BIRD FLU *& You*

MANAGER TOOLKIT

Supporting people who care for wildlife as H5 bird flu spreads through Australian wildlife

A practical guide built around ARC: Aware • Respond • Connect

This toolkit provides general information and practical suggestions on supporting wellbeing during the H5 bird flu response. It is not medical, psychological, legal or professional advice, and does not create a professional or advisory relationship between the reader and the author. It does not replace your organisation's own work health and safety obligations, psychosocial risk management, clinical advice, or emergency procedures — and it is not a substitute for professional assessment of any individual's mental health or safety.

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Why this guide is needed now

H5 bird flu is no longer only a future preparedness issue for Australia. Local transmission has been confirmed in Australian seabirds, and South Australia has experienced Australia's first confirmed H5-related mass seabird mortality event, involving dozens of greater crested terns. Authorities expect further detections and wildlife impacts as the situation evolves.

For people working in conservation, wildlife rehabilitation, rescue, veterinary care, research and environmental management, this can mean repeated exposure to suffering and death, difficult triage and euthanasia decisions, sustained biosecurity pressure, uncertainty, and the possibility of seeing populations they have spent years protecting decline rapidly. This guide focuses on the human impact of that work and what managers can do about it.

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How to use this toolkit

This Manager Toolkit is a practical companion guide to the Bird Flu & You poster, built around the same ARC framework (Aware, Respond, Connect), for managers and team leads supporting wildlife workers through the H5 bird flu response.

It explains the different ways this work can affect people, gives managers concrete tools for noticing when someone is struggling, having a useful conversation, and connecting them with support — and includes a Quick Reference section for use in the moment, with links to fuller detail elsewhere in the toolkit.

It is not a diagnostic manual and managers are not expected to become counsellors. The role of a manager is to create safer working conditions, recognise when the work is taking a toll, have useful conversations, respond to what can be changed, and connect people with additional support when needed.

A key principle

People can be deeply affected by this work without being mentally ill. Sadness, grief, anger, anxiety, helplessness and exhaustion can be understandable responses to confronting events. The question for managers is not simply ‘Is this normal?’ but ‘How intense is it, how long is it lasting, is the person recovering, and is it affecting their ability to function safely?’

Most people come through this okay

Distress in response to this kind of work is common and understandable — it is not inevitably long-lasting. With early acknowledgement, practical support and connection, most people recover well, and many also describe finding unexpected meaning, skill or closeness with colleagues through demanding periods like this. This toolkit focuses on risk and response because that is where managers can act, not because difficulty is the expected or only outcome.

Why this is part of a manager's role

Supporting psychological wellbeing during a high-consequence event such as this is not separate from your work health and safety responsibilities — psychosocial hazards (including exposure to trauma, grief and high-pressure decision-making) sit alongside physical hazards under WHS/OHS obligations in Australia. This toolkit is a practical resource to help you meet that responsibility; it does not replace your organisation's own WHS, psychosocial hazard or emergency procedures.

The ARC — a simple approach for action

The ARC approach sets out a simple way to look after yourself and others.

- AWARE — understand the different costs of caring and notice changes in yourself and others.
- RESPOND — reduce avoidable strain, make practical adjustments and act early when someone is struggling.
- CONNECT — strengthen connection within the team and make it easy to access peer, workplace and professional support.

Key terms used in this toolkit

ARC	Aware, Respond, Connect — the framework this toolkit and the accompanying poster are built around.
EAP	Employee Assistance Program — confidential, employer-funded counselling and support.
PPE	Personal protective equipment (gloves, masks, gowns etc.) used for biosecurity and decontamination.
WHS / OHS	Work health and safety / occupational health and safety — the legal framework covering psychological as well as physical safety at work.
STS	Secondary traumatic stress — see the glossary in Section 4.
GP	General practitioner (a person's regular doctor).

Contents

1. Quick reference — recognising and responding

Use this section in the moment. Each part links to fuller detail elsewhere in the toolkit — turn there when you want the reasoning behind it, or when something doesn't fit the pattern below.

Recognise — a simple traffic-light response

See Section 3 for the fuller signs-and-symptoms table this is based on.

