The CRANApplus Bush Support Services

Guide to Bush Survival

CRANApplus Bush Support Services line
1800 805 391
toll free ‘every day of the year’
CRANAplus is the peak professional body for the Remote and Isolated Health Workforce of Australia and is the only organisation whose sole focus is remote health. CRANAplus is a member-based organisation, which serves remote and isolated health workers through its endeavours in advocacy, education and support.

Remote and Isolated Health Professionals work in a variety of settings that include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities, on and off-shore oil rigs, railway and mining communities, pastoral properties, island resorts and tourism and other remote locations. They are an integral part of the health care delivery system in remote areas of Australia.

Our History
Remote area nurses seeking to put remote health issues on the national agenda founded the Council of Remote Area Nurses of Australia in 1983. Concerns about the poor health status of people living in remote areas, and inequalities in access to services, remain as a core focus for the organisation today. In 2008, CRANA members voted to open membership beyond nursing and welcomed all remote and isolated health workers into the organisation and changed its name to CRANAplus.

Our Aims and Objectives
The aim of CRANAplus is to contribute to the development and delivery of safe, high-quality primary healthcare to remote and isolated areas of Australia and her territories.

CRANAplus supports remote health workers so that remote area consumers are guaranteed an optimal standard of health care. CRANAplus calls for collaborative action and pledges strong commitment to the achievement of these objectives.

CRANAplus Programs
A series of multidisciplinary courses, which include the topics of advanced trauma and emergency management, and maternity emergency management. Held across the country, the program’s aim is to improve the skills, competence and confidence of participants.

CRANAplus Bush Support Services
A range of programs and resources to assist remote and isolated health workers and their families in managing the stress of living and working in a remote location. The program includes an anonymous, nation wide 24-hour telephone debriefing and support service staffed by psychologists with remote experience. CRANAplus Bush Support Services also offers workshops on stress prevention and wellness for the remote workforce.

Remote Health Practice
A Postgraduate multidisciplinary program designed in partnership with Flinders University of South Australia, this program aims to prepare the remote workforce through advanced education from graduate certificate to Masters degree level.
Foreword

It is difficult to think of a workplace context that offers as much opportunity to grow personally and professionally, to learn and to serve than that offered by working in remote area health. The challenges faced by remote area health workers all across Australia are diverse, confronting and exciting. Isolation, environmental challenges, lack of infrastructure and the high burden of disease are some of the factors that make up the reality of remote area health work. For some remote area health is a lifetime’s work. For others, their stay out bush is short. Each individual who works in a remote setting needs to have very clear set of ways of dealing with job related stress.

The remote area health setting is changing. Remote Area Nurses remain the backbone of service delivery in the remote context. However, the increased number of allied health professionals represented in remote health and the development of e-health technologies is changing the face of remote health practice.

Just as the remote area health setting is changing, current psychological thinking about the ways of assisting people to cope with stress has also evolved. There has been a shift away from a focus on negative emotions such as anxiety, depression, stress and trauma to a more positive psychology. The CRANAplus Bush Support Services Guide to Bush Survival aims to help health workers understand the stressors they may encounter in the rural and remote health setting and to consolidate and build resilience through a variety of positive skills and strategies.

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Disclaimer: The information provided within the contents of this booklet is merely a set of guidelines that one may use to achieve a healthier lifestyle.

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1. Introduction

This booklet is about staying emotionally well in the bush health setting. It’s about anticipating and accepting that there will be times in your working life in the bush that are more stressful than others. The first step is understanding your circumstances and why you may find yourself feeling stressed (Sections 2 and 3). The second step is about creating and maintaining a healthy working and personal life by managing how you respond to those stressors in a positive way (Sections 4 and 5).
2. Causes of Workplace Stress

Remote area health work is an experience that is professionally challenging and personally satisfying. The unique work context of working remote means that developing self-care strategies must be a priority in your day-to-day life.

Most of you who work remote are working above and beyond full-time, and you are performing multiple roles for which you may be trained but are not necessarily experienced in. Some of you are on call 24 hours a day or work shifts. You often work alone, or in small clinics, with responsibility for a large number of patients. You are more likely than your counterparts in cities to experience or witness multiple traumatic events; with little time to recover from one, before another occurs. You may live and work in the same community, often in inadequate housing, or you may do ‘fly in fly out’. To access support, clinically or professionally, you have to travel great distances. Professional issues such as boundaries can become very complicated and blurred. Career development can be limited. Friends and family are far away. Added to the above are the extremes of climate and climate change, drought or flooding rains, the dust and bugs. On top of that, food is expensive. Whew!

