



Impacts of family breakdown on the Emergency Services workforce.



Executive Summary

Introduction

Emergency services (ES) workers in Australia face unique challenges due to the nature of their work, which can be further exacerbated by personal crises such as separation and divorce. This report examines these impacts and highlights the need for targeted support services.

Background

Separation and divorce are deeply personal events that can profoundly impact every aspect of an individual's life. People often find themselves unprepared for the emotional, legal, and financial challenges that accompany separation, which can be overwhelming. This report explores the impact on individuals and the subsequent impact on the workplace and aims to recommend the best support mechanisms to reduce workplace risk in the future.

In comparison to the general population, Emergency Services (ES) workers often face additional stress due to the demanding nature of their jobs, which can create a negative feedback loop, exacerbating their difficulties. The financial burden of separation, coupled with logistical challenges like childcare, can further strain ES workers' mental health. Additionally, separation can impact workplace performance, increasing the risk of burnout and safety issues.

Despite growing awareness of mental health in the workplace, separation and divorce remain stigmatised, leaving individuals feeling isolated. Recognising and addressing these issues is crucial to support ES workers effectively and reducing the economic and safety risks for the workplace and the communities served by the sector.

Findings

Survey results show that ES workers utilised a wide range of support services during separation, with a slight preference for emotional and mental health support over other professional services such as legal and financial support. Personal support from friends and family (58.4%) and psychologists (45.5%) were most sought after, highlighting the importance of emotional support.

Family lawyers were the most common professional service used (44.2%) over mediators, which in family law is considered the most desirable first step in reaching a resolution. However, the findings that came with hindsight provided the biggest opportunity for the future, with respondents wishing they had sought more advice around financial, property, and superannuation prior to reaching settlement agreements. These areas are often linked to legal support during separation, but many avoid legal services due to cost fears, leading to costly long-term downstream impacts on workplaces, insurers, and the government.

Respondents emphasised the need for flexibility in work hours, special leave, and compassionate policies, along with accessible counselling, peer support networks, and financial and legal assistance. This highlights the necessity of a multifaceted support approach for ES workers during separation.

Respondents reported the impact of their separation on their work as significant, with many reporting high levels of stress and experiencing several issues simultaneously. Over 50% of respondents reported their mental fitness in the red zone during their separation, compared to 16% prior to separation with 62.7% reporting experiencing increased anxiety and depression. The red zone is the crisis zone. In this zone, a person experiences severe anxiety, depression, or suffering so intense that it becomes difficult to get through the day. They may struggle to eat, sleep, or practice basic hygiene and may experience so much emotional pain that it leads to thoughts of suicide or self-harm.

Several risk factors were highlighted in the data with over 70.7% reporting being physically present at work but not entirely focused, while 58.7% found it hard to concentrate and make decisions. Emotional regulation was a struggle for almost 50% of respondents and 40% found it more challenging to cope with job pressures. These all represent a high risk for employee health and wellbeing as well as a public safety issue.

The insights from hindsight provide the biggest opportunities for ES to meaningfully impact their workers' lives in the future, using research findings from this study and others mentioned in this report. This will allow the Emergency Services to be on the front foot in providing future support mechanisms that reduce risk and long-term economic costs to the workplace.

Recommendations

To support ES workers during separation, employers should:

- Ensure emotional counselling through EAPs or similar programs are promoted with reference to separation and divorce.
- Partner with the ESSSuper to provide financial advisors to assist with financial planning and advice around assets such as superannuation in separation and divorce.
- Provide information to ensure workers understand their rights, the process of separating superannuation and the need for legal advice in that process.
- Consider flexible work arrangements to accommodate personal responsibilities.
- Consider how legal support and access to resolution-focused family lawyers and mediators could be made available to reduce the duration and severity of the workplace impact.
- Provide awareness and education for peer supporters around the potential impact of separation and divorce.

- Consider establishing a support network for people with shared challenges around separation and divorce.
- Develop clear policies around family violence and separation-friendly work arrangements, and train managers to recognise distress signs that might be associated with relationship breakdown.
- The Leading for Better Mental Health Program could raise awareness of the impact of separation and divorce on mental health.
- Additional support for further risk mitigation could include a review of the economic benefits of providing a specialist holistic program of legal, financial and emotional support within the EAP benefits for ES workers. Programs such as this have been proven to reduce the risk of escalation and injustice, including long-term financial disadvantage to workers, thereby improving outcomes for individuals and at the same time reducing the impact on the workplace by as much as 25% as documented in the *State of Separation Impact Report 2023*.¹

Investing in these support services can significantly benefit ES workers' wellbeing and job performance, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness of the emergency services sector.

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Report

Introduction

Australia's emergency services (ES) workers are the backbone of community safety, facing constant danger and exposure to traumatic events. However, the emotional toll of their work can extend beyond the job, particularly during a relationship breakdown, separation and divorce. Studies reveal that ES workers experience significantly higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and burnout compared to the general population. When coupled with the emotional turmoil of separation, these stressors can create a perfect storm, potentially impacting their wellbeing, job performance, and ultimately, public safety.

This report was commissioned by the Emergency Services Foundation in recognition that separation and divorce affect so many people in the community which means that ES workers will be part of that cohort. The aim was to better understand how they and the broader emergency services sector through its member agencies can best mitigate risks and provide early intervention support when their workers need it most. It explores the impact of separation and divorce on ES workers in Australia. Drawing on current research, the report delves into the specific challenges faced by ES workers during separation, such as managing emotional distress while navigating high-stress work environments. By understanding these challenges, The Emergency Services Foundation can advocate for the development of targeted support services.

