BEHIND THE FRONT LINE:

Vicarious Trauma Amongst Support Staff in Victoria's Emergency Management Sector

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The impact of vicarious trauma in the emergency sector is profound and deeply significant

Mallacoota Fires (2019-2020)

"**I had no time to settle in...** emergency warnings were being issued left, right and centre.... Parks were being closed and evacuated of campers between Bemm River and Mallacoota. **It just kept coming at us!**"

"I'm not on the ground, but I know my **workplace is on the ground**, and **communities are on the ground.**"

Our objectives:

❑ Understand how **vicarious trauma** (VT) impacts **support staff** working in Victoria's Emergency Management sector

❑ Understand how it's being addressed in the sector with an **environmental scan**

❑ Understand **leading practice**

Agenda:

1 What we learned from desktop research

2 What we learned from support staff individuals

3 What we learned from agency managers

4 What we learned from people with specialist knowledge

5 Study conclusions and recommendations

4

What we learned from background research and literature review

Any traumatic event has a ripple effect

Families of Workers

Emergency Support Staff

Frontline Workers

Community in Need

Our original understanding of vicarious trauma:

A trauma-based condition onset by cumulative secondary exposure to other people's traumatic experiences

We determined a short list of support roles who might be impacted by VT

Dispatchers

Recovery Workers

Human Resources Staff

Communication Staff

Counselors

Interpreters

Poor management of psychosocial hazards increases risk of VT in support staff

Aspects of work that have the potential to cause psychological or physical harm

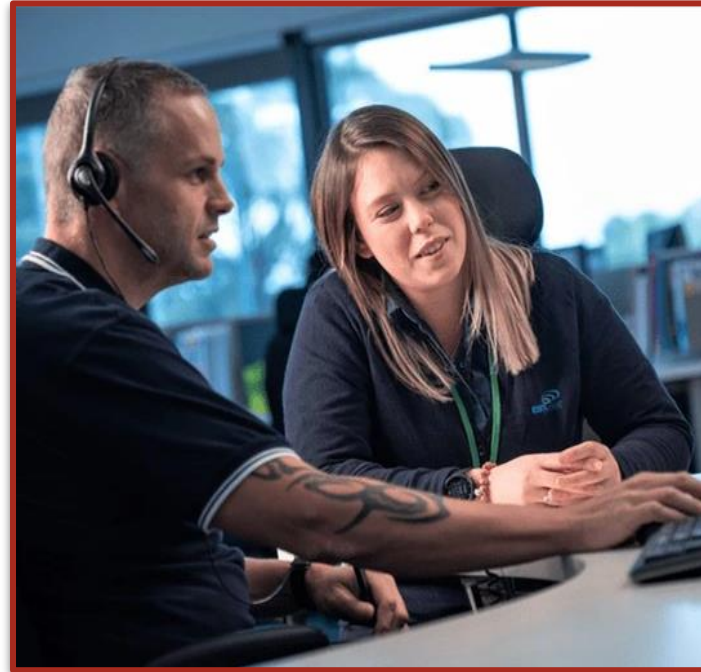**Traumatic Material**

Work Demands

Low Job Control

Work Relations

What we learned from individuals in support roles

The range of support staff roles at potential risk of VT is much larger than expected

transportation   analysis   social-media

psychology   team-leadership

Dispatchers   Recovery Workers

chaplaincy   education   wellbeing

Human Resources Staff   Communication Staff

volunteer   dispatching

Counselors   Interpreters

evidence-review   payroll   financial-services

Every individual we spoke with said they **have experienced VT** in some way

Each individual is impacted differently

Personal	Organizational
"Each day I had this video reel playing in my head."	"No one was looking after me, making sure my work was done."
"She was starting to have flashbacks about jobs she's dispatched on."	"We see it in the form of people just withdrawing."
"I started having nightmares."	"We see it in staff turn over."

Support staff feel like they don't deserve the same support as frontline workers

Heightened emotions affecting the workplace

Not validating their feelings

"There's always someone else who needs it more than me."

Not utilizing mental health resources

There are divergent views in terms of how supported individuals feel by their agency

"We are not addressing it [mental health] at all."

"We don't have enough on VT...focuses are on the physical impacts."

"It is a constant support. It doesn't come and go. It is there all the time."

