



VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTERS NEEDED FOR RESEARCH STUDY

We're looking for volunteer firefighters who were involved in the Black Summer bushfire season in NSW, ACT and VIC between September 2019 – March 2020.

As a volunteer firefighter, you may have experienced many stressful events while carrying out your duties. These stressful events, such as working on dangerous and unpredictable firegrounds during bushfire threats, can have a profound impact on the way we feel. Importantly, the ways in which we experience and process our involvement in such stressful events affects many aspects of our lives.

We are interested in hearing about how you have dealt with, and coped, under the stressful events from the prolonged and difficult Black Summer bushfires.

I am a Master of Clinical Psychology student at RMIT University investigating the ways in which volunteer firefighters have dealt with stressful events. I am especially interested in how the ways we have learned to relate to people can also affect the ways we have learned to cope in difficult situations and react to stress. Findings from this research may add valuable understanding regarding how to better support volunteer firefighters, ahead of future bushfire seasons.

Am I eligible?

- You are 18 years old or over
- You were a volunteer firefighter during the Black Summer bushfire season in NSW, ACT or VIC.
- You do not have a current mental health diagnosis (such as clinical depression or anxiety), provided to you by a qualified health professional
- You have not been diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in the last 2 years by a qualified health professional.
- You are not currently receiving psychological treatment from a qualified health professional.

What does my participation involve?

- Completion of one online survey (approx. 10-15 minutes), comprised of four questionnaires.
- Your participation will provide you with a free, virtual Wellbeing Package of supportive resources.

How do I participate?

If you would like to participate, please read through the Participant Information Sheet attached, to familiarise yourself with the project. Access to the survey is provided via electronic link at the end of the information sheet.

If you have any concerns or queries, or you are having trouble accessing the link, please contact the Primary Student Researcher below:

Ms. Lucy Tiley
Primary Student Researcher
RMIT University
S3837250@student.rmit.edu.au



Participant Information Sheet

Title	Understanding posttrauma outcomes for Australian volunteer firefighters in the 2019-2020 bushfires: The contribution of adult attachment style and coping strategies
Chief Investigator/Senior Supervisor	Dr Melissa Monfries (Senior Lecturer)
Principal Research Student(s)	Lucy Tiley (Master of Clinical Psychology Student)

What does my participation involve?

1 Introduction

You are invited to take part in this research project, entitled “*Understanding posttrauma outcomes for Australian volunteer firefighters in the 2019-2020 Black Summer bushfires: The contribution of adult attachment style and coping strategies*”. This research will be used by the Principal Research Student and Provisional Psychologist, Ms Lucy Tiley, towards meeting the requirements of a Master of Clinical Psychology degree.

This project is an online survey that investigates how volunteer firefighters dealt with the stress of the Black Summer bushfires, spanning September 2019 to March 2020. We are especially interested in whether individual responses to stressful events, such as bushfires, are influenced by two factors: the ways in which people relate to others, and their ways of coping. The next section explains these aspects of the project in more detail. You have received this invitation because you participated in this event as a volunteer firefighter in New South Wales or Victoria.

This Participant Information Sheet tells you about the research project. It explains the processes involved with taking part. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part in the research. Please read this information, including the frequently asked questions (FAQs) carefully. Before deciding whether or not to take part, you might want to talk about it with a relative or friend.

Participation in this research is voluntary. If you don't wish to take part, you don't have to.

If you decide you want to take part in the research project, you should follow the link at the end of this Participant Information Sheet, which will enable you to electronically access the survey. At the start of the survey, you will find a statement that explains that by submitting the completed survey, you have:

- A) *Understood what is involved in taking part in the research project; and*
- B) *Provided consent to take part in the research project.*

You may want to save a copy of this Participant Information Sheet as a document file on your computer's hard drive or, if you are able to do so, print it out to keep as a paper record.

2 What is the purpose of this research?

As a volunteer firefighter, you may have experienced exposure to many stressful events while carrying out your duties. These stressful events, such as working on dangerous and unpredictable firegrounds during bushfire threats, can have an impact on the way we feel. The ways in which people experience and process their involvement in such events affects many aspects of their lives.

We are interested in finding out how volunteer firefighters have dealt with these events. We are especially interested in whether individual responses to stressful events such as bushfires are influenced by two factors: attachment styles and coping strategies. Attachment styles can be described as the way we interact and behave in relationships. The way we have learned to relate to people can also affect the ways we have learned to cope in difficult situations and react to stress or threat.