The report concludes by highlighting the benefits of a holistic approach that addresses the multifaceted needs of ES workers during separation. We will discuss the types of support services that would be most beneficial and offer recommendations for employers in creating a more supportive environment. Ultimately, investing in the wellbeing of emergency services workers during separation is not only crucial for their individual wellbeing but also critical for ensuring the continued effectiveness of our emergency services sector and reducing the economic cost to the workplace when separation and divorce go wrong.

Background

Impacts of separation on the individual

Separation and divorce are deeply personal and rarely discussed. It touches almost every aspect of a person's life, and when it happens, they are typically under-prepared for the experience, making it even harder.

When people are separating, they must manage all the stress and ascend a steep learning curve. They need to learn about

- the process of separation and divorce
- what they have to do from a legal perspective
- their rights
- what fairness is
- their own emotional, psychological and financial needs
- their former partner's needs and rights
- their children's needs
- how much will it cost.

All this is often done in the context of ongoing parenting, work performance, setting up new homes, paying the bills, funding the separation process, and planning for the future.

The emotional demands of separation can be particularly acute for ES workers. The often stressful nature of their work can exacerbate the difficulties of separation, creating a negative feedback loop that can further strain relationships and hinder coping mechanisms. Separation can also create logistical challenges for ES workers particularly those with children. Shift work patterns and unpredictable schedules can make it difficult to manage childcare arrangements and meet legal obligations.

The financial implications of separation can also be significant. Legal fees, property division, and potential changes in income due to changed working hours can create a financial burden. For some ES workers, financial stress may further exacerbate existing impacts, creating a downward spiral that impacts both their personal and professional lives.

Separation also impacts the lives of others: from one's former partner, children and extended family, as well as flowing through to friends, colleagues and the community members that ES workers support in their work.

QUOTES

"Best decision and hardest decision of my life yet was completely unprepared for the toll it took. I have moved on with my life, but the latent effects are still with me."

"It is a life changing and sometimes almost destroying process to go through. People experiencing this need more assistance, otherwise families will be damaged, destroyed or lost. The emergency service MUST make help for this available and visible."

Impacts of Separation on the Emergency Services workplace

The stress and distraction of separation can negatively impact performance in any workplace. These impacts not only affect the individual experiencing the distress of separation - there is also a ripple effect on the colleagues around them. The danger of these negative impacts is more

acute for emergency services workers going through separation, who face a double threat: stressful work environments and the challenge of balancing work and family life.

Any negative impact on performance in the workplace not only has the usual effects of higher attrition rates, absenteeism, impaired decision-making capability and increased risk of burnout. It also has the potential for safety issues for the individual, their colleagues and members of the community who they serve.

For example, one study in *Safety Science*² conducted on US-based firefighters found that firefighting personnel experiencing stress at work and at home are less likely to follow safety protocols, wear proper equipment, or report safety hazards. This disregard for safety measures could have serious consequences for their health and wellbeing, as well as the safety of their colleagues and the community they serve. It highlights the importance of addressing pressure from external factors such as separation as a critical safety concern within the emergency services.

The economic impact of separation on the workplace is significant and increases without early intervention support measures.

QUOTES

“There is the possibility of projection of issues onto colleagues”

“When I went through mine, I had no management support, but I was supporting other members who were going through the same things. Members would come into my office crying. I would try and offer the best support I could while no one was there to support me.”

Incidence of separation in the emergency services

The Australian Institute of Family Studies³ estimates that around 48% of all Australian marriages are likely to end in divorce. There is no conclusive research on the separation and divorce rate in the emergency services. However, a report from US-based First Responders Initiative⁴ found the divorce rate in the emergency services averaged between 60-75%.

While The Separation Guide did not conduct a prevalence study into separation rates in the emergency services for this report, it is worth noting that the *State of Separation Impact Report 2023*¹ found an over-representation of survey responses from people working in the public administration and healthcare sectors, indicating a higher incidence of separation and divorce in people where at least one person is an emergency services worker.

ES workers face a unique set of stressors that can significantly impact their mental health. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a prevalent concern within this population,⁵ and research suggests a strong correlation between PTSD and an increased risk of separation and divorce.

Clinicians working with emergency responders often observe a pattern where PTSD symptoms and coping mechanisms contribute to marital breakdown. Common maladaptive coping strategies, such as substance abuse, infidelity, emotional withdrawal, anger outbursts, and anxiety, can significantly strain relationships.⁶

The impact of PTSD on relationships

PTSD symptoms and coping mechanisms place strain on relationships and contribute to marital breakdown:

- ✓ substance abuse
- ✓ infidelity
- ✓ emotional withdrawal
- ✓ anger outbursts
- ✓ anxiety

“The PTSD impact on our family is still felt nearly 5 years later.”

QUOTE

“The impact of PTSD on relationships isn't well understood especially at a GP level and this can have devastating impacts on families and needs to be better supported by the medical profession for those who work in the emergency service discipline.”

“The PTSD impact on our family is still felt nearly 5 years later.”

Separations including family violence among ES workers

Family Violence is a growing concern in the community and is often linked with individuals in the various stages of relationship breakdown from contemplation, initial stages of separation and the often high stress felt while trying to reach a settlement. Violence can be physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, social, cultural, spiritual or financial. It can also be facilitated through technology. Examples of family and domestic violence include physical assault, sexual assault, withholding someone's access to money, controlling a person's ability to see friends and family, image-based abuse, intimidation, verbal abuse, and tracking someone's movements. According

to Safe Work Australia⁷, those experiencing family and domestic violence will have both short and long-term effects on the victim's health and wellbeing.