Support staff are using their own coping mechanisms

Mindset

Informal Debriefing

Physical Activity

Self Care

Social Connection

Religion

16

What we learned from agency managers

We categorized each agency's focus on VT for support staff on a cumulative scale

Proactive

Measures in place to prevent the impact of VT before symptoms occur
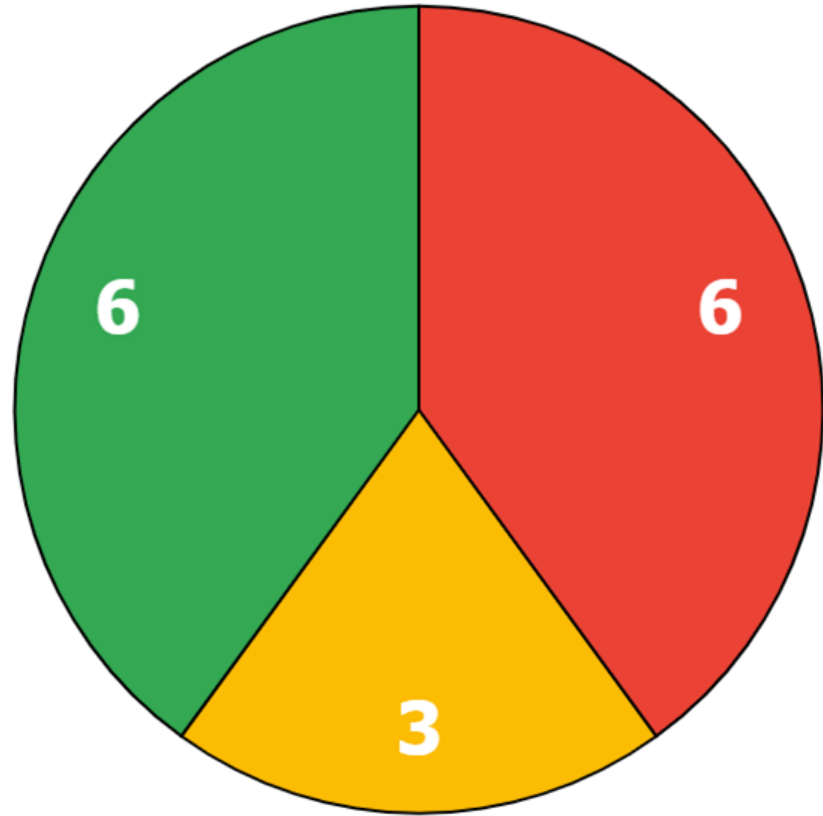
Reactive

Measures in place to recover from VT

Acknowledgement

Recognizes that VT is an issue within the emergency management sector

There are some good things happening in isolation, but there is plenty of room for improvement throughout the sector

Sample size of 15 agencies

● Acknowledgement   ● Reactive   ● Proactive

Some agencies are taking steps to address VT

Awareness

Recruitment

Education for support staff

Training for managers

The sector and agencies need more awareness about Vicarious Trauma

Awareness

"Just having this conversation brings VT to the forefront and brings awareness."

Mitigation of VT can begin in agency **recruitment** processes

"Staff said 'I didn't know I was going to be exposed to this, I didn't know this was part of the job."

Recruitment

"If you are prepared, that can reduce the shock."

Education is important for understanding the effects VT

"People not even being aware of the symptoms is a barrier and when you are aware of the symptoms, not realizing you need help."

Education for support staff

Managers need to be trained to know how to help themselves and address the specific needs of their teams

Training for managers

"If you think about the problem at the core, managers understanding their people's exposure to VT and the impact and the managers actually changing the job design of the people is probably the best way to mitigate risk."

Main initiatives used to mitigate VT:

Access to EAP

Access to Peer Support

Making it okay to be vulnerable and seek help

Regular check-ins or debriefs

Mental health training

Even with initiatives in place, barriers to seeking support for VT remain

Logistics	Stigma	Lack of Awareness
Heavy workload Timing of support availability Training budgets	Support staff feeling undeserving of support Macho culture	Lacking knowledge about VT signs and resources Compartment-alizing emotions

Planned future improvements within the sector:

Risk factor assessment

Extensions of peer support programs

Improved awareness of VT

VT trainings for managers and staff

Not unnecessarily exposing staff to traumatic material

What we learned from people with specialist knowledge

We adjusted our VT definition with feedback from different people with specialist knowledge

A trauma-based **psychological response** onset by **individual or cumulative indirect exposure** to other people's traumatic experiences.

Education on VT is available

"The reason they [agencies] might step away is the money. It is not they are rejecting the validity, it is more about presenting what they know."

