

# Local Government Bushfire Volunteers Returning Home Safe and Well

## **A Practical Guide**

**June 2021**

## Acknowledgement

The WA Local Government Association (WALGA) and LGIS acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land and pays respects to Elders past, present and emerging.



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## Introduction

Local Governments in Western Australia manage bushfire brigades made up of volunteers from the local community. The role of these volunteers is highly valuable and important to local communities, but by the nature of the work, can pose hazards to volunteers, that if not managed properly can lead to harm.

As a volunteer you will be exposed to many environments with varying degrees of risk. You may encounter such hazards as fire and smoke, falling objects, debris, asbestos, manual handling, fatigue, dehydration, emotional distress and road hazards

This list is not exhaustive, but highlights the importance that volunteers are prepared and protected when they attend fire grounds or volunteering activities.

This booklet is designed to provide guidance to those who volunteer for their Local Government Brigade. It is not a replacement for other important safety information you receive, rather a compliment to that information.

Fundamental to ensuring you are equipped to volunteer effectively and safely is to be trained.

In addition, working collaboratively and positively with your Brigade, fellow volunteers and Local Government will prepare you to keep safe and perform your duties to the best of your abilities.

Knowing how to manage risk and how to act responsibly in your role are of great importance to you and your local community.

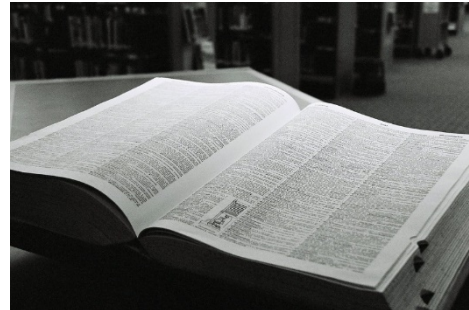
# Work Health and Safety Act

## Safety Legislation

Under the Work Health & Safety Act volunteers are considered in the same context as a worker.

## Volunteer

A **volunteer** is a person who is acting on a voluntary basis (irrespective of whether the person receives out-of-pocket expenses).



Within safety legislation a person is a **worker** if the person carries out work in any capacity for a person conducting a business or undertaking, in this case the Local Government. This includes working as a **Volunteer**.

## Duty of Care as a Volunteer

- Take reasonable care for their own health and safety; and
- Do not adversely affect the health and safety of other persons; and comply, so far as reasonably able, with any reasonable instruction that is given by the person conducting the business or undertaking to allow the person to comply with this Act; and
- Cooperate with the local government and brigade in ensuring your safety.

This includes:

- Participating in consultation and communication
- Reporting hazards and incidents
- Using personal protective clothing (PPC), personal protective equipment (PPE) and Respiratory protective equipment (RPE) appropriately
- Following safety documentation and reasonable instruction
- Attend any required training