Crime Statistics⁸ reports a 3.1% increase in incidents of family violence in Victoria from 2023 to 2024 with 95,982 family incidents being reported. While ES workers are often involved in supporting the community with reported family violence offences as part of their work, personal instances of family violence within the ES worker cohort are significant. Sophie Todorov of Vic Police has shared data with the Emergency Services Foundation which identified thousands of Vic Pol employees over the previous 20 years who are also Family Violence Victim Survivors (FVVS), and the numbers are increasing.

This data is significant to the Emergency Services workplace as cases of separation and divorce involving claims of family violence are traditionally more adversarial, involve the courts, are more costly and can take many years to resolve often causing FVVS high levels of stress and financial hardship and often having a high impact on their work. They also have a significant economic cost which according to Safe and Equal⁹, is an estimated \$1.9 billion per year.

This further increases the reason to support awareness of holistic services when workers are experiencing separation and divorce, including the need to promote and share ways workers can access legal and mediation support as an early intervention measure. Safe + Equal recommends businesses access specialist expertise early, to ensure the workplace is equipped to respond safely.

Under new Work Safe guidelines around employer duty of care¹⁰, the workplace has obligations to provide a safe working environment for employees that involve:

- Providing information about counselling, legal, health, financial and other family and domestic violence support services.
- Ensuring workers supporting those who are experiencing family and domestic violence are aware of the support options available to them, including employee assistance programs.

The Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia's 2021-22 Annual Report¹¹ shares the common risk factors linked to family violence which can include child abuse, drug, alcohol or substance misuse, mental health issues, risk of abduction, and recent threats to harm a child or other person relevant to the proceedings. Many of these risk factors are also readily seen in those coping with PTSD making this an issue of concern for the Emergency Services.

The Emergency Services Foundation are already working with Safe Steps to partner on support initiatives in this area, including exploring a network for victims and survivors of family violence within emergency service workers off the work Sophie Todorov conducted as part of the Learning Network and as speaker at the 2023 ESF Mental Health Showcase.

Separation stigma in the workplace

The Emergency Service Foundation has worked to understand stigma and help-seeking in ES workers and to build awareness of mental health in the workplace. There is a wealth of research on workplace interventions targeting mental health literacy, psychosocial working conditions, and organisational outcomes within the emergency services sector. Examples of existing support programs include mindfulness training, physical activity initiatives, manager training on mental health awareness, and chaplaincy services.

However, while mental health discussions are becoming more common, divorce and separation remain somewhat taboo. While societal attitudes towards divorce have become more accepting in recent years, a residual stigma persists, and the feelings of social stigma and isolation can further complicate the process of separation. This can manifest as a fear of judgment, gossip, or a sense of personal failure, leading individuals to withdraw from their social support networks. Consequently, they may suppress their emotions, feeling misunderstood and alone in navigating the complexities of their situation. This self-imposed isolation can exacerbate the emotional challenges associated with separation, impacting on their ability to perform their duties.

Mental health interventions show how it is possible to open workplaces up to discussion around other uncomfortable conversations and provide staff with the resources and support they need to recover from a difficult period and return to full capacity when at work.

QUOTES

“Sometimes we don't ask for help because we think we are okay or we are ashamed or embarrassed. “

“I feel like my circumstances have been ignored or treated as a taboo topic or something for me to sort out on my own.”

“Often there is a lot of shame and confusion in a person considering separation, so it's not always easy asking for help. Having a trustworthy person to start the conversation with can make all the difference.”

“I didn't want to acknowledge feeling broken.”

“We work in a culture where we are supposed to care for others, but you are looked down upon if you have personal issues.”

“Create a culture where you feel safe to discuss circumstances”

“The stigma and bias from colleagues can be significant.”

Methodology

The Emergency Service Foundation, in collaboration with The Separation Guide, conducted an online survey with a total of 100 responses. (Survey questions in supplementary materials).

The survey focused on the impacts of separation and relationship breakdown on work and work on relationships. It also examined the time taken to reach a resolution, the support people had accessed through separation and the support they wanted access to.

The survey was promoted and distributed by ESF via social media and internal communication channels amongst some member agencies and open for a 4-week period.

The Separation Guide conducted background research and drew on their *State of Separation Impact Report 2023*¹ for comparative statistics.

Demographic Summary

The ESF survey had 100 responses. This summary compares the make-up of responders to the emergency service agencies and to people going through separation in the wider community based on data from approximately 28,000 The Separation Guide users.

Stage of separation

- 6.3% Thinking about separating
- 23.8% Separated and yet to reach a settlement agreement
- 11.3% Finalised agreement in the last year
- 11.3% 1-2 years post finalising settlement
- 47.5% More than 2 years post finalising settlement

Gender split

- Survey respondents 67.5% men, 32.5% women
- ES gender split across member agencies averages 71% men, 29% women

Married vs de facto

- Survey respondents: 84.4% married, 15.6% de facto
- The Separation Guide users: 80% married, de facto 20%

Children

Survey respondents: 63% have children

TSG users: 83% have children

Member agencies

The top-4 agencies with the highest responses came from:

25.6% Victoria Police

23.1% Fire Rescue

16.7% Country Fire Authority

12.8% Ambulance Victoria

Note: This is not a representative sample of the number of ES workers employed and volunteering with the member agencies. Agencies with a higher volunteer rate were underrepresented in the survey responses—only 6.2% of respondents reported that they were volunteers. This may indicate that volunteers are less likely to participate in workplace surveys rather than a lower separation and divorce rate among volunteers.