In addition, callers to the CRANAplus Bush Support Services line sometimes talk about a lack of clarity in regard to what their actual job is and issues can arise when expectations do not match the job description. You might feel stressed when management expectations appear to favour quantity rather than the quality of work. Or sometimes work practices appear to go against professional standards or personal beliefs. Positions of power in the bush can be tricky when there is a conflict between what is expected by management further up the line and co-workers’ expectations.

No matter how resilient you are, all these factors increase susceptibility to stress.

Self-care is the key to avoiding burnout in the bush. It is both prevention and cure.
3. Knowledge is Power

Know Yourself

It is important to think about the personality factors that may have contributed to you choosing to work in bush health. We know that emergency service personnel in general tend to have certain personality traits in common including being high achievers; adventurous, independent, risk-takers who like to think outside the square.

They also share the personality trait of believing that they are immune to stress and trauma! For some, this factor makes it a challenge to discuss the very human responses to stress that we all experience. It also suggests a tendency to workaholism, a cycle in which people work harder and harder in order to achieve what they think they should. The difficulty here is that excessive hard work makes you feel fatigued and exhausted. In this case, self-care becomes the lowest priority, as not working starts to make those workaholics amongst us feel guilty.
What is going on in our lives outside of work also affects workplace levels of stress. Balancing work and home life may be difficult at different times in your life. Other factors such as physical or mental illness, financial concerns, relationship issues, bereavement or illness can also impact significantly on your level of workplace stress and can lower your tolerance.

**SURVIVAL TIPS:**

**Know Thyself**

- Reflect on each day and how you coped. Keep a diary that identifies the things each day that make you happy at work and the things that trigger stress.

- It’s so important to talk to someone you trust about what pushes your buttons or stresses you (remember CRANAplus Bush Support Services is ready to do this 24/7). Challenge your thinking if thoughts start coming into your head like “I’m weak” or “I’m not coping”. Remember: taking action is taking responsibility.

- Challenge perfectionist thinking and be realistic – you don’t have to be perfect all the time.

- Make lists and get organised. Itemising chores for the day will help to prioritise things and you get the satisfaction of ticking them off as they get done.
Know your Organisation’s Structures and Culture

Like all organisations, the culture of remote area workplaces varies from location to location. One of the key indicators of stress levels in a workplace is how an organisation deals with the emotional wellbeing of its employees. If stress is seen as merely individuals who are not coping, or a weakness, more stress is generated. Other factors in the structure and culture of an organisation that determine levels of workplace stress include poor communication, lack of consultation and little or no involvement in decision-making.
SURVIVAL TIPS: Know What You Are Dealing With

• Before you go out bush, learn about the organisation and community you are going to. Get information on the internet; talk to people who have worked there before.

• Once you are there, learn about the structure and culture of the organisation and the community.

• Become familiar with the policy and procedure manual. Well-used policies and procedures reduce stress by making the workplace more predictable and allows for avenues of grievance against discrimination and bullying.

• Make sure you are aware of the policies on harassment, bullying or racism. These documents should help to clarify what is and isn’t acceptable behaviour in your workplace and what the complaint procedure is.

• Be aware of the fact that if you are feeling stressed or bullied, others in your workplace probably are as well. So find the time to communicate with trusted colleagues. There is safety in numbers and it’s easier to plan a strategy.

• If you are aware of questionable practices in the organisation, for example unsafe clinical practices, financial dealings or abuse, find a way of speaking out about it. Make sure you stay safe, and get advice, for example from the union, employee assistance programme, or ring CRANAplus Bush Support Services to discuss.

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Know the Effects of Changing Work Patterns

Patterns of work in rural and remote settings have changed dramatically in recent years, and are still changing. It’s a fact of modern working life in general, and it’s important to be aware of the complexities of these changes, and understand how they can affect you. In the good old days, the norm for a health professional was to have only one or, at most, two jobs during the course of their working life. The benefit of this pattern was structure, predictability and stability; factors that generally ease stress.

However, the pattern has changed and the course of a person’s working life, particularly in rural and remote health, has become much more unpredictable. For some, this means short-term contracts, changing employers, periods of unemployment and even completely changing profession.

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As with any change, there are positives and negatives with this emerging work pattern. The extremely high turnover of health workers in remote areas creates some difficulties in the delivery of health services, particularly in terms of workload. The other side of the coin, though, is that, to a certain extent, this new work pattern does give you the opportunity to construct your own career path. And the ability to make career choices does, in fact, reduce stress levels.

