

Dealing with exposure to trauma



NEW ZEALAND
SEARCH
AND
RESCUE

TRAUMA

If you are involved in search and rescue operations (SAROPs) there is the potential you may be exposed to traumatic events. The SAROPs you respond to can be traumatic themselves, and the nature of the search along with tasking pressures and situational urgency can also have a big impact on your mental health.

We all have times when we feel sad or stressed or find it difficult to cope. Trauma is more than feeling a little bit down. In general, trauma can be defined as a psychological, emotional response to an event or an experience that is deeply distressing or disturbing. It can lead to impacts on you, your family and friends and on your search and rescue colleagues.

The signs of trauma can include headaches, tiredness (persistent) or an upset stomach. You may also experience the following:

- Sweating or hot flushes
- Difficulty sleeping
- Nausea
- Pins and needles
- Tense muscles and headaches
- Feeling tense, nervous or on edge
- Fearing the worst
- Feeling numb
- Feeling irritable and argumentative
- Dwelling on negative experiences or thinking over a situation again and again
- Unable to concentrate
- Being more forgetful than normal

CAUSES OF TRAUMA

In search and rescue activity the following can lead to trauma:

- **Repeated exposure to traumatic events (physically and emotionally)**
 - Major incidents
 - A recovery operation
 - Suicide or violent death
 - Assault or threat to your own or others safety
 - Emotionally charged SAROPs
 - SAROPs involving someone you know
- **High pressure environments (need to work fast, urgency, life threatening, physically and emotionally challenging)**
- **Long working hours**
- **Shift work or work in non-usual work hours**

These causes can be exacerbated by personal factors too:

- **Suffering loss of a loved one**
- **Experience loneliness**
- **Relationship problems**
- **Worried about money**
- **Sometimes we can just feel down**

The impact of trauma might appear immediately after the event, or not appear until some time after the event. It is different for everyone

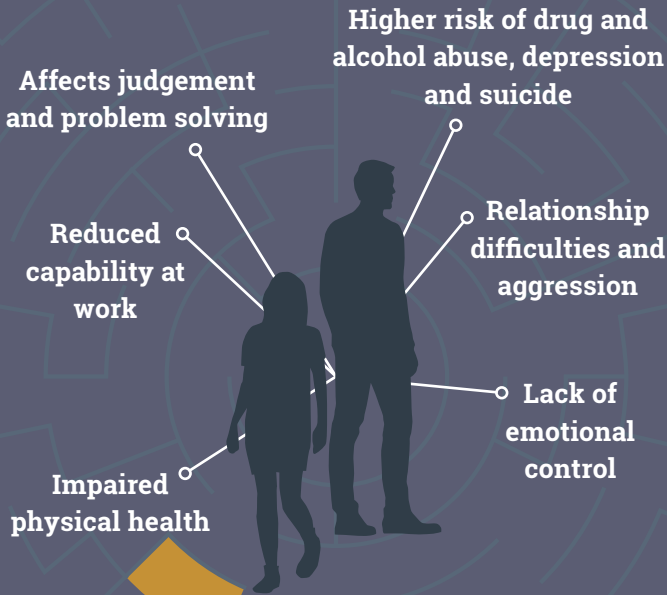
If you're not sure you're experiencing a reaction to trauma it's good to talk to someone.

SEARCH AND RESCUE VOLUNTEERS CAN BE AT GREATER RISK OF TRAUMA

In search and rescue activities, there can be an incorrect belief that those doing the searching and rescuing have to be mentally strong and heroic and cannot be seen to be impacted physically or mentally by the search and rescue/recovery. The unique challenges of working in search and rescue can be difficult to talk about – and this can also make you feel isolated from family and friends and others.

By looking after your own mental wellbeing you will be in the best position and health to help others.

IMPACTS OF TRAUMA



TAKING CARE OF YOU

How can I ensure I am best prepared for traumatic events?

The nature of the role you are in means that you may well be exposed to trauma. Therefore it is important to look after your mental wellbeing on a day to day basis, and not just after experiencing big traumatic events. The ability to stay mentally well during traumatic times is called 'resilience'.

Building resilience can reduce your chances of developing depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorders following exposure to traumatic events

How can I build mental health resilience?

Have a look at the list below. These are activities that can help you to build resilience so you are better prepared to deal with trauma:

C – A – R – E

Connection

- Have someone you can talk to about your feelings and attend debriefs
- Have friends that you can trust

Awareness

- Know what affects your moods
- Be kind to yourself about who you are

Relaxation

- Get good sleep the majority of the time
- Know how to relax and unwind

Exercise

- Eat healthily most of the time
- Do some physical activity regularly

“My past has not defined me, destroyed me, deterred me, or defeated me; it has only strengthened me”

SEEKING HELP IF YOU ARE EXPERIENCING TRAUMA NOW

Seeking help to deal with trauma is really important, but it can be hard to know how to start and where to turn to.

Remember - you are not alone! What you are experiencing is not unique to you. The search and rescue / emergency sector is more likely to experience trauma than the general workforce.

It is always ok to ask for support and for help

You might feel uncomfortable seeking support and you may feel like you should be able to stay strong, or you may have been feeling this way for so long that you think its normal and can't be helped. Talking about this will help.

If you are experiencing trauma, it's important for you to tell your employer and to tell the agency you volunteer with. This is so that they can provide you with the support and help you need and to protect you and others during activities.

HOW TO SUPPORT A COLLEAGUE IN DISTRESS?

If you notice a colleague has changes in their behaviour, personality or appears to be experiencing signs of trauma:

- 1. Encourage them to seek help (what would work for them)**
- 2. Offer support rather than solutions**
- 3. Be encouraging, hopeful and reassuring**
- 4. Encourage your colleague to talk. Listen to them and empathise**
- 5. Ask them what you can do to help**

Remember, that the effects of a traumatic event can still be felt days, weeks or months after an event. You may want to think about getting involved at a later date to check up on your colleague. This is called watchful waiting.

“Anything that’s human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable. When we can talk about our feelings, they become less overwhelming, less upsetting, and less scary. The people we trust with that important talk can help us know that we are not alone”

RESOURCES AND ORGANISATION CONTACT DETAILS

Samaritans 0800 726 666
www.samaritans.org.nz

Depression Helpline 0800 111 757
www.depression.org.nz

Suicide Crisis helpline 0508 828 865
www.lifeline.org.nz

Anxiety Helpline 0800 269 4389
www.anxiety.org.nz

Healthline 0800 611 116
www.health.govt.nz

New Zealand Mental Health Foundation
www.mentalhealth.org.nz