Work arrangements

82.5% Permanent full-time staff

6.2% Permanent part-time

6.2% Volunteer

3.7% Contract

1.2% Other

70% Front-line workers

18.8% Leadership/Management

10% Support role

1.2% Other

55.7% were shift-workers

25.3% Regular hours

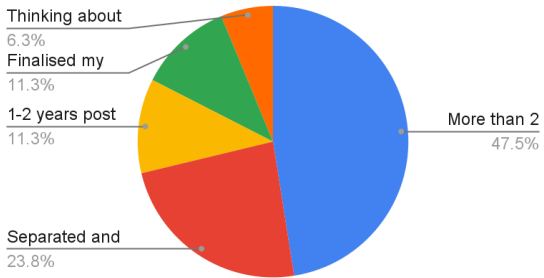
12.7% Flexible hours

6.3% Other

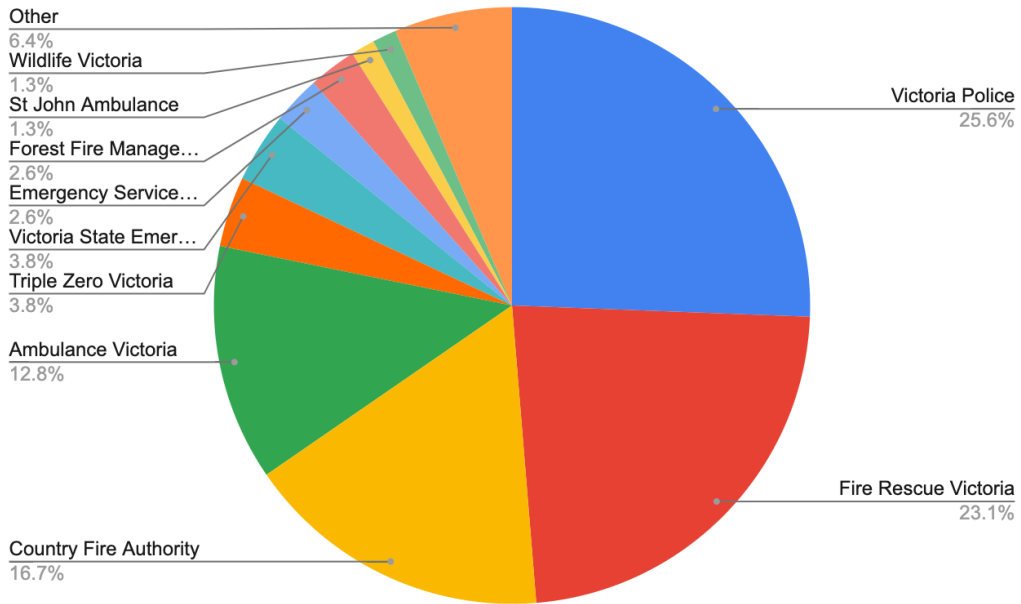
18.8% of respondents **both worked for the Emergency Services during separation**

Demographic snapshot graphics (appendix as above)

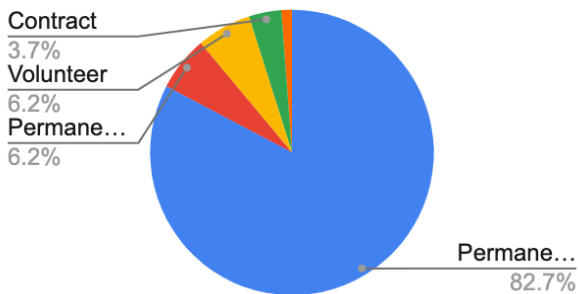
Stage of separation



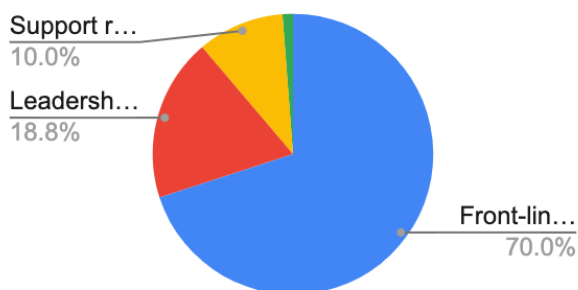
Which service did you work for when you considered or went through separation?



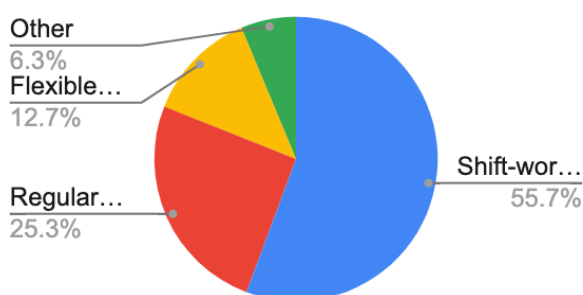
Type of Employment



Role at work



Work Schedule



Results

Separation approaches and resolution timelines

The survey data highlights the diverse approaches and timelines experienced by ES workers going through separation. A significant majority (66%) initially attempted a do-it-yourself approach without using lawyers, reflecting a preference for self-management in the early stages. This figure is higher than The Separation Guide's 2023 Impact survey, which found 46.6% of couples took this approach. However, only 23% resolved their matters through this method, as opposed to 33% of respondents to the Impact Survey, indicating potential challenges or complexities within ES worker separations that necessitated further assistance.

