Welcome to another special edition of Courageous Conversations for the Let's Talk About Grief awareness campaign.

In this episode, Siusan MacKenzie, CEO of the Emergency Services Foundation, joins us to discuss how emergency services personnel cope with grief and loss in their daily work. We explore the unique challenges they encounter from constant exposure to trauma and highlight the crucial support systems in place to help them navigate the emotional toll of their roles.

**Louisa**
Okay, great. So, I am joined by Siusan Mackenzie, the CEO of Emergency Services Foundation.

And today we're having a courageous conversation about emergency workers, and the challenges that they face in their day-to-day roles, and what grief might emerge, as their I guess, facing repeated exposure to trauma and loss in their roles, and how that may affect their emotional wellbeing. And you know what coping strategies they can apply. So, Siusan, the 1st question I have for you is, you know, emergency workers do often deal with grief and loss in as part of their job.  How does that affect their work and their overall wellbeing?

**Siusan**
You know, what's really interesting, Louisa, is that the word grief is not something that I've heard used very often in our sector. Not at all mental health issues. Trauma. Yes, but not grief. But I mean, grief is always a risk, isn't it? You know, and anytime we lose something or someone we care about. We grieve, and that can become a mental health issue. And the Emergency

Services Foundation is focuses on mental health and wellbeing, and more the prevention than the treatment.

So we know from a survey that was done by beyond Blue Back in 2,018, and they spoke to nearly 22,000 emergency service workers across Australia that one in 3 emergency service workers compared to one in 8 of the general population, suffer high or very high psychological distress and they're 6 times more likely to show signs of PTSD, so within that we can assume that there are degrees of grief in there, although it's never really been delved into.

**Louisa**
And I guess it would be challenging, challenging for emergency service workers when they are delivering bad news to individuals and being a myth, you know, amongst you know, traumatic events, such as natural disasters say. For instance, when people are losing their homes, they're losing their livelihoods, they're living, losing their livestock. And they and they're immersed in that and having to hold all these individuals while getting on with their jobs. So it's safe to say that they're probably surrounded by loss.

**Siusan**
Oh, absolutely and you know, they deal with all sorts of loss. So, there's potential for grief. So, and it's more than the bereavement of people. Of course, that that is an issue. I mean, there's suicides again. We don't have statistics for, and I mean suicide of emergency service workers.

We don't have actual statistics of that from across the sector. They're very hard to compile. But this suicide, you know, imagine coming into a police station and finding one of your colleagues. That's decided enough is enough.

The trauma of attending incidents, especially when it's a situation when the responders can relate to something. So, you know, it might be that there's a child that's about the same age as their child or a grandchild.

Or they're responding within their own community that has a major impact on them. You know they feel very responsible. And if something terrible happens in the community through a bushfire they carry that burden for a very, very long time. And you know that sort of trauma can intersect with grief. And what you were talking about. The things like that. We off. We refer to that as vicarious trauma, and we have done quite a bit of work on that. So you think about frontline responders. But you also need to think about people like the 000 call takers.

Or the people who go out, as you said, and deliver bad news to families or the people who do investigations of terrible motor vehicle accidents, you know. That's a grief. People going off on work cover. If a colleague goes off on work cover. You know people suffer because of that.

People whose careers are shut are cut short. You know they suffer terrible grief because of a loss of identity. You know their identity has always been around being a police officer, or a firefighter, or a paramedic, or whatever it is, and that that having that cut off for whatever reason is, is a problem.

And you know, change of any sort. So, in our sector, for example, there was the CFA. Paid. Firefighters moved over to fire rescue Victoria a couple of years ago. Terrible grief amongst those CFA firefighters because they've been with CFA for years and years and years. And so yeah, there's a whole range of ways that that grief can affect people in the role.

**Louisa**

Yeah. And I guess they're just expected to soldier on and forge forward, because that's their job. And I think, you know where we where there is good data is understanding. You know, the impact that it has on absenteeism, and then that you've got presenteeism as well when people are there, but they're not really there.

**Siusan**
Yeah.

**Louisa**
Is impacted and that can be driven by so many different. You know life events that we all face.

I wanted to sort of explore the impact of Covid, and also not just the pandemic that occurred. But also the safety threats that are impacting emergency service workers lives every day, you know, it's a challenge that they have to face. So what strategies are you aware of that? They're putting into place, I guess, to support themselves.

**Siusan**
Can I just go back to something you said before? And you talked about them just getting on with things, and they very much was a culture of suck it up sunshine, you know, and while the newspapers put emergency service workers on the front page and call them heroes, that means that they're less inclined to put their hand up and ask for help.

And so stigma in our sector is a huge issue. And that's something that we're really working hard to break down is the stigma. Because we want to say what we say to people is, the earlier you get help the more likely you are to recover. You know. We don't want you to be in a fetal position somewhere, you know.

