



Peer support in the emergency services during a disaster: Lessons from the 2019-2020 bushfires.

What are some key features and benefits of peer support programs in the emergency services?

Peer support programs are coordinated programs where members of an organisation offer their time to provide mental health and wellbeing support to colleagues. Peer support programs have been emerging as standard practise in high-risk organisations such as emergency services, where exposure to potentially traumatic events is high, compared to the general population.

There are several core elements of the peer supporter role. The peer supporter acts as an initial point of contact for fellow employees experiencing distress and provides a sense of psychological support. Where appropriate, the peer supporter also assists with referral to professional health services.

Strong research evidence links increased social support with reduced rates of mental health conditions among first responders. Peer support programs integrate social support within organisational structures, to assist with the prevention, early intervention, and destigmatisation of psychological distress among emergency services personnel.

What did the 2019-2020 bushfires teach us about peer support during a disaster?

- **It is never too early to implement peer support.** Implementing peer support programs during a large-scale disaster is very difficult. Well-planned, integrated programs should therefore be in place before such an event, to best support the mental health and wellbeing of emergency service workers when disasters do occur.
- **We must continue to reduce stigma that exists around accessing support.** To help facilitate engagement with peer support during disasters, the utilisation of programs must be normalised. Emergency service workers in leadership positions are well-placed to encourage their colleagues to access support.
- **Tailored training can boost disaster readiness.** Peer-based training interventions such as Psychological First Aid were designed for use in post-disaster context. These interventions can help equip emergency service workers with the skills and knowledge required to support the wellbeing of others when disasters occur.
- **Large-scale disasters demand a coordinated response from agencies.** Where possible, communication between agencies should be established in advance of disaster situations. Interagency communication and training can assist with knowledge sharing, efficient allocation of resources, and a coordinated response to the mental health and wellbeing needs of first responders.



What challenges are associated with peer support and how can these be overcome?

Some of the challenges associated with peer support include the impact of insufficient support from management, inadequate promotion of peer support programs, a competitive workplace culture, and a lack of effective peer support training can compromise program success. To address these challenges, we recommended the following:

- **Training.** Peer supporters and managers should undergo rigorous training to ensure the support that peer supporters provide is best practise. Ongoing training also allows for maintenance of peer support skills and incorporation of new research evidence.
- **Ongoing support.** Regular supervision within peer support programs promotes cohesion within peer support teams, and provides peer supporters with an opportunity to access support themselves. Supervision also helps ensure any issues are promptly addressed.
- **External evaluation.** This helps ensure the peer support program is effective in meeting its goals and helps close gaps in research evidence.
- **Awareness.** It is critical that staff know what peer support programs are available, who is eligible to engage with peer support and how to access programs.
- **Timeliness.** It is important that peer supporters are available to staff with minimal delays, in the interest of prevention and early intervention for mental health issues.
- **Ensuring confidentiality.** Staff need to be confident that their personal information will not be shared.

What trauma-related training does Phoenix Australia offer for emergency services personnel?

Supported by funding from the Australian Government under the *Mental Health Supports for Bushfire Affected Australians* package, Phoenix Australia is providing the following training programs to emergency services personnel:

- **Psychological First Aid** for leaders – training program for managers and supervisors of frontline emergency personnel.
- **Trauma Informed Care** - training program for frontline emergency personnel.

Find out more about the training and [register your interest here](#).