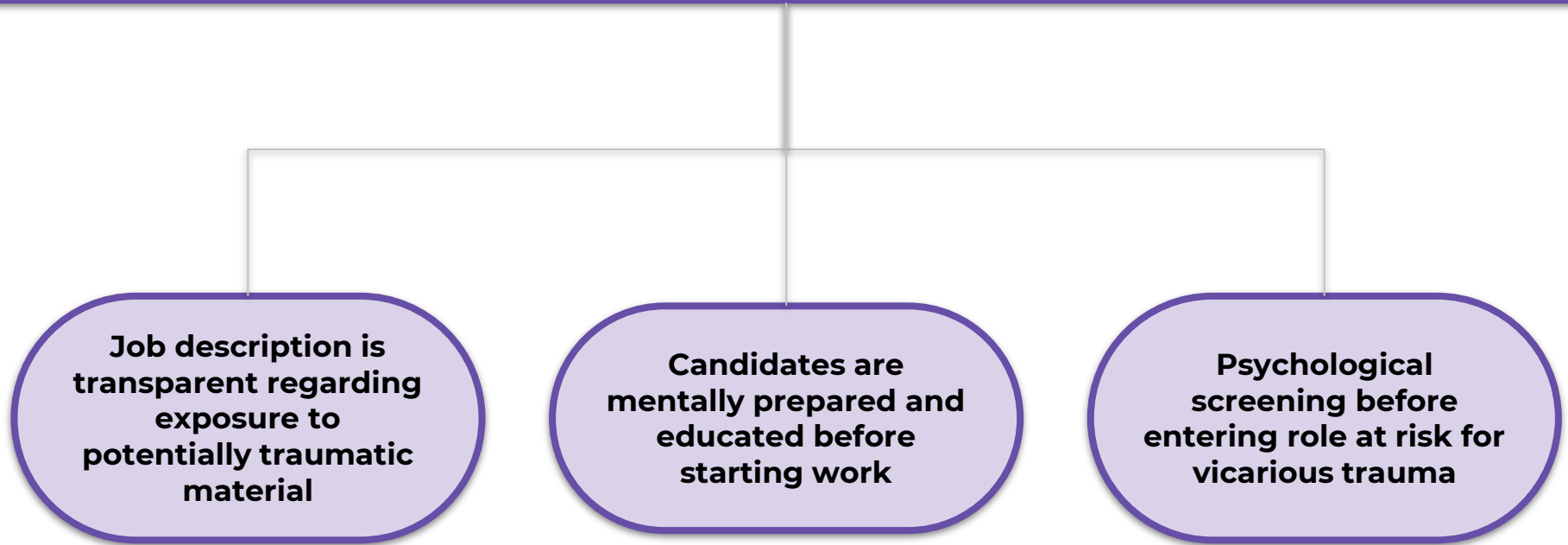# The impact of VT within the emergency sector is profound and deeply significant

This study provided an environmental scan and lived experience that hasn't been done before

There is a need to increase VT awareness and education, and to normalize the conversation