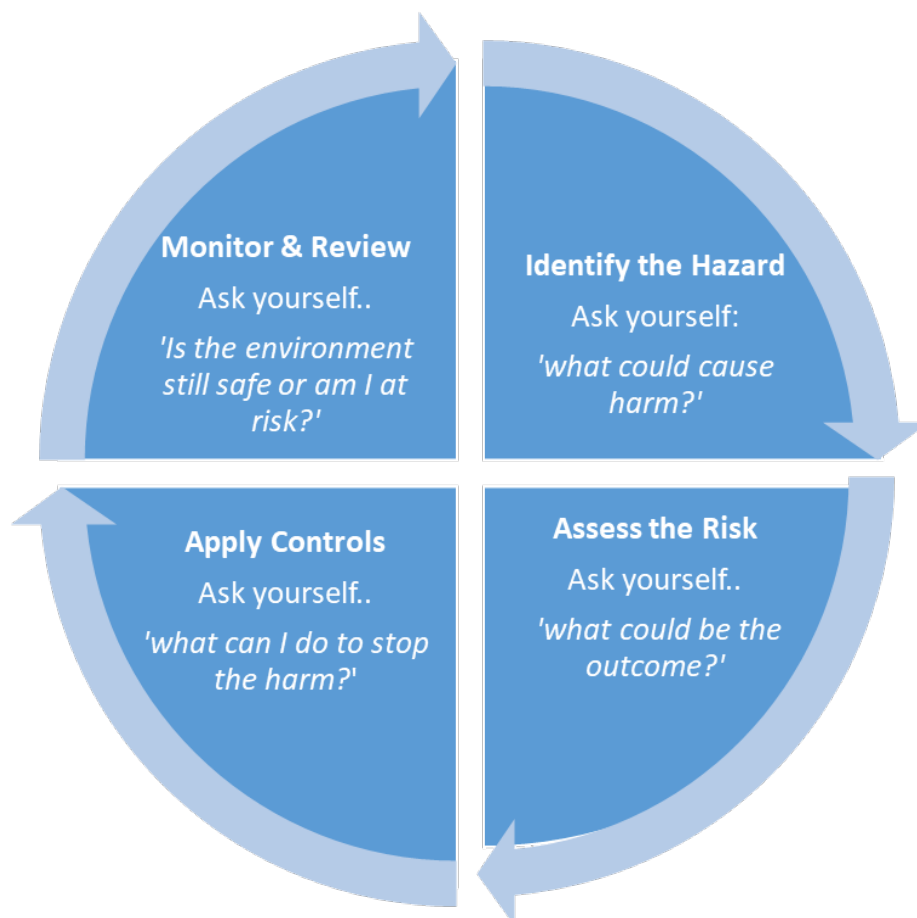
## How can you volunteer safely?

Fundamental to volunteering safely is ensuring you approach every task with a risk management mindset. That is, whilst working with your brigade, ensuring you consider the risks associated with the activity, and have a clear plan that uses measures to control those risks.

The role of a bushfire volunteer is dynamic, and whilst risk management is always considered in the planning, when on the ground and faced with a pending situation, it may not always be possible to conduct a formal risk assessment. This is why you must always have a risk management mindset

The diagram below is an example of how you can take a risk management approach to volunteering:

## Managing your risk mindset



## Policies and Procedures

Local Governments and your brigades have developed policies and procedures in relation to how they as an organisation support and manage the safety of volunteers. These may include but not be limited to:

- Safety Policy
- Hazard identification, risk assessment and control procedures
- Hazard and incident reporting processes and procedures
- Fitness for work policy – including drug & alcohol.
- Task or activity process – Standard operating procedures
- Personal Protective Equipment and Personal Protective Clothing
- Respiratory Protective equipment
- Plant and equipment use and instructions
- Volunteer safety manual
- Issue resolution processes

It is important you are familiar with these documents as they relate to your role as a volunteer. Please talk with your Brigade or Local Government if you are unfamiliar with the relevant policies and procedures or how they relate to you.



## Why training is key?

To ensure that you are adequately prepared to perform your tasks and activities in a safe and healthy manner it is important that you participate in all training, and are deemed competent in the activities that you will perform.

Training may be delivered in a class environment, such as at the brigade, or on the job; both are equally as important and set the foundation for how you will perform your role as a bushfire volunteer.

If you are having difficulty in understanding any aspect of the training provided, speak to your Brigade or Local Government, and they will review the training and work with you to ensure you have a good understanding.



## Consultation and Communication

Effective consultation and maintaining open communication are key to having a positive safety environment.

Whilst recognising the diverse nature of volunteers and competing responsibilities, as a volunteer it is important you attend and participate in as many group meetings as possible. These meetings occur to ensure volunteers are given consistent messages, up to date safety and health information as it relates to tasks and activities to be performed, as well as build comradery amongst the brigade; which is a fundamental component of volunteering together safely.

If you are unable to attend a group meeting, inform your brigade as soon as possible so they can provide you with any information you may have missed.