GREEN — affected but functioning

Sadness, fatigue or worry is present, but the person remains connected, functioning and able to recover between exposures.

Manager response: acknowledge; monitor; protect breaks and recovery; keep checking in.

AMBER — struggling

Symptoms are persistent or increasing, or are affecting sleep, concentration, relationships or work.

Manager response: talk privately; reduce exposure/workload where possible; agree a follow-up; encourage EAP, WildTalk, GP or other professional support.

RED — urgent concern

The person cannot function safely; is severely agitated, disoriented or hopeless; talks about self-harm or suicide; or there is another immediate safety concern.

Manager response: do not leave the person to manage alone. Follow emergency procedures and seek urgent professional/emergency support.

You do not need a diagnosis to act

If you are concerned, check in. Practical support offered early can prevent ordinary distress from becoming harder to manage.

Our organisation's escalation pathway

Fill this in before it's needed, so it's ready in an urgent moment.

Escalation contact for urgent safety concerns: _____

After-hours / weekend contact: _____

Useful checklists

Checklist — AWARE

See Section 3 for the signs to watch for and Section 4 for what they can mean.

- ☐ I know which roles currently have the greatest exposure to distressing work.
- ☐ I am watching for changes in mood, behaviour, concentration, sleep, coping and work performance.
- ☐ I am considering cumulative exposure, not just single incidents.
- ☐ I know who is working alone or carrying unusually heavy responsibility.
- ☐ I recognise grief over population and conservation losses as a legitimate impact of the work.

Checklist — RESPOND

See Sections 5 and 6 for the practical actions and conversation guidance behind these.

- ☐ High-exposure tasks are rotated where possible.
- ☐ Breaks and recovery are planned, not merely permitted.
- ☐ Staff understand why difficult decisions are being made.
- ☐ I check in privately when I notice a change.
- ☐ Practical workload or duty changes are considered before relying only on individual coping.
- ☐ Significant wildlife losses are acknowledged.

Checklist — CONNECT

See Section 7 for support pathways, including for volunteers.

- ☐ Staff know how to access EAP and whether volunteers are eligible.
- ☐ WildTalk details are visible and easy to access.
- ☐ I know the organisation's process if I am concerned about someone's immediate safety.
- ☐ People are followed up after particularly confronting work.
- ☐ I have my own support pathway. *(see Section 8)*

Checklist – MANAGER self-check

See Section 9 for more information on why this is important

- ☐ Am I sleeping and recovering between shifts?
- ☐ Am I becoming more irritable, detached or cynical?
- ☐ Am I repeatedly taking on the hardest tasks because it seems easier than asking someone else?
- ☐ Am I carrying responsibility for things outside my control?
- ☐ Do I have someone I can speak candidly with?
- ☐ Have I used the support options I am encouraging my team to use?
- ☐ Am I making decisions while too fatigued or distressed to think clearly?

2. The human cost of bird flu response

Wildlife workers may be affected precisely because they care deeply about animals, species, places and conservation outcomes. That commitment is a source of meaning and resilience. It can also make disease-driven loss particularly painful.

Bird flu can create several pressures at the same time:

- Repeated exposure to sick, neurologically affected, distressed or dead birds and other wildlife.
- Large numbers of deaths over a short period, including carcass collection and disposal.
- Triage and euthanasia decisions when animals cannot be saved or safely rehabilitated.
- Strict PPE, decontamination and biosecurity requirements, sometimes over long shifts or in difficult field conditions.
- Fear of making a biosecurity mistake, spreading disease to other wildlife, or carrying contamination home.
- Uncertainty about where the virus will appear next, which species will be affected, and how severe losses may become.
- Public concern, grief, scrutiny or anger directed at frontline workers and organisations.
- Disruption to normal conservation, rehabilitation, research or monitoring work.
- Seeing populations already diminished by habitat loss, drought, fire or other pressures suffer another major blow.
- Seeing years or decades of conservation effort potentially undone in days or weeks.
- Knowing that, once disease is established in free-ranging wildlife, there may be strict limits to what responders can do to stop it.