In a remote health setting, as in any other setting, the way you earn your living is just one of the factors that affects your identity and gives meaning to your life: other factors include your relationships with other people, your outside interests, and your choices around diet and exercise. These factors are important resources to draw on when your working life is going through a stressful phase.

SURVIVAL TIPS:
The Times They Are A-Changing

• Think about the future sometimes. Keep your CV up to date, and have Plan A and B!
• Think about using careers counselling if you feel like you are in a rut.
• Don’t make big career decisions at the time of a crisis
• Remember that work is only one part of your identity. Work at maintaining the balance between work and life. Develop interests and relationships outside of work and value them!

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4. Bush Survival Strategies

The Importance of Relationships

One of the best buffers against workplace stress is having supportive relationships. Remote area work often means that you are away from your usual supports and this makes building good relationships with your work colleagues doubly important.

Remember you can’t do it all on your own! Besides enriching your work, good relationships with your colleagues ensures that you have others on hand to debrief with and to provide support when necessary. One of the most distressing things when things are not going well for you is the sense that you are alone. Added to the geographical and cultural isolation, this feeling of personal isolation can be really hard to deal with and is a major factor in good people leaving the bush.
Essential to staying well in the bush is the need to invest some time and energy into improving the quality of your work relationships. Strong working relationships are not necessarily friendships but are built on mutual understanding, empathy, good communication and listening with full attention. The ability to ‘give and take’ is the most important factor in relationship-building.

Forming good relationships can take time but the investment will reap many rewards including greater cooperation, better morale and less conflict – that has to be good!
SURVIVAL TIPS:
Work on Your Relationships at Work

• Prioritise building up a network of support and invest time in developing good relationships, even if you do this by telephone, email or skype.

• Greet your colleagues when you begin the work day – the first few minutes are crucial for setting the scene. Find some things in common with each of your colleagues (there will be something!) and have a conversation about these from time to time.

• Be sincerely curious about what is behind others point of view when it differs from your own. Share some of things about yourself – you don’t have to divulge everything!

• And don’t be too discouraged if relationships get strained from time to time: this too will pass.

• It is important to remember that: some conflict is unavoidable – try to bounce back and engage with colleagues as soon as possible.

• Treat other people as you want to be treated ie with respect.

• Express your point of view without alienating others.

• Admitting your mistakes is a sign of confidence and leadership.

• When you are having a bad day, take some time to do some mindful breathing, muscle relaxation etc – it can take the body 20 minutes to calm down so, if possible, take a break.
Recognising Stress

It is important to recognise the symptoms of stress in order to do something about it. Some of the signs of stress to look out for are:

**Psychological** – feelings of agitation, anxiety, tearfulness, feeling blue, moodiness, lack of motivation, irritability and indecision.

**Physical** – exhaustion and fatigue, digestion problems, headaches, loss or increase of appetite and muscular pain.

**Behavioural** – fidgeting and pacing, increased drug and alcohol consumption, withdrawal from social activities, aggression.
Building Resilience

It is important to be aware of your stress levels, and to have a plan to deal with your stress.

The first step towards stress busting is to identify what it is in your workplace that is causing stress. The second is to identify those factors that help you work happily. Thirdly and most importantly, having a positive attitude is crucial.

10 tips to beat bush stress

1. Relaxation
2. Do things you value
3. Family and friends
4. Be in the moment
5. Use humour
6. Healthy lifestyle
   - eating nutritious food
   - getting adequate sleep
   - regular exercise
7. Ban negative thoughts
8. Learn to say NO
9. Prioritise yourself
10. Self compassion

Pain is inevitable. Suffering is optional.
Taking steps, even small steps, to manage your stress means that you are taking control. And that can make the world of difference. It’s important to remember that you can reduce your own personal level of stress, even if others in your workplace are stressing.
Recent psychological thinking has moved away from focusing on negative emotions, such as depression and anxiety, as in the past. Rather, it has been looking at the choices that we can make to build resilience through understanding the positive, creative, adaptive parts of ourselves.