Recommendations
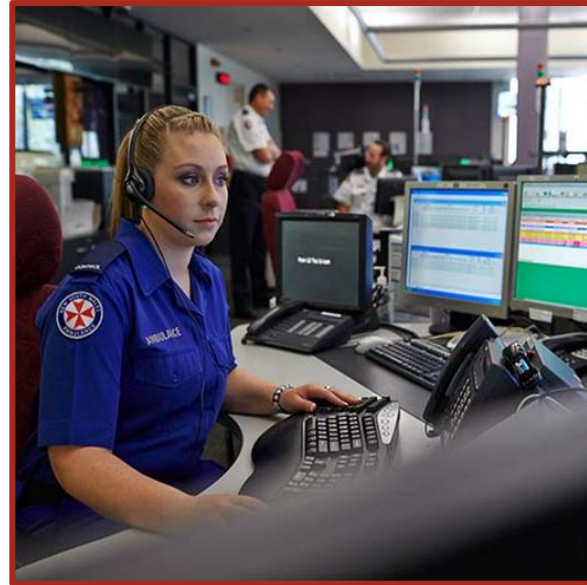
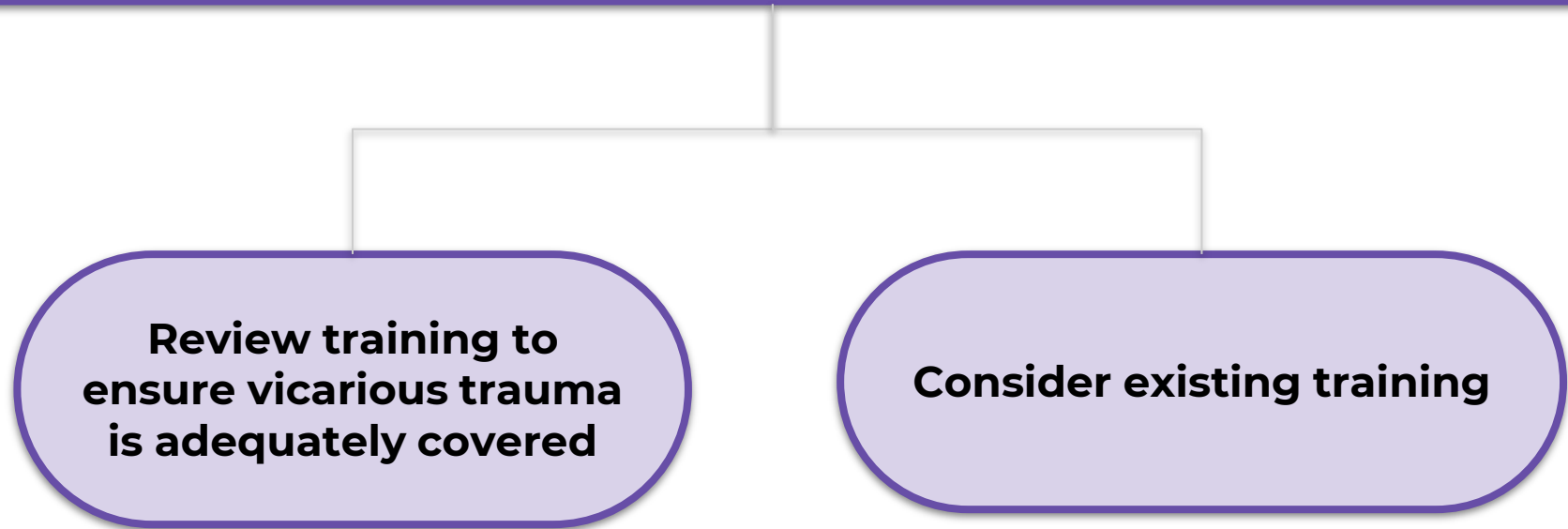# *Provide honest and transparent recruitment that paints a true picture of the potential exposure to VT*

Job description is transparent regarding exposure to potentially traumatic material

Candidates are mentally prepared and educated before starting work

Psychological screening before entering role at risk for vicarious trauma

Raise awareness that support staff are as eligible for mental health support as frontline workers

Tailor messages specifically for support staff

Be cognizant of self-stigma that exists amongst support staff

Use education and train managers to better understand the potential risk of VT

Review training to ensure vicarious trauma is adequately covered

Consider existing training

Have *a forum to share what agencies are doing to mitigate VT*

Don't reinvent the wheel

Don't keep good things to yourself, share them

Allow for support staff input and feedback

Mental health continuum can be applied to support roles at risk of VT

Good | Coping | Struggling | Overwhelmed
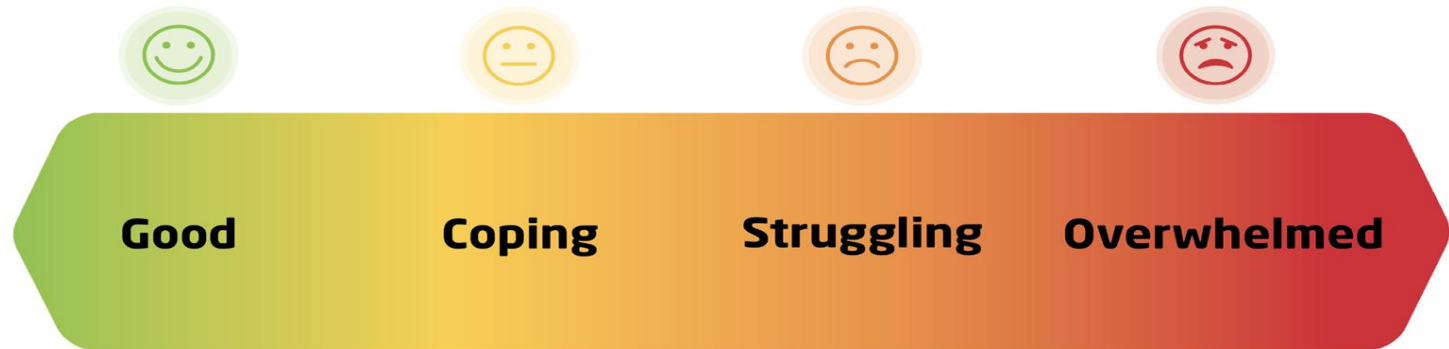
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Questions?

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