In this way, this project will investigate how volunteer firefighters coped under the difficult circumstances of the Black Summer bushfires of 2019-2020. In particular, whether different styles of attachment and coping contributed to how they have reacted to, and their experiences of this stressful event. This project hopes to contribute to a better understanding of the factors that influence volunteer firefighters' responses to stressful events. Few studies to date have examined the interaction of these factors and focused on the unique circumstances affecting volunteer firefighters.

3 What does participation in this research involve?

If you are interested in taking part in this research project, and follow the electronic link to the survey, you will be asked to answer some brief questions relating to your age and current health. If you are eligible, you will be presented with four questionnaires (where responses are indicated in boxes). **These should take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete at most.**

By registering your interest in participating in this survey, you will be provided with a virtual Wellbeing Package of resources, specifically chosen to support volunteer firefighters. The Wellbeing Package is provided regardless of your eligibility status, and will include a range of written resources for stress-management, supportive online modules, video exercises and a list of free support services.

These resources are provided by a range of third-party providers and are free and accessible at any time. There should be no costs on your part associated with participating, and participants will not be paid. Importantly, the completion and submission of this survey will be taken to be your consent to participate in this study.

You will be eligible to participate, if:

- You are 18 years or older.*
- You were a volunteer firefighter during the Black Summer bushfire season in NSW, ACT or Victoria.*
- You do not have a current mental health diagnosis (such as clinical depression or clinical anxiety), provided to you by qualified health professionals like a doctor or psychologist.*
- You have not been diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in the last 2 years by a qualified health professional.*
- You are not receiving psychological treatment or therapy, from a qualified health professional.*

4 Other relevant information about the research project

We aim to recruit at least 100 participants from New South Wales and Victoria. This number of responses will help us better understand volunteer firefighters' reactions, as a unique occupational group, to the Black Summer bushfires. It is likely that the electronic link to our survey will be discontinued after 200 or so people complete the survey.

5 Do I have to take part in this research project?

Your participation in this research project is voluntary. If you do not wish to take part, you do not have to. When making your decision, please be aware that this project is for research purposes only and does not offer psychological treatment or counselling. If you decide to take part and later change your mind, you are free to withdraw from the project at any stage without having to provide any explanation. Your decision whether to take part or not to take part, or to take part and then withdraw, will have no adverse effects on your relations with the firefighting authority with which you are affiliated as a volunteer, because no identifiable information is collected at any stage, and all survey responses will be anonymous.

Submitting your completed survey will indicate your consent to participate in the project. You can withdraw your responses to any of the questionnaires in the survey at any time before you submit it. However, once you submit the survey, your responses to any of the questionnaires it contains cannot be withdrawn, because they are anonymous and therefore, we will not be able to tell which one is yours.

6 What are the possible benefits of taking part?

We cannot guarantee or promise that you will receive any benefits from this research; however, you may appreciate contributing to a greater understanding of how firefighters cope in times of stress.

7 What are the risks and disadvantages of taking part?

- **Psychological distress.**

You may feel that some of the questions we ask are stressful or upsetting. For example, you will be asked to rate how much you experienced distressing symptoms concerning your experiences during the bushfires. If you do not wish to answer a question, you may skip it and go to the next question, or you may stop immediately. If you become upset or distressed as a result of your participation in the research project, we aim to support you by providing a virtual link to a Wellbeing Package which includes free third-party mental health resources including interactive modules, and videos. This also includes relevant telephone support services, which also appear at the end of this document.

- **Online surveys.**

This project will use an external site (Qualtrics) to create, collect and analyse data collected in an anonymous survey format. If you agree to participate in this survey, the responses you provide will be stored securely on their host server. No personal information will be collected in the survey, so none will be stored as data. Once we have completed our data collection and analysis we will import the data to the RMIT server, where it will be stored securely for 7 years. The data on the host server will then be deleted and expunged.

8 What if I withdraw from this research project?

You may withdraw from the project at any time. However, any survey data you have submitted up to that point will not be able to be deleted, as it is anonymous and we cannot identify which responses are yours.

9 What happens when the research project ends?

It is anticipated that the results of this research project will be published and/or presented in a variety of forums. We will be pleased to provide the firefighting authorities a summary of group findings and ask them to distribute it to their membership. These findings are group averages of anonymous data, and as such, no individual results can be provided. The expected completion date for this project is in early 2022.

How is the research project being conducted?

