

12 PRINCIPLES OF SUPPORT FOR RECOVERY WORKERS

1. Genuine

The most frequently noted success factor in support initiatives was buy-in right from the top—the **belief that supporting people is valuable in and of itself.**

“The most crucial thing is that the organisations and people who support us genuinely care.”

Japan

2. Tailored

Needs will change and vary across individuals and across time. Ask “What do you need?” and then listen, honestly, genuinely and safely—not from a place of judgement about coping or not coping.

“Ask open-ended questions about what people need and do not assume you know how people feel. Lots of mistakes happen when we think we know how people feel.”

Denmark

3. Build Understanding

One the greatest sources of stress, is the perception that **those higher up the chain don’t ‘get it’** – they don’t understand the challenges or the realities within the affected communities. If you want to support, find ways to increase your understanding of the realities on the ground.

“They feel it acutely when you spend time in a community and in a team— but real quality time— not breezing in and giving an hour. What is really beneficial is the informal stuff you are exposed to. Have lunch with people. Listen and feed challenges up the chain.”

Australia

4. Learn

Educate yourself in disaster recovery. Develop an understanding of the typical trajectories and challenges faced by communities and the supporters during long-term recovery.

“Workers and volunteers may be unwillingly and unknowingly exposed. They need to be told of the potential emotional costs. If they know the risks then they can make choices knowingly and be prepared—knowing what they’re diving into, the risks, the difficult issues and what they can do to look after themselves..”

Denmark

Educate about the importance of wellbeing. Understand an organisation’s role in protecting workers from the hazards of negative stress. Learn about the science behind stress, resilience and wellbeing. Educate supporters in the risks of a role in recovery, and in strategies and tools to minimise risk and support wellbeing.

5. Address the load

Recognise the load being carried, then take steps to lighten it. Identify and deal to the stressors themselves.¹¹ The nature of recovery does create bricks that are unavoidable, but a great many others could be lifted from the pile.

“One of the biggest organisational obstacles is the fallacy that it is all about self-care. Self-care is just one piece. We should be asking, how can we limit the stressors people are being faced with.”

U.S.A.

Proactively manage workloads, scale back expectations or scale up resourcing. Provide assistance for administrative tasks. Remove unnecessary hurdles, increase flexibility and reduce complexity to make tasks, processes, and systems less onerous.

Provide practical support to directly address recovery challenges of supporters who are themselves affected, and consider family needs as part of the equation.

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6. Prevention

Support resilience, rather than patching people up after they are injured.

"I know what doesn't work! Letting people get to the point where the systems we have kick in. It doesn't work to wait until someone is showing signs of vicarious trauma and then sending them off to a great therapist. That's gone too far."

Australia

7. Fair

Ensure access to support is equitable—within and across teams, roles and across time for those who may need support later.

"There's a load on people who work in the community but are not in dedicated recovery roles, and don't have access to supports—we also need to provide a system around them."

Australia

8. Flexibility

Trust in local perceptions and the flexibility to be able to respond to local needs using local knowledge. But combine this flexibility with clarity of direction and role objectives.

"Clarity in direction, boundaries and objectives is important, but works best when accompanied with the autonomy and flexibility to shape the support within these limits using the benefit of local knowledge"

New Zealand

9. Engrained

Make worker support part of how your organisation lives and breathes. Ensure that support of your people becomes a nonnegotiable basic and part of your culture and language. This comes from the top, and from making it an expectation of everybody in the organisation.

"It cannot be a tick-box exercise, or a siloed role. It has to be a value. And that value has to inform the actions and what management instil. That managers take care of each other and managers take care of their staff. It really comes right from the top."

U.S.A.

10. Dedicated Resourcing

While wellbeing should be everybody's responsibility and considered in all you do, there needs to be dedicated roles or responsibilities for creating and supporting the framework, expectations and systems, for raising awareness, providing training, monitoring levels and measuring the effectiveness of initiatives put in place.

"In the absence of anyone being identified to take care of people then it gets too busy, the focus drops off and they will just keep working..."

U.S.A.

11. Connect

Create connection opportunities for supporters in order to normalise struggles, offload frustrations with those who understand, and to problem solve. Build connections within the team and the organisation, with peers facing similar challenges from other organisations, with professional supervisors, with those who have previous lived experience of a role in disaster recovery...

"As time goes on, it's hard to separate themselves from what is happening. Having an external person, outside of the area to be their supporter helps—they know where they are standing, they have the long-term perspective and they know what they might be yet to face."

Japan

12. Reflect, Celebrate

Create opportunities for time away and for reflection to help people keep in touch with a normal frame of reference and prevent them from becoming consumed by recovery realities. Value and recognise contributions and efforts. Find opportunities to celebrate successes.

"After 9-11 we had a snapshot of the week, the moment that put a smile on your face and shared a few of these amongst the team which let us walk out with an image of a good moment. Because recovery is a big and never-ending process, we need people to hold onto the little moments."

U.S.A.