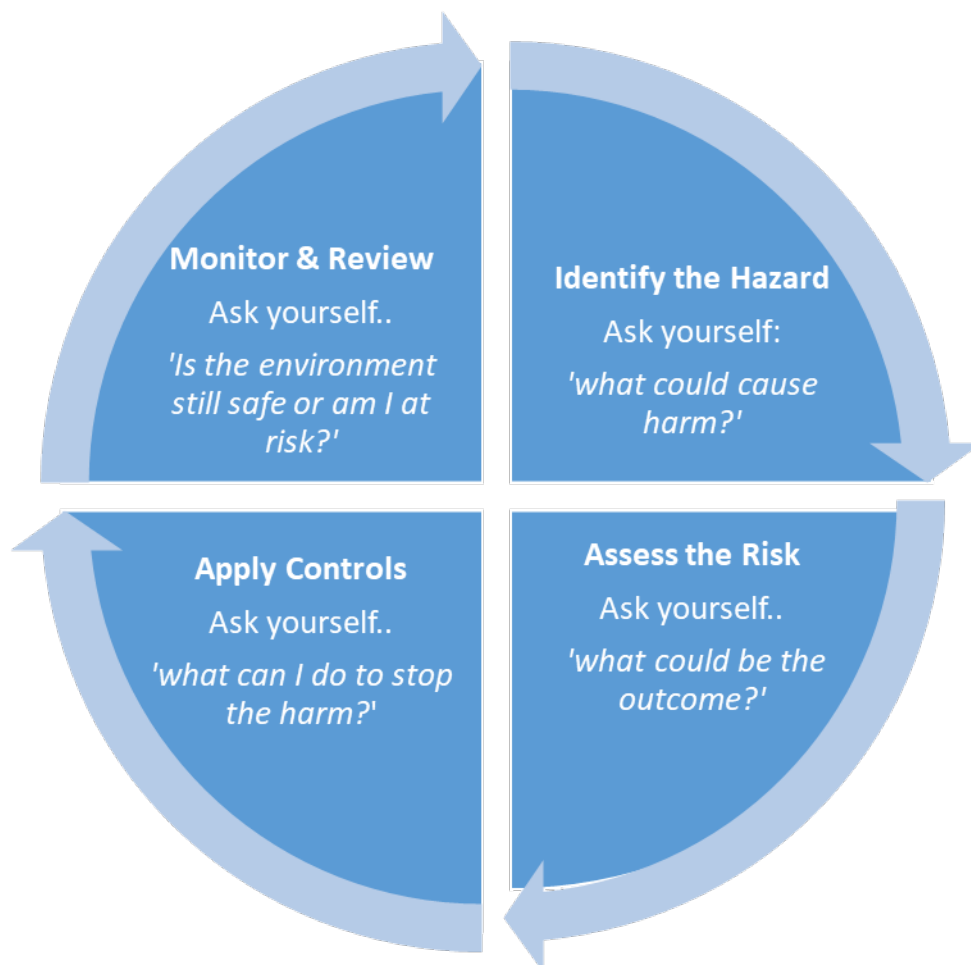
## Managing the Risks

As mentioned earlier, managing risks is about having the mindset to identify, assess, and work out the controls in a dynamic environment where you continue to review those controls to make sure they are effective or whether we need to change anything.

It is fundamental that each task you approach is with a risk mindset, whilst working with your brigade.

It is understood that in the role of a bushfire volunteer, it may not always be possible to conduct a formal risk assessment. So, it is important that you continually assess the risks for all activities, from the time activated.

The diagram below is an example of how you can apply a risk management mindset whilst volunteering.



## Common Hazards and Controls

When volunteering, you will be exposed to many hazards. On the following pages you will find information on those hazards, as well as common controls.

This information is by no means complete as every situation is different, which is why you must always approach volunteering with the risk management mindset.

It is important that we identify and report hazards so that action can be taken to address. Within your role as a volunteer, you should identify and report any hazards to your Brigade or Local Government

You can do this by:

- Formal hazard reporting processes
- Performing a “take 5” or similar (job size up)
- Participating in crew briefings
- Ensuring you have situational awareness
- Attend training and drills
- Incident reports (reactive)
- Red flag warnings

## Fire and Smoke

The hazards of fire and smoke present numerous risks. These can include:

- Exposure to high heat
- Fume inhalation
- Carbon Monoxide exposure
- Dehydration
- Reduced visibility
- Damage to structures

You will be provided training by your brigade and instruction on what to do in situations where these hazards are present.

Additionally, the training you receive on the correct use of Personal Protective Equipment, Personal Protective Clothing and Respiratory Protective Equipment will be of utmost importance to controlling these hazards.