The loss can be bigger than the animals in front of you

A person may be grieving an individual bird, a breeding colony, a threatened population, a place they love, years of conservation effort, and a hoped-for future for that species — all at once. Managers should not underestimate this cumulative meaning.

3. AWARE — recognising when it is becoming too much

Do not wait for someone to say they are not coping. People who are highly committed to wildlife work may keep functioning long after they are depleted. Look for change, accumulation and impact.

What may change	What you might notice	What to consider	More concerning when...
Emotions	Sadness, tearfulness, anger, guilt, helplessness, anxiety, numbness	Is it proportionate to recent events and does it ease with rest/support?	It is intensifying, persistent or overwhelming.
Thinking	Poor concentration, indecision, intrusive images, self-blame, hopelessness	Is judgement still sound? Can the person switch attention away from the event?	It is affecting decisions, safety or ordinary functioning.
Behaviour	Withdrawal, conflict, avoidance, overworking, refusing breaks, unusual risk-taking	Is this a change from their usual behaviour?	The change is marked, escalating or unsafe.
Body	Poor sleep, exhaustion, headaches, appetite changes, tension	Are they recovering between shifts?	Sleep loss or fatigue is affecting safety or functioning.
Work	Errors, reduced confidence, inability to complete usual tasks, absenteeism or presenteeism	Can they still perform safely and effectively?	Performance has deteriorated or they cannot work safely.
Coping	Increased alcohol or drug use, compulsive checking, inability to switch off	Are coping strategies actually helping recovery?	Coping is creating additional harm or loss of control.
Connection	Isolation, detachment, feeling nobody understands	Are they still connected to supportive people?	They are markedly withdrawing or feel completely alone.

Five questions for managers

- CHANGE — Is this noticeably different from how the person usually is?
- CLUSTER — Are several signs appearing together?
- DURATION — Is it persisting rather than easing with ordinary rest and support?
- FUNCTION — Is it interfering with work, relationships, sleep or daily life?
- SAFETY — Is there any concern about the person's judgement, ability to work safely, self-harm or suicide?

The full traffic-light response for what to do next is in Section 1 (Quick Reference).

4. AWARE — understanding the costs of caring

The experiences below overlap. A person may be grieving and exhausted, morally distressed and anxious, or experiencing trauma symptoms alongside compassion fatigue. The labels are useful for understanding; they should not be used by managers to diagnose staff. Use this as a reference rather than something to read start to finish.

Term	What it can look like
Compassion fatigue	Emotional and physical depletion from prolonged caring when opportunities for recovery are inadequate — can show as reduced empathy, irritability, detachment or dread about returning to the work. ***Example:*** *repeated rescue, euthanasia, carcass handling and distressed-public contact with little chance to recover.*
Secondary traumatic stress (STS)	Trauma-like reactions from repeated exposure to traumatic scenes or others' suffering — intrusive images, avoidance, hypervigilance, sleep disturbance or emotional numbing. ***Example:*** *seeing large numbers of dead or dying birds, severe neurological symptoms or traumatic rescue scenes.*
Moral distress	Distress from knowing what should be done but being unable to do it because of disease-control requirements, resources, policy, safety or competing priorities. ***Example:*** *wanting to rescue an animal that cannot safely be admitted, or having to prioritise limited resources.*
Moral injury	More enduring distress following an experience that deeply violates a person's moral values — can involve guilt, shame, betrayal or a changed sense of self. Moral distress does not inevitably become moral injury. ***Example:*** *being required to take part in an action a person experiences as profoundly wrong.*
Ecological and conservation grief	Grief over the loss of species, populations, ecosystems, places and conservation outcomes — not only individual animals, but what years of work were intended to protect. ***Example:*** *a tern colony or threatened species declining after years of monitoring or breeding effort.*
Disenfranchised grief	Grief that isn't fully recognised by other people or society, often because the loss involves animals or ecosystems rather than people. ***Example:*** *comments like 'they're only birds' leaving someone feeling their grief is illegitimate.*
Anxiety and sustained vigilance	Some anxiety is appropriate around a serious infectious disease. More concerning when persistent, hard to switch off, or interfering with sleep, concentration or daily function. ***Example:*** *ongoing worry about PPE, contamination, or the next mortality event.*
Burnout	A response to chronic workplace stress marked by exhaustion, mental distance or cynicism, and reduced sense of effectiveness. Distinct from grief or trauma, though they can co-occur. ***Example:*** *long-running response operations with staff shortages and inadequate recovery.*

5. RESPOND — reduce the impact of the work

The response should not be limited to telling individuals to practise self-care. Managers have influence over exposure, workload, recovery, information, control and team culture.