Independent legal advice emerged as the most common method for reaching resolution (28%), with court involvement and collaborative or mediation-led approaches each accounting for only 17.3% of final settlements. The average time to reach a resolution in the wider population is 619 days, underscoring the prolonged and often challenging nature of the separation process. 31.9% of ES respondents finalised their settlements within 12-18 months, while a considerable 23.6% took 18 months to 3 years, demonstrating the variability in the duration of settlements. The longer the settlement period goes on, the more stressful the separation process can become for individuals, as it can be a time of great uncertainty.

These findings emphasise the need for accessible, efficient early support systems to get staff on the right path and help individuals navigate their separation more effectively and reduce the overall time to resolution.

The Separation Guide *State of Separation Impact Report 2023*¹ found that **without support**, 87.5% of people end up in unfavourable separations that would be considered either unfair in the eyes of the law or end in high acrimony, both of which have a high personal and societal impact, meaning a high economic cost to the workplace.

Reported impacts at work

The survey data reveals significant negative impacts of relationship issues or separation on work performance, with an **average negative impact score of 6.7 out of 10**. Among the respondents, the severity of the impact varied, with the highest concentration (24%) reporting an impact score of 8 out of 10 and 10.7% rating it as 10.

Respondents detailed how their work performance was affected, often experiencing several issues simultaneously.

A considerable **70.7% reported being physically present at work but not entirely focused**, while and **58.7% found it harder to concentrate and make decisions**, and task prioritisation was an issue for 30.7%. Confidence at work and self-worth were impacted. **32% of respondents said they felt ineffective and lost confidence** in themselves, and **24% felt they were letting their team down**. **Emotional regulation** was a struggle for 46.7%, and **40% found it more challenging to cope with job pressure**. Given the challenging and critical nature of much of the work performed by ES workers, these impacts have the potential of extremely negative ripple effects on colleagues and members of the community.

A number of respondents found their separation had impacts on their health and wellbeing. **62.7% experienced increased anxiety or depression** Physical health also suffered, with **17.3% being unwell more** often.

There were also practical impacts on the workplace. Changes in caregiving responsibilities led **33.3% to request schedule adjustments**, and **13.3% were late for work more frequently**.

Additional comments from respondents highlighted specific personal challenges, such as **alienation from colleagues** and **the inability to pursue additional achievements or professional development due to lack of energy or headspace**.

However, **53.3% of respondents reported that they used their work as an escape from the stress of home**. This could indicate that agencies can be a positive place of support and camaraderie for separating individuals, or that the nature of the work allows ES workers to switch off from a difficult situation at home.

This data underscores the profound and multifaceted impact that relationship breakdowns can have on individuals' professional lives for a prolonged period of time and the need for supportive workplace policies and mental health resources to help employees navigate these challenging times.

The impact on mental fitness

Mental fitness before separation



Mental fitness during separation



229% increase



QUOTES

“Be cautious of applying any added workplace pressure or role changes whilst the person is going through separation, and check in regularly to ask what supports they need in each stage.”

“Allow for people to come off shift if they need to and away from the front line. Taking on another role away from stressful situations and giving them a chance to still work but in an environment where it is ok to be emotional and have timeout at times.”

“Acknowledge that it takes time for people to bounce back from this and that being flexible and supportive is key.”

“It ruined me. I became emotionally numb and incredibly sad.”

Leaving the emergency services due to separation

The survey data indicates that most respondents (88.6%) did not leave their jobs due to relationship issues or separation, with 11.4% reporting that they had done so. Of those who provided reasons for leaving their job, the most common factors included the impacts of

separation on their health and wellbeing (57.1%), the inability to work with their former partner (42.9%), and the desire for a fresh start as part of their new life (42.9%) and inflexible workplace conditions (28.6%). Changes in caregiving responsibilities, the need to move far away from the workplace, and a lack of support from managers or workplace culture in accommodating the needs arising from the separation were all reported by 14.3% of people who had left a role.

At 11.4% attrition rate, this data suggests that leaving a job in the emergency services due to relationship issues or separation is above the 2023 national workforce average of 9.5%¹² and well above the industry average for the public administration and safety of 6.8%. A further study by the Productivity Commission into the emergency services sector addressed attrition rates, stating that a national average of 6.6% in 2021-2022 was representing an eight year high.¹³

It is noted that some roles in emergency services have limited alternative employment options for the skillset, for example, in the case of a paramedic, which may reduce this attrition percentage but make ongoing work relationships harder, especially with the high rate of relationships within the sector. 18.8% of respondents reported both they and their former partner worked for the Emergency Services during separation.

Those who decide to leave are significantly impacted by their circumstances. The prominent reasons for leaving a job highlight the profound effect of personal life disruptions on professional stability. Health and wellbeing concerns were paramount, indicating that separation's stress and emotional toll can become overwhelming enough to necessitate a job change. Additionally, the inability to work with a former partner underscores the complications that arise when personal and professional lives intersect.

Average cost of attrition when staff leave a role

When an employee leaves it costs the employer 1.5 x their salary to replace them.¹⁴

With the average Emergency Services Officer salary in Victoria being \$124,999 per year¹⁵, every employee who leaves costs the Emergency Services sector and the Government \$187,498.50.