# Manual Handling

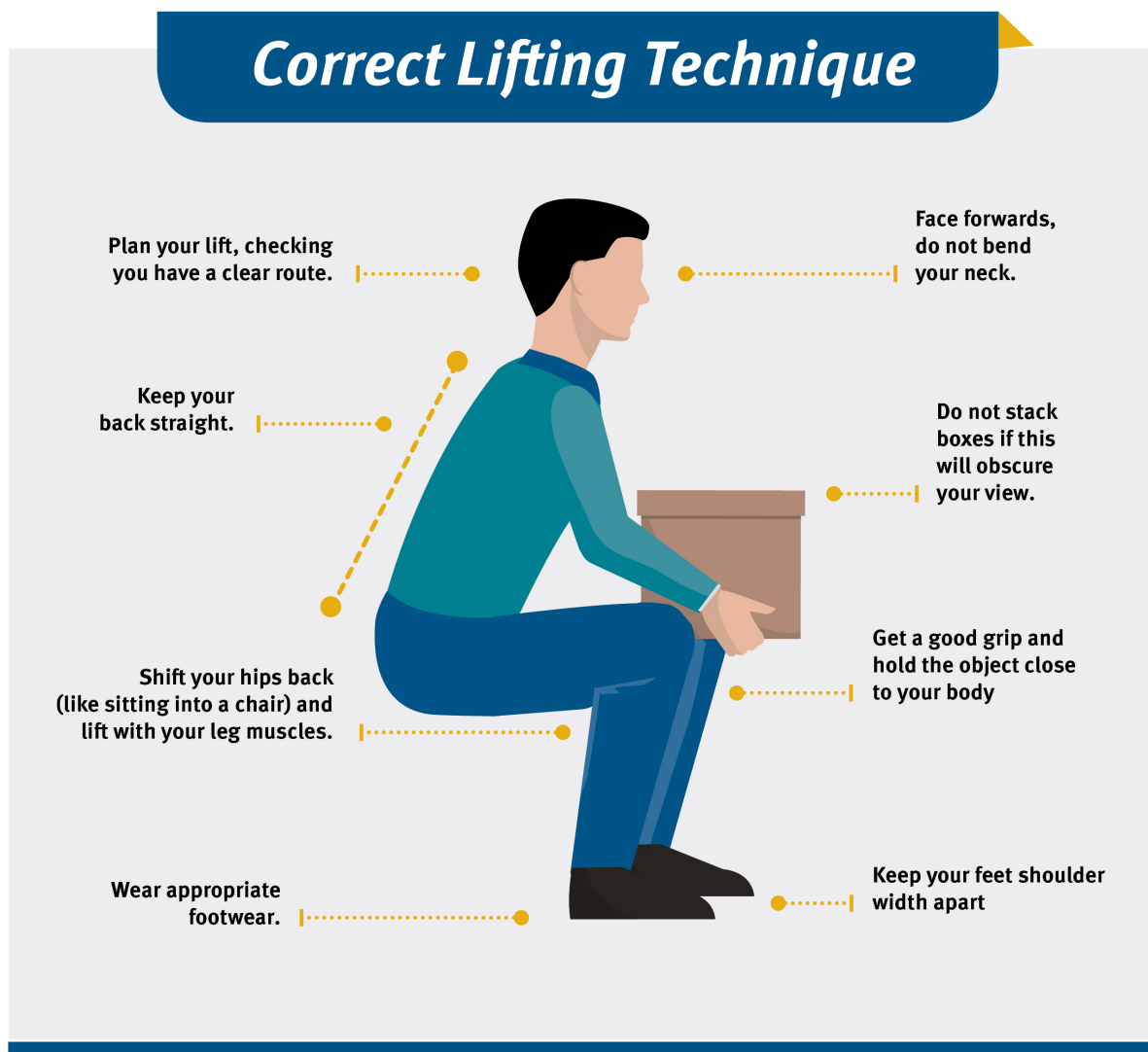
As a bushfire volunteer, you will be involved in numerous manual handling and lifting tasks.

This may include:

- Moving fallen trees and debris
- Using a fire hose
- Using and maintaining vehicles
- Using and maintaining equipment

It is important you attend training and always follow correct manual handling techniques.