Manage exposure

- Rotate high-exposure duties such as euthanasia, carcass collection, triage and repeated handling of affected animals.
- Do not repeatedly allocate the hardest work to the person who appears most resilient or who never says no.
- Track cumulative exposure across days and weeks, not only particularly difficult incidents.
- Use buddy systems for confronting field tasks where practicable.
- Alternate distressing work with lower-exposure or restorative tasks where operations allow.
- Build breaks into rosters rather than leaving people to request them.
- Protect genuine time away from the response.

Reduce uncertainty where possible

- Provide regular briefings about what is known, what is uncertain and what has changed.
- Explain the reasons for difficult decisions, including triage, euthanasia, access restrictions and biosecurity measures.
- Make PPE and decontamination requirements clear and practical.
- Be explicit about what workers can and cannot control.
- Tell staff where to raise ethical concerns or challenge an operational decision.
- Make support pathways visible before people need them.

Make space for grief

- Acknowledge significant deaths and population losses rather than moving immediately to the next operational task.
- Recognise that people may be grieving conservation gains, places and future possibilities as well as individual animals.
- Do not minimise loss with ‘that's nature’, ‘at least…’ or ‘you knew this was part of the job’.
- Mark significant losses or the end of an intense response in a way appropriate to the team.
- Acknowledge achievements without using them to cancel out grief: both loss and worthwhile work can be true at the same time.

A useful management question

Before asking only ‘How can this person cope better?’, ask ‘What can we change about the work?’

6. RESPOND — have a useful conversation

Managers do not need perfect words. A useful conversation is private, specific and low-pressure.

1. Say what you have noticed — for example, ‘You've seemed much quieter this week and you've mentioned you're not sleeping.’
2. Link it to the context — ‘You've had several days of very confronting field work.’
3. Ask an open question — ‘How is it affecting you?’
4. Listen. Do not rush to reassure, compare or fix.
5. Ask what would help — ‘What would make the next few days more manageable?’
6. Consider practical changes to duties, exposure, workload or recovery.
7. Offer support options and agree when you will check in again.

Questions that can help

- What has been the hardest part of the work lately?
- What are you noticing in yourself?
- Are you recovering when you're away from work?
- Is there something about the work we could change?
- Would stepping away from a particular task help?
- Who are you able to talk to?
- What support would be useful right now?

Avoid

- Using ‘Are you OK?’ as the only question.
- ‘Everyone is feeling like this.’
- ‘At least…’ statements.
- ‘Don't take it home.’
- ‘You have to be tough in this work.’
- Trying to diagnose the person.
- Making support contingent on the person proving they are unwell enough.

7. CONNECT — build support around people

Connection is protective, but responsibility for support should not simply be transferred to colleagues. Provide several pathways and make them easy to use.

Within the team

- Brief, regular check-ins during prolonged responses.
- Buddy or peer support for isolated field staff.
- Permission to say 'I need a break from this task' without being seen as letting the team down.
- Proactive manager check-ins rather than waiting for disclosure.
- Follow-up after particularly confronting work — and again several days later.

Workplace and professional support

- Employee Assistance Program (EAP) — make access details and eligibility clear, including arrangements for volunteers if relevant.
- Occupational health and safety / psychosocial hazard processes.
- Flexible duties, workload adjustment, leave or temporary removal from high-exposure tasks where appropriate.
- Professional supervision or structured peer support for roles with repeated exposure.
- WildTalk — specialist counselling support for people working with Australian wildlife.
- A GP, psychologist, counsellor or other mental health professional.
- Lifeline for crisis support when someone is overwhelmed or having difficulty coping.
- Black Dog Institute for evidence-based mental health information and resources.