The *State of Separation Impact Report*¹ found that those who had early support saw a 100% reduction in attrition rates. This makes the comparative cost of early intervention initiatives an insignificant cost when weighing up the improvements it delivered on every metric including reduced attrition, better health and wellbeing and reduced impact to other coworkers as individuals removed 150 days of stress by finding more amicable pathways for their separations and removing some of the cost, conflict and confusion.

QUOTE

“I went from not having any issues about work hours to everyday stress and worry about how to get to work and what hours I could do”

“I have had to leave shift work and work weekdays to have my children on a week on, week off arrangement.”

Separation from an ES co-worker and job performance

Separation from a spouse within the same workplace, particularly in high-stress environments like emergency services, can compound the challenges faced during a relationship breakdown.

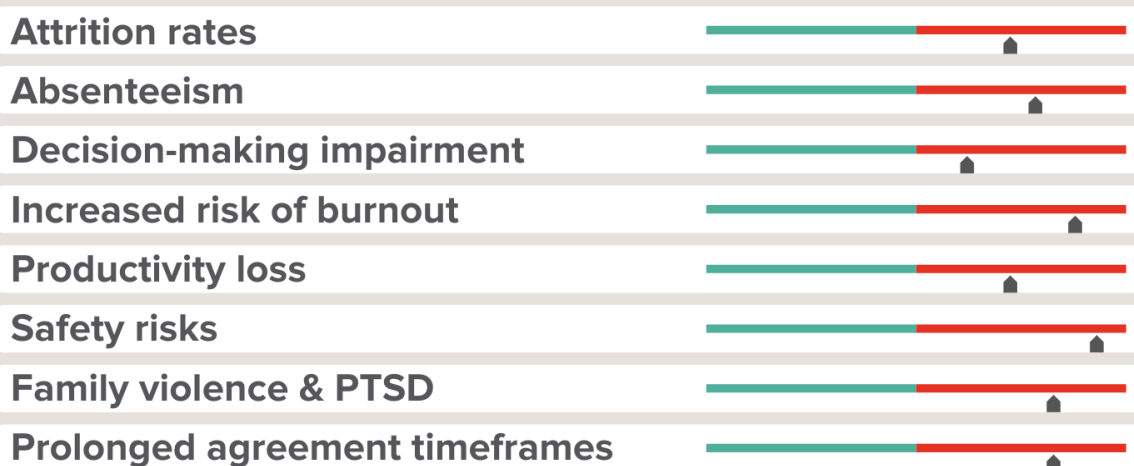
18.8% of respondents told us that both partners worked for the emergency services when they separated. The data highlights how these situations can lead to feelings of isolation, with 12% of respondents reporting this issue. Furthermore, 8% of respondents felt their team members were 'taking sides,' which exacerbated the emotional strain and created a hostile work environment. This dynamic can disrupt professional relationships and hinder teamwork, which is critical in emergency services where cooperation and trust are paramount. Additionally, the necessity for schedule changes to avoid encounters with the estranged spouse, as reported by another 8%, can further complicate work routines and affect job performance.

One respondent's experience in a small community underscores the intensified impact of such situations. The affair between their spouse and a colleague not only strained their personal life but also spilled over into their professional environment, where everyone knew each other. These findings highlight the need for confidential, tailored support systems within workplaces, especially in close-knit and high-pressure fields like emergency services.

QUOTE

“Relationships with coworkers are a big cause of relationship breakdowns in emergency services”

Economic risk scorecard for the ES workplace



The impacts of ES work on homelife

Impacts do not flow one way. Separation has an undeniable impact on an individual's work life, and the survey highlights the impacts of the emotional demands and nature of Emergency Services work on home life.

The survey findings underscore the profound impact of work-related factors, particularly within the emergency services sector, on personal relationships. A significant majority of 60% identified being emotionally drained as having a negative impact, highlighting the substantial emotional toll inherent in roles such as emergency responders. Nearly half of respondents noted prioritising work over family and the inability to switch off when at home affected them, reflecting the challenges of maintaining a work-life balance. Equally notable were concerns related to accumulated trauma.

42% of respondents cited shift work, indicative of the stress and strain associated with irregular schedules. 33% also highlighted issues with their work, such as time away from home and long hours, underscoring how time-intensive work commitments can impact personal life. Addressing these challenges through targeted support initiatives, improved work-life balance strategies, and fostering a supportive workplace culture could mitigate their detrimental effects on personal relationships within the emergency services sector.

The impact of work on home life

60% emotionally drained

50% prioritising work over homelife

42% shiftwork & irregular schedule

33% long hours & time away from home

QUOTES

“Working in the emergency services can change your personality, which can change your personal relationships and redefine your support network.”

“Long-term trauma is challenging and causes long-term damage to a relationship. Managers generally will ask if you are ok, but rarely reach out proactively to check on your wellbeing.”

“I think employers such as FFM should consider what mental health support is provided to their employees following traumatic events so that conditions such as PTSD are treated before they have an impact on relationships and family.”

“I feel employers should support their staff as whole humans who need access to services in these matters especially as many Emergency Services members work have a huge toll on their families and relationships.”

“The impact of my ES career and subsequent mental breakdown without a doubt contributed to the failure of the marriage.”

“They have always said that shiftworkers have an above-average rate of separation in their profession. I know now and understand why.”

“Emergency services can lead to a far greater possibility of separation. The employer needs to be more understanding of this.”

Support sought by ES workers during separation

The survey results indicate that individuals dealing with relationship or separation issues utilised a diverse range of support and professional services. The prominence of personal support from friends and family, psychologists, and family lawyers underscores the multifaceted nature of support required during this challenging period.