The following demonstrates safe manual handling principles:



## Falling Objects and Debris

Both falling objects such as tree branches, and on the ground debris (typically causing trip and fall injuries), pose hazards to volunteers. These hazards are present in a wide variety of situations.

While the personal protective clothing, and equipment you are provided will help reduce the risk associated with these hazards in some way, they cannot be relied on solely. This is particularly important when falling objects such as trees and branches can be a common occurrence on a fire ground.

Trees, branches, power lines and poles are all objects that can fall in the event of a fire or weather event.

Where possible keeping yourself and vehicles clear of the drop zone is the best form of control.

It is important to always take note of what is above you and your overall surroundings, and take direction from your brigade.



## Vehicle safety

Preparation for an emergency response begins before an alarm is raised.

Having a sound knowledge and understanding of how the vehicles and equipment you will be using or operating, and being competent in their use is vitally important, with this in mind it is important that you complete any training.

Your brigade should provide you with an induction to all equipment including vehicles.



## Plant and equipment

Bushfire volunteers use a variety of plant and equipment within their role.

It is important that volunteers familiarise themselves with these items, and how to operate them safely.

There are many ways in which this can be achieved, a few are listed below.

- Ensure that you are using the correct piece of equipment for the task.
- Familiarise yourself with the manual or safe operating procedures for the plant or equipment.
- Having the correct level of personal protective clothing and equipment is vital, this should be included in the manual or safe operating procedure.
- Carry out any prestart checks, make sure the equipment isn't damaged – if it is don't use it, and report it.

### Post Activity

- Conduct post operational inspection or maintenance
- Conduct any brigade processes on returning the item.
- Ensure that any damaged equipment is reported, so this can be addressed.

## Flammables (Petrol/Diesel)

Bushfire volunteers should be aware of the hazards that are involved when working with flammables, most commonly petrol and diesel.

The potential for explosion and fire is ever present during training and response processes.

Hot refuelling of plant and storage of fuel can be very dangerous in this working environment and should not be conducted without approval and supervision from a superior.

Some of the risks associated with these products include damaging skin, eyes and respiratory systems. It is vital that volunteers familiarise themselves with the safety data sheet, which explains how injuries should be treated as well as outlining the correct form of personal protective clothing or equipment needed.

It is good practice to have copies of safety data sheets in vehicles to access should the need arise.

## Asbestos

Many environments that bushfire volunteers respond to may have asbestos containing materials. Volunteers should approach and treat the hazard in a manner that ensures the safety of all crew members.

It is imperative that volunteers use the correct PPC. This should include P2 respiratory protection, full overalls with sleeves down and safety glasses or goggles, this can be further enhanced with disposable overall or chemical protective clothing.

It is important that volunteers try to limit the release of any asbestos fibres during incident operations.

The following points provide general guidance.

- Hand tools should be used instead of powered tools as their use reduces the amount of potential fibre release
- Keep to a minimum the movement of ash and debris (e.g. turning over) and ensure it is carefully carried out to prevent/reduce the amount of fibres that may be released
- DO NOT intentionally break any asbestos into smaller pieces
- Leave intact and undisturbed individual pieces of asbestos cement sheeting if the fire/damage has disturbed and distributed it over a wide area
- If disturbed, ensure the asbestos is wet down, using a fine spray and moved as short a distance as possible (but still within the risk area) to a safe place
- Ensure good personal hygiene both during and post incident.



# Your Health & Wellbeing as a Volunteer

## Mental Fatigue

As a bushfire volunteer, mental fatigue could be an outcome of exposure to different types of demands that leaves you feeling exhausted which impacts overall function:

