



Centre for Traumatic Stress Studies

MFS HEALTH AND WELLBEING STUDY

The South Australian Metropolitan Fire Service (MFS) and the University of Adelaide conducted a ground-breaking Health and Wellbeing Study of MFS staff during 2014.

This Study examined the mental and physical health of MFS personnel, and included identification of occupational hazards and risks faced by firefighters and the functional effects at work, and in firefighters' personal lives, of health conditions experienced.

The final report has recently been forwarded to the MFS, and is now ready for wider distribution. The invaluable information gained from this study will be used to inform future MFS policy, procedure and processes that will assist all MFS personnel. The findings of the report are summarised in this fact sheet.



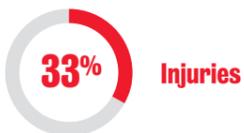
Government
of South Australia



Nearly 1 in 5 were estimated to meet criteria for a mental disorder in the last 12 months. Anxiety disorders are the most common mental disorder class in the MFS, followed by affective disorders.



Most MFS members reported low levels of current psychological distress, however, nearly 1 in 3 reported moderate to high levels. Exposure to traumatic events, and in particular, occupational stressors (such as concerns about job skill and co-worker conflict) was associated with current levels of psychological distress.



The most common type of injury sustained by MFS members while on the job were musculoskeletal, with around 1 in 3 reporting having sustained a musculoskeletal injury while on duty or attending an emergency in their lifetime.



1 in 10 MFS members were estimated to have experienced suicidal thoughts in the previous 12 months – a rate substantially higher than generally observed in the Australian community. In contrast, rates of suicide plans and attempts were exceptionally low.



Just over 5% of MFS members were estimated to meet criteria for PTSD in the previous 12 months – this equates to 1 in 20. The risk of PTSD was higher among MFS members who reported experiencing a range of traumas commonly occurring in the workplace, such as dealing with deceased persons and mass casualties. The number of accumulated workplace traumas MFS members had experienced over their career was also more generally associated with increased traumatic stress symptoms.



MFS members were generally physically fit and healthy, with low rates of doctor diagnosed physical health conditions. The most commonly reported physical health conditions were high cholesterol, high blood pressure, sinus problems, skin cancers, osteoarthritis and hearing loss. These were more common in older MFS members and those who had been in the MFS for longer, suggesting an overall accumulation of physical health complaints with age. There was substantial comorbidity between physical health complaints and 12 month mental disorders, with around 1 in 5 people with each physical complaint also meeting criteria for a 12-month mental disorder. Mental disorder comorbidity was particularly high for some physical conditions including traumatic brain injury and rheumatoid arthritis.

Occupational Stress

Most MFS members reported some level of occupational stress, with the most common sources being:

- Job skill concerns
- Co-worker conflict
- Sleep issues

Trauma Exposure

Most MFS members reported experiencing traumatic events in their lifetime, and nearly all have experienced traumatic events in the course of their work.

3 out of 4 MFS members reported having seen someone badly injured or killed, and 1 in 2 had experienced a man-made disaster in their lifetime.

Workplace trauma exposure is an inherent part of MFS service, with 3 in 4 members being exposed to 10 or more critical workplace incidents in their career.

Around 1 in 20 reported very high levels of workplace traumatic exposures (30 or more incidents).

Nearly all MFS members have witnessed death on the job, and three quarters reported feeling threatened on the job.

Workplace events involving injury to MFS members themselves, and attending mental health incidents were most highly associated with psychological distress.

Where to From Here

The Senior Leadership Team of the MFS know well the challenges and potential damage to health and wellbeing that firefighters and staff face during the course of their careers. The MFS is therefore committed to protecting and improving the work health, safety, and wellness of its workforce and in the forthcoming months and years, many positive changes will be implemented, to bolster and support those changes that have already been put in place (e.g., the MFS has already increased its Employee Assistance Program by initiating an additional Employee Support Coordinator).

The MFS will be implementing a Wellness and Safety section to better coordinate issues that relate to the health and wellbeing of MFS personnel. Initiatives already being worked on include:

- Working collaboratively with the UFU on functional fitness
- Investigating what additional support can be offered to retired personnel and those that are transitioning into retirement
- Increasing the resilience of MFS staff through a Mental Health First Aid in-service program
- Reviewing and strengthening the Peer program
- Continuing to work with the UFU on an Alcohol and Other Drug Policy for all staff.

Support

The MFS provides you and your family with a range of support options that you may want to utilise. Please contact one of the following:

Employee Support Coordinator:
Dennis Taylor
08 8204 3650 / 0417 861 922

Employee Assistance Program (EAP):
COGNITION 08 8373 2688

Peer Support Group:
Please refer to the Members Only Website (MOW) for a list of current peers

For assistance in a mental health emergency, please contact one of the following services:

SA Mental Health Triage Service:
13 14 65 (24 hrs, 7 days)

Crisis Care: 13 16 11 (Mon - Fri, 4pm - 9am. Sat, Sun and Public Hols 24 hrs)

Lifeline:
13 11 14 (24 hrs, 7 days)

Beyond Blue:
1300 22 46 36 (24 hrs, 7 days)

For other assistance, please contact your local GP or your existing mental health provider.