The data reveals **a slight preference for emotional and mental health support services over professional advice and services.** The most sought-after service was personal support from friends and family (58.4%), followed closely by psychologists (45.5%). This underscores the critical importance of emotional support during separation.

On the professional side, family lawyers were the most frequently sought service (44.2%), indicating the necessity of legal guidance in navigating the complexities of separation and divorce.

Responses indicate that peer and managerial support in the workplace and online resources also play a significant role in providing necessary guidance and assistance. Reports of internal support were mixed, with many reporting that their managers and peers had been incredibly supportive, while others indicated a lack of support.

Most respondents indicated they had sought some kind of support for their separation, with 32.4% indicating they had required professional support before they had separated from their partner.

While all types of support are crucial, the data suggests that emotional and mental health support may be slightly more important to individuals in the emergency services. This highlights the effects of separation on the emotional wellbeing of individuals undergoing separation and the essential role of personal and professional mental health support in coping with the stress and challenges of this life transition.

QUOTES

"I actually get a lot of comfort from the relationship with my crew, they are wonderful."

"Supportive colleagues were amazing."

"I received an overwhelming amount of support."

"I was lucky as I had good family and friends who supported me . My CFA support group were fantastic"

"My manager at the time was incredibly understanding. I think that is what made a considerable difference to my experience."

“In my experience, I felt supported at work, though no specific support services were directly offered to me at the time.”

“CFA's psychological services saved my life, literally during a horrendous and dangerous time. I'll be forever grateful for how they stepped in and my manager allowed me to grieve and become stronger.”

“My employer has been pretty amazing but more access to professional advice and services is always helpful.”

“Our Peer support network was absolutely brilliant helping me, only problem writing had was finding help for being a male victim of domestic violence.”

How do ES workers want to be supported?

When directly asked what would help a person going through separation, respondents had clear ideas and suggestions. The responses highlight a clear need for comprehensive support for Emergency Services employees going through a separation.

Flexibility in work hours emerged as a primary requirement, allowing individuals to manage their personal and professional responsibilities more effectively. This was requested particularly from those with caregiving responsibilities. Additionally, special leave arrangements and compassionate policies were deemed crucial in enabling employees to cope with the demands of separation without added stress.

Many respondents emphasised the importance of mental health and emotional support, advocating for accessible counselling services and empathetic managerial conduct. Respondents suggested confidentiality and peer support networks to create a safe space for employees to seek help without fear of judgment.

Financial and legal support, including access to advisors familiar with the unique challenges faced by ES workers, was frequently mentioned. Proactive assistance, such as dedicated personnel to guide employees through the separation process and the provision of relevant resources, was also highly valued.

Overall, the findings underscore the necessity for a multifaceted approach, incorporating flexibility, mental health resources, proactive support, confidentiality, financial and legal assistance, and empathetic managerial practices to support employees through separation effectively.

QUOTES

Based on your experience, how could your employer best support people going through separation?

Flexibility

“Understanding and flexibility to manage emotions and appointments.”

“Time out and space so that you can go out and find support or seek guidance”

“Have on-shift roles available for people who have shared custody of kids”

“Flexible hours for shift workers, within reason. A few hours flex either side of a shift could make big difference”

“By being more understanding with regards to child care arrangements be more flexible. I lost time with my kids due to work commitments and not feeling supported.”

Manager/peer support

“Specific peer support from people who have gone through and understand separation.”

“Listen, try to understand, and help guide and assist to solutions. Everything is very overwhelming and hard to tackle on your own, Sending links to make information easily accessible, check in regularly.”

“Continue to promote services and help that is available to staff, and also continue to train people in Mental Health First Aid and Peer Support Officers to improve early detection and interventions for people going through a hard time.”

“Identifying members about to or going through separation and divorce and referring them to some immediate support services. In work time would be preferred as it would help to take away the pressure of finding time to attend.”

“Ensure line managers support their people - My line manager supported me, however I’m aware others in similar positions have not received the same support.”

Professional Support

“Would be great if it was a sort of instant referral to go and see someone who is well aware of all the moving parts who can you sit you down and help work out a plan. I just fumbled my way along trying to survive. I did not ask for help from anyone but in hindsight having someone force me to meet with a person just once who could then help me with a plan and explain my options would have been very helpful.”

“I wish I had been able to see a financial counsellor etc but it is just too expensive to engage that service, so I didn't. I now know that I would have been entitled to money from my partner, but I wasn't in a situation where I could deal with that in the moment and I didn't even know where to start.”

“If the employer would have someone available to discuss the topic of separation, assist with Child support enquiries and payroll, be proactive in having a dedicated service related to this as it is very common with the fire service.”

“Having dedicated personnel and/or processes to assist employees”

“I needed someone I could trust who wasn't going to cost an arm and a leg. I was worried about finances.”

Resources and guidance

“Maybe have an online portal with available support.”

“A structured workflow for people who present as going through separation so that they know which services they can plug into at whatever step they find themselves in through the process.”

“Provide information of support services available that specifically relate to separation”

Recommendations for Emergency Service Agencies

Benefits of targeted support services

Providing targeted support services to ES workers during separation can have significant benefits. Financial guidance can help individuals navigate the complexities of property division and develop strategies for managing their finances during this challenging time. Legal support can ensure that ES workers are aware of their rights and receive fair treatment throughout the separation process. These were two factors identified by respondents when reflecting with hindsight about what services they wish they had accessed that may have improved their outcomes.