Type of Demand	What this looks like for a Bushfire Volunteer
<p><b>Cognitive demands</b></p> <p>Tasks that are mentally demanding due to long periods of high concentration and difficult decision making.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Reactive nature of emergency situations</li> <li>▪ Being switched-on 100% to adequately attend during emergency situations</li> </ul>
<p><b>Emotional demands</b></p> <p>Work that is emotionally challenging, due to high emotional involvement, or having to regularly disguise emotion whilst volunteering.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Loss of life</li> <li>▪ Being a pillar of support within a community</li> </ul>
<p><b>Physical demands</b></p> <p>Tasks or a physical environment that negatively impacts our health.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Handling equipment</li> <li>▪ Moving obstacles</li> <li>▪ Maintenance of equipment</li> <li>▪ Standing for long periods of time</li> </ul>
<p><b>Time demands</b></p> <p>Long working hours, time pressure tasks.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Deployment of time sensitive interventions to support people, animals and communities.</li> <li>▪ Shift work / working for long periods with feeling like you are unable to take a break.</li> </ul>

When getting sufficient sleep, good nutrition and exercising regularly still results in difficulty performing everyday activities, concentrating or being motivated at normal levels, you may be experiencing fatigue that needs further investigation

Some signs of fatigue may include: tiredness, headaches, dizziness, muscle weakness/aching, impaired decision making, moodiness, impaired coordination, appetite changes, changes in vision, and changes in memory.

It is important for you to report in a timely manner to your brigade captain if you are feeling unwell.

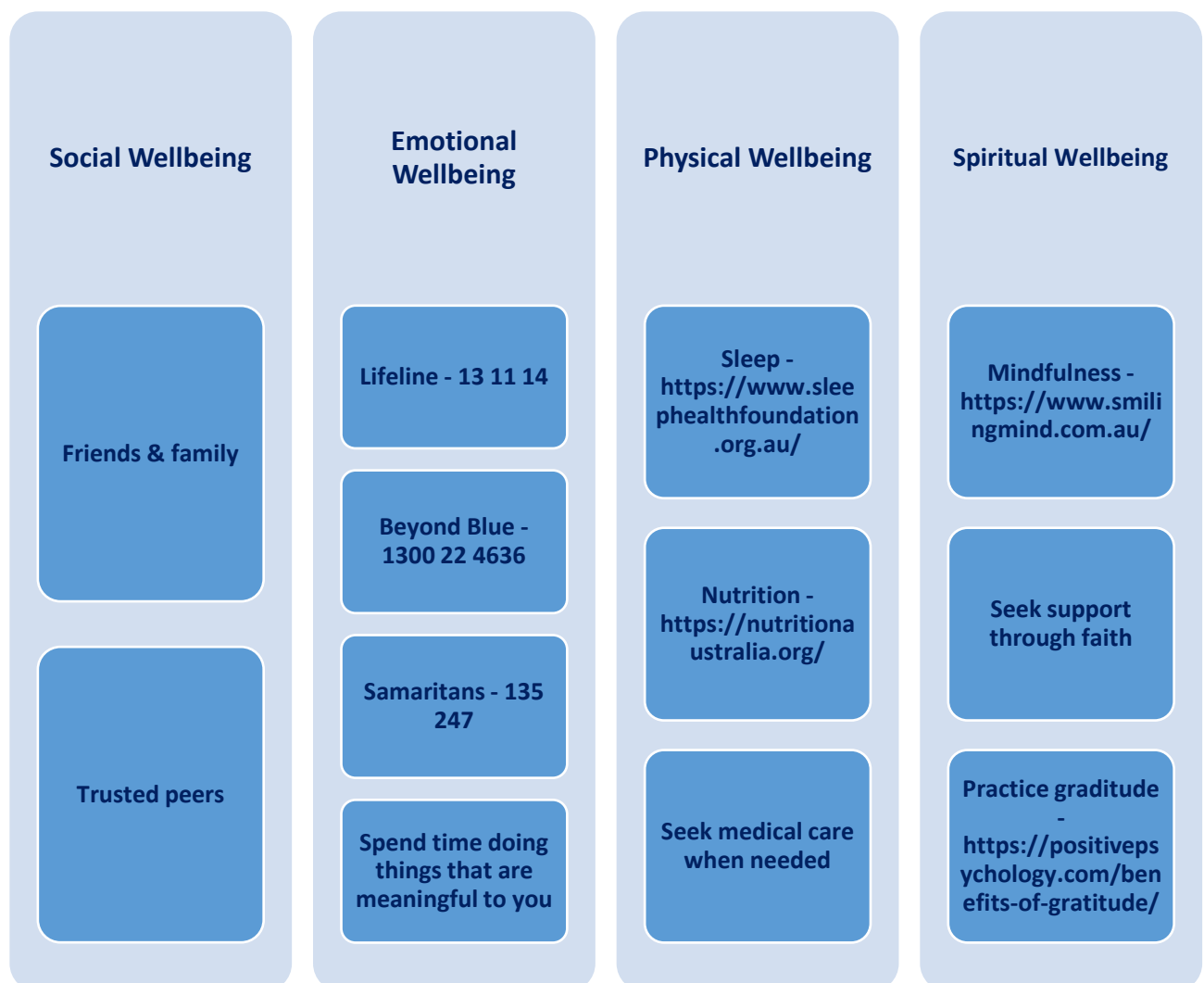
# Emotional Distress and Having the Right Frame of Mind

