, and frequent exposure to traumatic events. This also places an increased burden on leaders to not only ensure the wellbeing of their workforce, but their own resilience as well.



The need for independent early intervention and preventative mental health practices

- ➔ First responders face trauma during both disasters and routine duties.
- ➔ While agencies provide support, many first responders are reluctant to use internal services.
- ➔ While many first responders recognise trauma in others, they often don't recognise their own distress.
- ➔ Cost and waiting times are barriers to seeking private support, while there may be a sense that general community services may not fully understand the nature of the challenges of first responder work.

Early intervention plays an important role in reducing the impact of mental health issues on both organisations and individuals as well as their families. Early intervention helps to:

- improve diagnosis and treatment
- prevent or reduce the progress of a mental illness
- improve confidence in support services available, and therefore engagement
- build tools for individual resilience and wellbeing
- improve retention of staff and valuable knowledge, skills and abilities.



Fortem's impact

Since 2019 Fortem has:



supported over **20,000** individual first responders and family members



hosted **3,800** social connection wellbeing activities



provided career management services to **1,800** first responders



opened a dedicated **wellbeing hub** in WA for first responders and their families



held **9,000** psychological and counselling sessions



expanded its outreach program to support more first responders and their families in **regional and remote Australia**.

Sources

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2015), *National Health Survey: First results, 2014-15*.
Beyond Blue Ltd (2018), *Answering the Call: National survey, National Mental Health and Wellbeing Study of Police and Emergency Services*.
The Royal Melbourne Hospital (2012), *5 Ways to Wellbeing*.



More than just nice to have: why is social connection important?

The research is clear that there are measurable and strong benefits to programs that are preventative and that include socially connecting activities. These programs play a crucial role in supporting the wellbeing of individuals across Australia, particularly first responders and volunteer groups in regional and remote areas.

Social connection activities benefit first responders and their families by working towards reducing stigma of mental health issues, connecting communities – even in remote and rural areas, increasing opportunities to understand and access services

available, and offer opportunities for first responders to recognise and respond to early warning signs of mental ill health. They can also be pivotal in preventing suicide and bolstering levels of resilience.

An emerging concept, social prescribing, a healthcare approach that enables professionals like GPs, nurses and social workers to refer individuals to non-medical, community-based services aimed at enhancing health and wellbeing, further acknowledges that factors like loneliness, stress and financial difficulties significantly impact health, and these challenges often cannot be addressed through medication or psychological interventions alone.

Connection activities plus mental health literacy is a key formula in the success of Fortem Australia.

89% of respondents felt that the activity they participated in benefited their health and wellbeing.

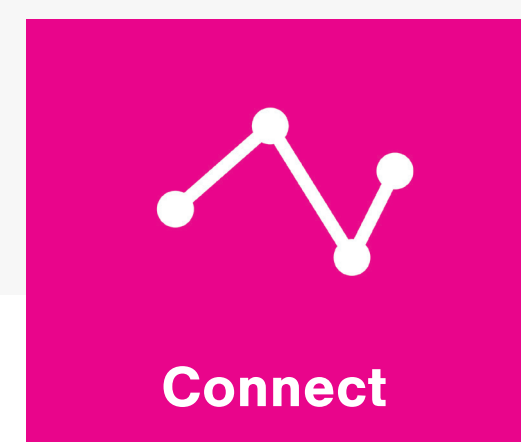
93% of respondents reported the wellbeing activity they attended improved their awareness of their own mental health and wellbeing.

64% of respondents felt that the activity they participated in strengthened their social network.



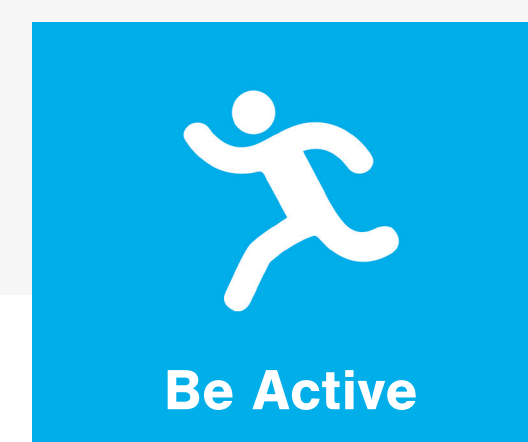
5 Ways to Wellbeing

All Fortem activities are underpinned by the 5 Ways to Wellbeing framework, delivered in collaboration with the Royal Melbourne Hospital.



Connect

Connection is why we are here. It is what gives us purpose and meaning in our lives.



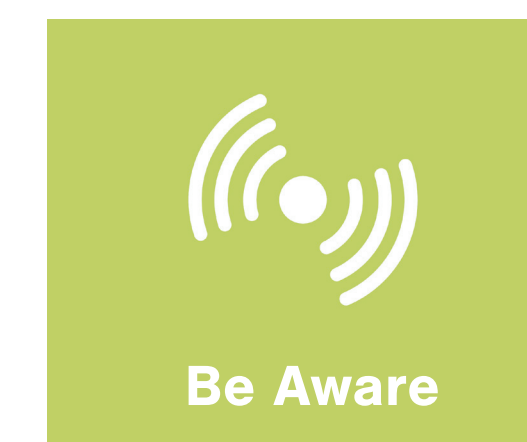
Be Active

Being active is important for good health to help keep your mind and body working well.



Keep Learning

Trying new things will make you more confident and give you a sense of achievement.



Be Aware

Finding time to notice how you are and what is right with yourself and your life, boosts your wellbeing.



Help Others

Even the smallest act can make you happier, whether it's a smile, a "thank you" or a kind word.



Conclusion

As more responsibilities for disaster resilience fall on fewer individuals, the risk of burnout, psychological distress, and physical exhaustion increases, further threatening the resilience of our national disaster response framework. Ensuring the wellbeing and retention of these critical responders has never been more urgent.

Addressing these complex needs requires an integrated approach that includes proactive mental health support, community engagement, and career transition resources, ensuring frontline responders remain resilient and committed.

Early intervention and preventative mental health practices delivered by independent organisations provide low-threat support systems that encourage our first responders to seek assistance before it's too late, while also supporting the family unit. This helps to strengthen the wellbeing and resilience of our first responders, therefore strengthening the resilience and capability of those agencies to better respond to natural disasters.

Dash, S., McNamara, S., de Courten, M., & Calder, R. (2023). *Social prescribing for suicide prevention: Policy Evidence Brief*.
Hilbrink, D (2022), 'The role of social connectedness in protecting first responder mental health and wellbeing', *Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, no. 37 (4), pp. 65–68.