SURVIVAL TIPS:
Making Positive Choices

- Remember it is OK to say no. Saying yes to extra demands might just be the straw that breaks the stressed camel’s back.
- Remember to breathe! Stress can be controlled by mindful breathing.*
- Try and get away from the clinic (or at least your desk) at regular intervals.
- Smile lots.
- Get moving! Exercise is the key to both physical and mental health.
- Drink lots of water.
- Eat fresh fruit and vegies.
- Practise relaxation regularly.
- Always look for the positives in difficult situations.
- Stamp out workaholism. As much as you can, try to work regular hours. Take your lunch and tea breaks. Don’t forget your holidays!
- Laugh lots.
*Mindful Breathing*

Get into a quiet, comfortable position. Lie down if you can, although it is possible to do this whilst sitting comfortably at your desk. Close your eyes.

Start to breathe slowly and steadily. Gradually start to focus your attention on your breathing. Notice anything about your breath? You might notice that the air you breathe in is slightly cooler than the air you breathe out. Feel your chest rising and falling. Become aware of the air going in and out of your nostrils. In your mind, stand back and watch your breathing.

While focussing on your breathing, your mind will wander. Notice this happening and gently bring your focus back to your breath.

When you are ready to stop, slowly start to observe other things in the room. If you are sitting at your desk you can start to become aware of your feet on the ground. When you are ready open your eyes, ask yourself how you feel right now and get on with your day.
MORE SURVIVAL TIPS:
Positive Choices You Can Make with Your Employer

• Strive to make your physical work environment as appropriate to your work needs and as comfortable as possible.

• Laugh.

• Make sure your manager/supervisor is regularly updated about your workload.

• Seek out regular feedback on your work. Don’t be afraid to open up lines of communication. This can pre-empt problems and helps in problem solving.

• Laugh some more.

• Don’t let problems build up. Give yourself permission to talk to relevant HR or union personnel.

• Reflect on your own values and highlight the way you contribute to society. It will make it easier to put the annoying little things into perspective.

• Be aware of the support available and use it! For example, CRANAplus Bush Support Services, EAP and mentoring schemes.

• As much as you can, make the most of any opportunities for training and development offered by your employer.
Making the Workplace Happy

One of the conditions that callers to the CRANAplus Bush Support Services line prioritise in the bush is a happy workplace. Anecdotally, the stories of a happy workplace involve the workers feeling like they belong, that their work is of importance, they are loved and cared for as people and their expertise is valued. Of all the factors that contribute to the retention of the remote area workforce, workplace happiness is the one that seems to contribute the most. And the exciting thing is that it is a factor where you can make a difference.

There are a number of signs and symptoms of a happy workplace. When you walk into a happy remote area workplace you will see lots of busyness but also lots of smiling and positive interaction between staff members. Staff members greet each other. You will start to see evidence of power-sharing. Breaks will be important as they give you the opportunity to chat. The environment will be neat, clean and tidy and there will be signs of life: some artwork or plants.

What you won’t see in a happy workplace is bitchiness, cynicism and sarcasm. Remember that small talk is OK, so take time to learn the art of it. But make sure you understand the importance and danger of gossip. It’s important to adopt a rule of good faith in the workplace. This means that you don’t assume that colleagues are out to get you, or that they don’t have the organisation’s best interests at heart. A good rule might be ‘don’t say anything about anyone else that you wouldn’t want said about you’. A happy workplace is one where it is safe to be upfront and appropriate.
The importance of good communication in a happy workplace extends to emails and phone calls as well. Make sure you don’t neglect returning calls and emails promptly. Failure to do so makes colleagues feel unimportant and frustrated.

SURVIVAL TIPS:

• Choose to have a happy workplace by making a decision to actively contribute to a happy atmosphere at work.

• Find reasons to celebrate and find reasons to decorate!

Work/Life Balance

Having a balance between work and life is one of the factors that contributes to creating a happy work environment. We all know this is a challenge in a remote setting, but it’s not impossible. The ‘life’ side of the equation includes encouraging strong and enduring relationships with friends and family and finding a passion in an activity or hobby.

If you can have conversations with your managers about making your work time flexible so that you ‘have a life’, this can also assist with workplace happiness. Managers who can be flexible about these sorts of arrangements are definitely setting the scene for a happy workplace.
Try to cultivate friendships with your co-workers as much as possible. Within limits, the more you know about someone the more understanding and compassionate you can be when things become stressful. Celebrating birthdays and achievements is crucial to a happy workplace... even if you have to do it via telephone or internet. Surprising your colleagues with a treat, such as baking scones, also encourages a sharing environment. Think about the occasional social activity together outside of work.