As a bushfire volunteer your role is key in supporting communities when man-made or natural disaster strikes.

The nature of this type of activity can present significant emotional demands for bushfire volunteers. Emotional demands can be defined as work/situations that are emotionally challenging, due to high emotional involvement, or having to regularly disguise emotion in the moment.

Remember – as a bushfire volunteer these emotional demands can arise through working within your own community, coping with the loss of life (human and animal), defending your own properties and/or properties of other families, viewing the loss of livelihoods, and being confronted with life threatening situations.

When emotional demands are coupled with additional demands, this can lead to adverse outcomes on health and wellbeing, such as psychological strain, burnout, and issues with sleeping. So, it's really important that volunteers are proactive in managing their own mental health and wellbeing, to be in the best frame of mind when responding to events.



## Using Personal Protective Equipment or Clothing

As a volunteer, you will be provided with personal protective equipment (PPE) and protective clothing (PPC) this is to be used to mitigate against the hazards you will be exposed to; it's important this is worn where required at all times.

The brigade or Local Government will provide instruction and training in how equipment and clothing should be:

- Worn and appropriately fit you
- Conditions for it to be kept in and looked after
- When it should be replaced and how often
- Cleaning and hygiene
- If Personal protective equipment, Personal protective clothing or Respiratory protective equipment is required for a task or activity, it **MUST** be worn
- Damaged PPE or PPC should not be used and replacements should be requested.



## The Role of DFES



FOR A SAFER STATE

The Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES) works in collaboration with Western Australian communities and other government agencies to help prevent, prepare or, respond to and recover from a diverse range of hazards. These include fires, cyclones, floods, rescue missions on land and at sea, as well as assisting at road and traffic emergencies.

The majority of bushfire response in Western Australia is managed by Local Governments Brigade and their volunteer responders. However, DFES may get involved in bushfire emergencies at the request of the Local Government Brigade or if an incident becomes a major event.

When a Local Government Brigade formally hands over an incident to DFES, all responding volunteer bushfire brigades **MUST** act on the instructions given by DFES.

Instructions are provided by the Incident Controller and may include:

- declaration of incident levels
- tactics
- instruction to leave the fire ground (e.g., welfare breaks or transitioning between sectors)
- requests to change roles on the fire ground
- undertaking black-out/mop-up
- moving into a maintenance role

It is imperative that the Local Government, DFES and other supporting incident groups work collaboratively to manage the health and safety of all volunteers.

At DFES controlled incidents, where LG volunteers are undertaking emergency services work at the incident, DFES is obligated (where reasonably practicable) to:

- Provide safe systems of work
- Ensure appropriate supervision
- Verify volunteers have been trained to carry out allocated tasks
- Ensure volunteers have appropriate personal protective equipment and clothing for the activity
- Ensure volunteers understand any relevant safe operating procedures and have been given instructions to perform tasks safely
- Ensure there are appropriate facilities and welfare provisions for all volunteers.
- Ensure safety incidents and injuries reported are investigated to prevent recurrence, working towards continuous improvement.

DFES works with Local Governments to provide a holistic, safe system of work to protect all our people.

## Thank You

Bushfire volunteers provide a vital and important role in assisting local government brigades to protect their communities, keeping volunteers safe and well to ensure they return home to their families is a priority for all Local Governments and other agencies involved in emergencies.

Thank you for your ongoing commitment. Stay Safe and well.

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