We want you to. Just if you're feeling a little bit wobbly. That's okay to say that, you know.

And so I think that's very important in terms of you know, Major, events like Covid, and things like that. There was actually a study done during Covid by Charles Sturt University, that spoke to about 1,500 police and paramedics from across Australia and some child protection workers actually. And it and in investigated levels of stress, depression, anxiety and burnout, which, of course, all leads on to mental health and grief, and so forth. So you know, despite the relatively low Covid related, infection and mortality rates in Australia, comparatively the personal and professional impacts on frontline workers were very significant, you know, and I was just speaking to a paramedic the other day who talked about how terrifying it was, you know, people would put in a call to 000, and they'd call people out, and they wouldn't necessarily tell the truth about what was what was wrong with people and so they.

They were faced with this, all of this incredible palaver of their personal, protective equipment that they had to put on which added so much burden to their day, and fear about taking all of that home and now, that's had a profound effect on people. You know they were. They were asked to do things that were so very, very different to what they've signed up for. You know, stopping people coming out of their houses and going more than 5 kilometers and doing border checks and all of this sort of thing. Yeah, had a big impact on people.

Louisa I would expect so, and I think there would be long lasting effects of that as well. It's not something that you can like we said earlier, just continue on living life like you did previously. It would be it would really, I guess, affect the way that people do their jobs, moving forward as well.

**Siusan**
Yeah. So you talked about the things that people do. Well, there's really 2 streams to that. There's the individuals. And then there's the organizations what they do to support people.

And you know, individuals need to have you know, their own what we call personal protective plan for themselves.

To look after their wellbeing. One thing that we actually set up around the time of Covid was a series of mindfulness tapes that we did for people. And we, as we've had thousands of emergency service workers download those and they're still downloading them. They're still finding them very, very useful.

But you know everybody's got their own thing that brings them joy, and that's their own personal coping mechanisms and having their own support crew, who whoever that is, you know, a mixture of people that you can call on.

And it's not friends that you make when it hits the fan. But it's a support crew that you've got ahead of that that you know that you can rely on different people for different things. You know there's always someone who can bring you a casserole, but there might be somebody else who's got a different skill that they can. They can help you with. So there's those personal ways of doing things, and we always say, feeling blue, go green, you know, get out in nature and get some fresh air, and be in nature. But then there's the organizational approaches, and of course, all organizations have the reactive approach where they have employee assistance programs and so forth to help people and psychologists and so forth.

But you know, at ESF we do a whole range of things. So, for example, our mental health matters program which is for volunteers in Victoria. And there's about a hundred 1,000 emergency service volunteers. And we go around to

brigades and units. And that's really basic mental health literacy. And what we find with those workshops is that people say, you know what this is. The 1st time we've actually stopped to think about our own mental health. We've stopped, and we've been forced to reflect and think about. Well, how am I managing this?

You know I fall over and I break my leg. I go to the doctor. Easy, Peasy. Nobody's going to question me, but if I'm feeling wobbly, you know I may not say that, because on the hero with the uniform on or whatever. So that's, you know, we do a whole range of things like that. We're training team leaders to be more aware of mental health and wellbeing of their team. You know, we've got programs about helping people transition to retirement. Well, because that's a big grief and loss, you know, if you've been a firefighter, a police officer for years and years, it's a huge loss.

And you know we've got all the research to show that. And yeah, there's a whole range of programs that we're doing that are proactive to help people deal with their mental wellbeing.

**Louisa**
It's wonderful. And you know, I it's fabulous that your foundation exists. So how do emergency service workers become a member of the emergency Services foundation. And what should they know about the work that you do.

**Siusan**
Okay? So well, it's actually the organizations that are members of ours, not individual emergency service workers. Because, you know, under the Occupational Health and Safety Act. It's the employer who's responsible for their physical and mental well-being. So what we try and do is help the

agencies be the best they can in in, because our focus is totally on mental health and wellbeing, whereas their focus is on.

You know, catching bad guys taking people to hospital, etc, putting out putting the wet stuff on the hot stuff, as is, as they say, whereas where our focus is solely on mental health and wellbeing, and that sort of trying to prevent the harm. It is a risky job. We know it's a risky job, and some of those risks just can't be taken away. So what we've got to do be able to deal with those risks more effectively in terms of mental wellbeing. And that's what we do is help. The agencies do that by doing things that they can't do individually.

**Louisa**
Oh, it's just a wonderful service. And I'm really grateful that you took the time to share information about the Emergency Services Foundation. And thank you very much, Susan.

Siusan I will say just before we go. It's unique. This organisation in Victoria. No other State has an organisation like this. So we bring together the 15 agencies or organizations in Victoria that work in emergency management.

And we connect them and collaborate with them. So it's a it's a really great model, and it works very, very well.

**Louisa**
Yeah, it is brilliant.

Thank you so much.