Emotional counselling can be invaluable in helping ES workers cope with the emotional upheaval associated with separation. In the *State of Separation Impact Report 2023*, The Separation Guide found that the highest proportion of people reporting feelings of depression occurred in the group who had not even discussed separation with their partner yet. This indicates that confidential support from separation specialists could benefit ES workers even before they separate with The Separation Guide findings suggesting most opt for anonymous, outside

support rather than seeking support from friends or family in the very early stages. Separation Support or coaching can provide the communication approaches to separate safely and avoid escalation, and therapists can provide tools for managing stress, anxiety, and depression, and help individuals develop healthy coping mechanisms. The *State of Separation Impact Report 2023* also found that without support, 87.5% of people ended in what would be considered ‘bad separations’, that were unfair or ended in high conflict.

Flexible work arrangements can also be crucial in supporting ES workers during separation. Offering options for flexible scheduling or reduced workloads can alleviate the logistical challenges associated with childcare and allow individuals to manage their personal responsibilities more effectively.

Finally, confidential and carefully managed peer support programs can provide a safe space for ES workers to connect with colleagues who understand the unique challenges they face. Peer support can help reduce feelings of isolation and provide valuable emotional support.



Recommendations

Employers of ES workers have a significant role to play in supporting their personnel during separation. By implementing the following recommendations, emergency service agencies can create a more supportive environment and minimise the negative impacts of separation on their staff and volunteers’ wellbeing and work performance.

- **Emotional counselling:** Expand promotion of the employee assistance programs (EAPs) to include support for managing the emotional challenges of separation and ensuring the findings of this report are shared with all EAP providers for each agency.
- **Financial advice and superannuation guidance:** ESF to share research findings with ESSSuper and other leading superannuation funds to help equip ES workers with the knowledge and skills necessary to make informed financial decisions during separation, ensuring they understand their rights, the process of separating superannuation, and the need for legal advice in that process.
- **Early intervention resources:** ESF to provide access to separation resources such as articles, videos, and self-help tools on the Family Matters portal (currently in development) and encourage agencies to link to these resources to minimise duplication.
- **Legal support:** Consider how access to legal advice can be supported as an extension of EAP services as a means of reducing the long-term risks to the workplace.
- **Flexible work arrangements:** Agencies to consider reviewing flexible work arrangements to ensure they are easily accessible for people managing the stress and challenges of separation.
- **Confidential Peer Support:** Agencies to consider providing training for peers to ensure they are aware of the unique challenges of separation and feel confident to provide appropriate support.
- **Develop and promote separation support policies:** Clearly defined policies outlining the types of support services available to ES workers during separation can provide valuable guidance and reassurance.
- **Train managers to recognise signs of distress:** Equipping managers with the skills to identify signs of emotional distress in ES workers can enable them to offer support and intervene early if necessary.
- **Promote a culture of support:** Creating a supportive workplace environment that removes the stigma of separation and divorce where ES workers feel comfortable seeking help from colleagues and managers can be crucial in facilitating access to available resources.
- **Ensure confidentiality and respect for privacy:** Ensuring confidentiality throughout the support process is essential in encouraging ES workers to seek help without fear of judgment or repercussions.

Further Research

While this report has explored the current state of knowledge regarding separation support services for ES workers in Victoria, there are opportunities for further research. Future studies could investigate the effectiveness of different support interventions, explore the specific needs of diverse groups within the ES worker population (e.g. volunteers, gender, age, length of service), and examine the long-term impacts of separation support services on ES worker wellbeing and career trajectories.

A gender lens could be applied to future research to segment the impact on female versus male workers. Specifically, studies should assess whether women are more likely than men to require altered work hours or to leave their positions entirely due to separation-related stress. An economic based diversity and inclusion lens could also be applied assessing the cost benefit to government for providing all government workers with early intervention support, something that is shown to minimise long term disadvantage to women, specifically when they do not receive legal advice around fairness of separation agreements.

The *State of Separation Impact Report* found that 67% of people demonstrated a behaviour to avoid legal advice, yet almost half of those who were primary carer givers had accepted unfair arrangements that would increase their chances of long-term financial disadvantage. This avoidance represents high risks to them, the workplace, and the government, which pays the highest economic cost for downstream support systems.

Importantly, this ES survey captured this sentiment with most respondents commenting with hindsight that they wished they had received advice around financial, property and superannuation matters. This finding represents a commonly misunderstood factor of separation agreements, emphasising the importance for educational information to navigate the complex nature of separation, greater awareness around the process of superannuation splitting and the need for legal representation to divide superannuation benefits fairly. Understanding these gender-specific outcomes will be crucial in tailoring support services to better meet the unique needs of both female and male ES workers and for other government funded employees.

Conclusion

Separation is a challenging life event that can significantly impact ES workers due to the inherent stress of their jobs. This report has explored the negative consequences of separation on ES worker wellbeing, highlighting the importance of providing targeted support services. The research suggests that a holistic approach encompassing financial guidance, legal support, emotional counselling, flexible work arrangements, and confidential peer support can significantly benefit ES workers during separation.

By implementing these recommendations, member agencies can create a supportive work environment that fosters individual wellbeing and minimises disruption to work performance. Investing in separation support services not only benefits individual ES workers but also strengthens the broader organisation by promoting a more resilient and engaged workforce. Furthermore, supporting ES workers during separation can contribute positively to the broader community, as healthy and well-balanced ES workers are better equipped to serve and protect the public.

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