Creative work environments are also happy work environments. If you feel like your workplace is in a bit of a rut, initiate some fun. Have colour theme days, such as a Yellow Day where everyone has to wear or do something with the colour yellow, or a hat day where everyone wears a hat. Even more helpful would be to have some group activity that involves physical exercise. Buy a Zumba DVD! Even if you are in a single-nurse post, you could “pal up” with someone via telephone or the internet and do the exercises at the same time.

**SURVIVAL TIP:**

- Aim to have connections with people and fun both at work and in your home life.

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5. Staying Fit and Healthy

Staying physically healthy is the key to surviving in the bush. Just because you are working in a remote area does not mean that the basic requirements for a healthy life go by the wayside. Staying healthy emotionally includes looking after your body as well. This means paying attention to having good sleep patterns where possible, exercising regularly and eating well. These are tried and true stress reduction activities that will definitely make you feel better and get you into training for when the going gets tough.
Keep Moving

It’s so important to keep moving. It can be a challenge when you are facing extremes of climate but it needs to stay near the top of your priority list. Moving enhances your overall level of fitness, increases your strength and energy levels and improves flexibility. In short, it makes you feel, overall, better about yourself.

Variety is the spice of life and it’s important to think about having a number of activities that you find suit you and the environment that you are in. This will help you stay motivated to keep fit. Activities could be walking, swimming, jogging or cycling but may also include more creative pursuits such as dancing. Think about setting up a home gym.

<table>
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<th>Exercise per day</th>
<th>15 mins</th>
<th>30 mins</th>
<th>45 mins</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Healthy meals that include vegetables per day</td>
<td>1 per day</td>
<td>2 per day</td>
<td>3 per day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water consumption per day</td>
<td>2 / 3 glasses</td>
<td>4 / 6 glasses</td>
<td>7 / 8 glasses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact with social or professional supports – can include telephone, skype, social media or debrief with a colleague</td>
<td>2 per week</td>
<td>3-4 per week</td>
<td>5 or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sleep per night</td>
<td>6 hours</td>
<td>7 hours</td>
<td>8 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making a contribution to workplace wellbeing</td>
<td>1 per week</td>
<td>2 per week</td>
<td>3 per week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hobbies per week</td>
<td>1 hour</td>
<td>2 hours</td>
<td>3 hours per week</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alcohol free days per week</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2 days</td>
<td>3 days</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Eating Well

Another self-care strategy that can be challenging for remote area health workers is accessing fresh food including plenty of fruit and vegies. Again, planning for this is a key survival strategy in remote areas and may require some creativity such as starting a vegie garden or being proactive by shipping in food or taking supplements.

It’s also important to remember not to overdo it. A good rule is to pitch your physical activity at just above your level of fitness: 30 minutes of exercise where your heart rate is elevated 3 times a week is ideal.

And stay connected. If you can’t exercise with a friend, connect up with another remote area health worker via email or telephone and encourage each other.

Your motivation will partly depend on how rewarding the activity is... so remember especially in the early days to build in rewards when you create an activity regime. A bit of lie-in and a lovely cuppa is an excellent reward for exercising during the week!
The type of food you eat really does make a huge difference to your overall wellbeing. Foods that are fatty or overloaded with sugar are mood altering and need to be avoided.

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Sleep

Sleep is so important to recharge the batteries but good sleep hygiene can be tricky when you are on call or working shifts. When your sleep is interrupted, it can be difficult to get back to sleep and it can disturb the quality of sleep.

However, there are certain things that you can do to improve the quality of your sleep when you do finally get the chance.

If you are trying to get back into a night sleep routine:

- Get up when you wake up in the morning rather than lying around for hours.
- Start the day with some activity to wake yourself up completely.
- Don’t nap during the day.
- Coffee and chocolate are stimulants so avoid them after about 4:00pm.
- Relax before you go to bed and take a boring book with you in case you can’t sleep. Your brain will choose to sleep rather than be bored senseless!
SURVIVAL TIP:

The number one thing to surviving in the bush is to stay mentally and physically healthy. This isn’t just about going for a walk once a week, or occasionally cutting down on alcohol consumption. It’s about being positive and making a commitment to daily self-care through regular exercise, good diet and routine stress management. Even little changes are sometimes difficult to make.

If you need support remember CRANAplus Bush Support Services is there 24/7.
Tip Sheet

- Avoid perfectionism and workaholism
- Develop relationships at work.
- Know the organisation you are working for.
- Understand the effects of changing work patterns in the bush.
- Make positive choices about your workload and work environment.
- Contribute to a happy workplace environment.
- Develop a good work/life balance.
- Stay healthy – it’s the key to surviving in the bush.
Acknowledgements

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