10 What will happen to information about me?

Once we have completed our data collection and analysis, we will import the data to the RMIT server where it will be stored securely for 7 years. The data on the host server will then be deleted and expunged. All data we collect is anonymous, and your privacy is ensured. In the event of publication, the anonymous data we collect will be stored indefinitely in a data repository.

11 Who is organising and funding the research?

This research project is being conducted by Lucy Tiley, Master of Clinical Psychology student, under the supervision of Dr. Melissa Monfries, and is supported by RMIT University.

12 Who has reviewed the research project?

All research in Australia involving humans is reviewed by an independent group of people called a Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). This research project has been approved by the RMIT University HREC. This project will be carried out according to the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007)*. This statement has been developed to protect the interests of people who agree to participate in human research studies.

13 Further information

If you would like any further information concerning this project, please refer to the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) below, or feel free to contact the Principal Student Researcher (Lucy Tiley) below.

A. Does any information I provide go back to my firefighting organisation?

- Only anonymous group results will be reported by this study and distributed to firefighting organisations. No information that can identify you is collected at any stage of this project.

B. Will my firefighting organisation know whether I have participated or not?

- No. Your organisation will have no access or knowledge of who has accessed the survey. The survey is kept separate from the firefighting organisations. All survey responses are only accessible by the research team in line with RMIT's Privacy Policy.

C. Will my access to the Wellbeing Package end upon completion of this project?

- You will have access to the interactive modules for 12 months following your completion of the survey. All other resources included in the Wellbeing Package, such as written resources for dealing with stress, video exercises, and access to support service lists will not have an expiration date.

14 Contact details

If you have any queries about participating in this study, the Research Team's contact details are set out below. **In the first instance, please direct queries to the Principal Research Student, Lucy Tiley.**

Principal Research Student	Lucy Tiley s3837250@student.rmit.edu.au
Senior Supervisor	Dr Melissa Monfries (03) 9925 7782

15 Complaints

Should you have any concerns or questions about this research project, which you do not wish to discuss with the researchers listed in this document, then you may contact:

Reviewing HREC name	RMIT University
HREC Secretary	Vivienne Moyle
Telephone	03 9925 5037
Email	human.ethics@rmit.edu.au
Mailing address	Manager, Research Governance and Ethics RMIT University GPO Box 2476 MELBOURNE VIC 3001

15 Link to online survey

Please click on the link or scan the QR code to participate in the project.

https://rmit.au1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_3I5OET8XYMKYDwp



16 Support Services

After experiencing stressful events, it can be common to experience problems such as:

- Feeling like you've been **reliving** the experiences of last summer's bushfires, and having unwanted **memories**, vivid **nightmares**, **flashbacks** or intense reactions – like panic or heart palpitations, when reminded of this event.
- Feeling **wound up**, **having trouble falling asleep or staying asleep**, **concentrating**, feeling **angry** or irritable, taking **risks**, or being easily startled and **constantly on the lookout for danger**
- **Avoiding any reminders** – such as activities, places, people, feelings or thoughts – that bring back memories of last season's bushfires.
- **Negative thoughts and feelings**, like fear, anger, guilt, or **feel flat and numb** a lot of the time, have **lost interest** in things you previously enjoyed or **feel cut off** from your friends or family.
- Using **more alcohol or drugs** to try to reduce feeling emotionally upset.

If you are struggling with any of these, your mental health may be at risk.

Please consider seeking professional help and contacting a support service listed below.
Talking to someone can be an important step towards feeling better.

Organisation	Contact details
SANE Australia <i>Where you can talk to a trained counsellor for free via telephone support.</i>	1800 18 7263
Bush Support Line <i>Telephone counselling service for individuals living in rural or remote areas, where you can speak to the same psychologist over the phone.</i>	1800 805 391
Lifeline <i>If you are feeling distressed, in personal crisis, or having thoughts of harming yourself or others.</i>	13 11 14
MensLine Australia <i>An online and telephone support service for Australian men. Counsellors will listen, understand you, and help you find ways to feel better.</i>	1300 78 99 78
BeyondBlue <i>Telephone service to help if you are feeling anxious or depressed</i>	1300 22 4636
Suicide Call Back Service <i>For anyone thinking about suicide or harming themselves.</i>	1300 659 467
SANE Australia: "Life After Bushfires" <i>Anonymous bushfire forum for connection with peers who understand what you're going through, and how the bushfires might have changed your life.</i>	https://www.sane.org/lifeafterbushfires

If you or someone you know is at immediate risk of harm, please dial 000