

ICAR RECOMMENDATION

2026 Revised ICAR Recommendations for Stress Resilience in Alpine Rescue

Prepared for the AOD by Dr Natalie Hölzl (MEDCOM president) and Dr Jon White (MREW), Dr Naomi Dodds (SMR), Dr Alison Sheets (MRA)

Passed by the AOD on the 10 October 2026. Review date in 5 years' time.

These ICAR recommendations are designed for all rescuers and mountain rescue organisations.

Mountain rescuers are exposed to significant stress in the work they perform. The injuries, illnesses and fatalities seen, and exposure to the bereaved families and friends takes a toll on the emotional wellbeing of the professionals that respond to these incidents. Over the last decade building awareness and resilience against operational stress injury has become an important focus in alpine rescue organisations and other first responder agencies.

We believe that all rescuers should have the knowledge, skills and an ability to cope with the difficult work we do. All rescuers should be supported in this by their organisations. We also believe these recommendations promote a healthier team culture and could encourage better retention of experienced members.

We would like to acknowledge the Responder Alliance (<https://www.responderalliance.com>) for their formative work.

No evidence grading has been possible for this recommendation. It is based on consensus opinion.

Comments are welcome; please send them to:

mountain.medicine@alpine-rescue.org

Recommendations:

We have divided the larger topic of operational stress injury into three areas where education and training can be focused.

Organisation culture, preparation and pre-planning	
1	Understanding exposure to stress, the formation of stress injury, its physical effects and risk factors should be part of all training, including for new members.
2	Stress injury training should be recurring to normalise and destigmatise the discussion of mental health topics.
3	Organisations should develop a method to promote resilience and connection within teams. Organisations should ensure there is continuous education about stress injury, and that a monitoring tool is used routinely in the day-to-day activities of the team and the individual rescuer.
4	Mountain rescue organisations should develop strategies for the assessment of, the ongoing monitoring of, and the team response, to a potentially traumatising event. Other responding agencies should be included in this planning.
5	Successful organisations reduce exposure to stressors and proactively offer support. They should develop social cohesion and have zero tolerance policies on bullying, harassment, emotional and physical abuse.

During an incident or exposure

6	Psychological First Aid (PFA) should be practiced to provide practical, effective, and timely interventions. The five intervention principles (safety, calm, self-efficacy, connection, and hope) should be used when implementing PFA. PFA can be used for rescuers, casualty, family, and bystanders.
7	If feasible, rescuers should be able to “opt out” of potentially traumatic exposures, although avoidance can be a sign of PTSD. Organisations should where possible limit exposure to potentially traumatic exposures.
8	Consider a “tactical pause” when there has been a major change to the mission goals, for example, a change from rescue to body recovery.

After the incident or exposure

9	After action reviews or debriefs should be timely when a potentially traumatising event is identified. The focus should be on establishing the facts of the incident, what went right and areas for improvement. Acknowledgment of the incident stressors should occur, but this should not retraumatise the participants.
10	Rescuers and team leaders should understand the elements of stress injury recovery and the normal timing of the stress cycle. A structured approach over time should be utilised to provide support to exposed rescuers and agencies. Rescuers should be supported to have a break from rescue if necessary.
11	Mental health professionals working with SAR personnel should be familiar with the rescuers' tasks and culture of the organisation. A common language should be used consistently.