Volunteers face this differently

Volunteers often have less access to formal supports than paid staff, can step away from the organisation more easily if unsupported, and may find WildTalk is their most accessible source of professional support. Confirm — and clearly communicate — what support volunteers can access, including EAP eligibility, before it's needed rather than in the middle of a response.

If safety is a concern

If someone talks about suicide or self-harm, says life is not worth living, appears unable to keep themselves safe, or you believe there is immediate danger, take it seriously. Stay with them or ensure another responsible person does, follow your organisation's emergency procedures and seek urgent help. In immediate danger call 000.

8. Before, during and after a mortality event

BEFORE / PREPARE	DURING / RESPOND	AFTER / RECOVER
Include psychological wellbeing in response planning.	Brief regularly and acknowledge uncertainty.	Do not assume the impact ends when operations end.
Identify high-exposure roles and rotation options.	Track cumulative exposure and workload.	Check in again after people have had time to decompress.
Make EAP/WildTalk and escalation pathways visible.	Build breaks and recovery into rosters.	Acknowledge losses and conservation impacts.
Prepare managers to have supportive conversations.	Check in after confronting tasks.	Review what helped and what increased strain.
Clarify how ethical concerns can be raised.	Respond to operational stressors where possible.	Watch for delayed distress and encourage support.
Plan for mass mortality and carcass-management work.	Keep teams connected, including remote staff.	Recognise the contribution people made, without implying that recognition removes grief.

Consider a structured group debrief

After a significant mortality event, individual check-ins are important but often not enough on their own. Consider also offering a short, structured group debrief (sometimes called a defusing session) — a facilitated conversation, separate from routine handover or operational review, where the team can name what happened, share reactions and identify what would help before returning to routine work.

- Hold it as soon as practicable after the event, ideally within a few days.
- Make it optional to attend and keep it brief — this is not a critical incident investigation.
- Use a neutral facilitator where possible, rather than the most senior person present.
- Focus on reactions and support needs, not on assigning blame or reviewing operational decisions in detail.
- Follow up individually with anyone who seemed particularly affected, a few days later.

9. Supporting managers

Managers may be making difficult decisions while supporting distressed staff, dealing with the public, maintaining biosecurity and carrying responsibility for safety. Being the person others come to does not make you immune to the same costs of caring.

Manager self-check

- ☐ Am I sleeping and recovering between shifts?
- ☐ Am I becoming more irritable, detached or cynical?
- ☐ Am I repeatedly taking on the hardest tasks because it seems easier than asking someone else?
- ☐ Am I carrying responsibility for things outside my control?
- ☐ Do I have someone I can speak candidly with?
- ☐ Have I used the support options I am encouraging my team to use?
- ☐ Am I making decisions while too fatigued or distressed to think clearly?

Managers need support too

Use peer support, professional supervision, EAP, WildTalk a GP or other professional support. A depleted manager has less capacity to notice and respond to the needs of the team.

10. Support services and further information

Service	Contact	Purpose
WildTalk	**1300 945 382**	Free confidential counselling for people working with Australian wildlife.
Lifeline	**13 11 14**	24/7 crisis support.
Black Dog Institute	**blackdoginstitute.org.au**	Evidence-based mental health information and resources.
Emergency	**000**	Immediate danger or emergency.

Current bird flu context

Australia's H5 bird flu situation is evolving quickly. Local transmission among Australian seabirds has been confirmed, and a mass mortality event involving greater crested terns has been confirmed in South Australia. Wildlife detections and precautionary measures are changing rapidly. Managers should use current Commonwealth and state/territory biosecurity advice for operational, PPE, reporting and disease-control requirements.

This section last reviewed: *[9 August 2026]*

Selected information sources

- Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry — current H5 bird flu updates and national response information.
- State and territory agriculture/environment agencies — current local detections, wildlife reporting and biosecurity requirements.
- WildTalk — support for people working with Australian wildlife.
- Lifeline Australia — crisis support.
- Black Dog Institute — evidence-based mental health information and resources.

This toolkit provides general workplace wellbeing guidance and does not replace clinical advice, emergency procedures, work health and safety obligations, psychosocial hazard management, or current biosecurity directions.