



UNDERSTANDING  
ANIMAL RESEARCH  
OCEANIA

# Supporting Those Who Care for Research Animals

*A guide for families and young people*



**Created By:**

Olivia Cameron, Brigitt Jones, Dr Amy Tait and Bella Lear

# 01 Introduction

Families play a vital role in supporting animal care professionals. The scientific and medical research that depends on animal studies benefits us all, but ensuring that the animals live good lives, with the least possible pain, suffering or distress, can be emotionally draining. For many, it is the strength drawn from family connections that makes it possible.



This guide is intended to help families of animal care staff working in research organisations to understand more about the use of animals in research and its emotional impacts.

It has been developed with input from people who have worked and studied in this community. We listened to the stories of people working with animals in different situations and have tried to address their needs and concerns in a practical way.

No one is an island. We know the stress and strain from trying to integrate very different roles at work and at home can negatively affect family life if it is not carefully managed. Animal care staff often rely on their family to support them in important ways like helping them leave for work with the right mindset to meet emotionally challenging events, or supporting their recovery process through difficult periods.

We know that despite the challenges, most people who work with and care for animals in research are dedicated to providing the best care possible to their animals while supporting great science.

Families share their commitment and are usually keen to support them in their meaningful and important work. They often sense the real pride their loved one takes in their work, but understanding scientific and technical jobs can be challenging. When you add to that challenge the complex ethical and emotional aspects of animal research, it can be hard to know what to say.

The families of animal care workers live with the unpredictability that comes with working with laboratory animals, such as call outs, shift changes, unexpected events, and the emotional difficulties that this work can bring. It is recognised that what affects people involved in emotionally challenging work invariably affects their relationships with partners, children, and other family members.

Families must keep the domestic wheels turning when the animal care workers are absent at work, or experience traumatic events. This guide has been developed to help you understand more about how and why animals are used in research, and how you can support someone who works in this field.

# Working with animals in scientific research

Many people tell us they grew up not knowing that animal technology or other animal care professions existed. Animal work underpins many fields of scientific enquiry including human and animal medicine, agricultural science and ecology.

Animals are used in science when it is impossible to answer key questions or gain critical knowledge without using them. The precise reasons why animals need to be used varies with each study, but the research itself is done for one of four reasons:

- To advance scientific understanding
- To study disease
- To develop and test new medicines and medical treatments
- To protect people, animals and the environment

The use of animals in research is an ethically complex issue, and in Australia, as with other countries around the world, animals are protected by law. Federal regulations provide clear guidance about how animals used in research must be kept and cared for, and each State provides its own regulations to ensure the protection and care of these animals.

The use of animals in scientific research is absolutely essential if we are to study and treat diseases, provide safe and effective medicines to people and animals, and allow medical professionals to undergo proper training to keep animals better, in both captivity and the wild.

The teams who care for research animals are unsung heroes who make all of this possible. They ensure that animals are kept to the high standards that the law and the public expect. Without them we would not have the science that is helping us shape a better world.

The laboratory environment is very specialised and unlike most other spaces. Where animals are involved, biosecurity is often especially important, both for the animals and for human populations. These laboratories are often separated by physical barriers and entry requires a change of clothes or sometimes showering, to protect the animals from micro-organisms that people carry on their clothing or skin. The processes needed to keep these spaces clean can create an environment that feels very isolated and separate, and can seem hidden from the outside world.

People who work with animals outside can also be in isolated places, away from people who might affect their work so that the animals are not disturbed.

Working with animals means connecting with them, and this can be very demanding and potentially stressful.

Animal care staff will be exposed to traumatic events, for example witnessing animals in pain or having to take an animal's life are both emotional experiences. There may also be common workplace stressors, such as high workloads, inadequate support and interpersonal conflict. It can be hard to find the right balance among many different needs. All these things have the potential to impact the wellbeing of an individual and, through association, their family.

This means ensuring that mental fitness is a priority. If animal care staff fully recognise the emotional challenges of their work, they can take steps to take care of their mental health, just as we take care of our bodies.

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To understand more about what it is like inside laboratory animal facilities, watch [A day in the life of an animal technologist](#). Or view virtual tours at <https://labanimaltour.org/>.

# 02

## Mental Health

Working with animals in a research setting can be deeply meaningful, but it can also be emotionally demanding. Many people who care for research animals are affected in ways that are not always visible once they come home. As family members, your understanding and support play an important role in their wellbeing.

Feeling compassion for animals while potentially having to carry out duties that might cause pain or end an animal's life can create an emotional conflict that is difficult to explain and even harder to leave behind at the end of the day.

Over time, this internal conflict can build up and affect mental wellbeing. When someone's compassionate instincts feel at odds with their work responsibilities, it can cause significant emotional strain. Many animal care workers keep these feelings to themselves, which can slowly affect their mood, energy levels, and overall mental health.

There can also be social stigma associated with animal research. Because of this, animal carers may feel misunderstood, judged, or undervalued. Some may avoid talking about their work altogether, even with the people closest to them. This can add to feelings of isolation and ongoing stress.



Our overall mental health influences how strongly these emotional challenges affect us. But mental health does not stand alone, it helps to think of it as something that is supported by mental fitness and mental wellbeing.

**Mental  
Fitness**

**Mental  
Wellbeing**

**Mental  
Health**

### **Mental Fitness**

Mental fitness is similar to physical fitness. It involves building resilience so we can cope better with stress and recover more quickly when life feels overwhelming. When mental fitness is strong, it helps protect mental health over time.

Activities that support mental fitness include:

- Practising healthy thinking patterns
- Mindfulness or relaxation techniques
- Staying socially connected
- Regular physical activity
- Journaling or reflection
- Maintaining healthy sleep habits

## ■ Mental Wellbeing

Mental wellbeing is about having a positive mental state that functions appropriately. It is more than the absence of illness or sadness, but relates to our capacity for positive emotional experiences. Mental wellbeing is influenced by factors such as lifestyle, relationships, and purpose, and is the outcome of good mental health, supported by mental fitness.

Our mental wellbeing naturally fluctuates depending on external influences such as work pressures, life events, and how supported we feel. When wellbeing is low, it often shows up at home first.

Changes in mental wellbeing can sometimes affect family relationships, leading to misunderstandings or tension. It is important to understand that these reactions are usually rooted in misunderstanding, confusion or anxiety and are not a reflection of how others feel towards you, they may simply be struggling emotionally.

## ■ Mental Health

Mental health is the overall state of our emotional selves, from healthy to struggling. Good mental health supports mental wellbeing, because it allows people to cope with adversity, while poor mental health can make it much more difficult to cope when things go wrong. Feeling stressed, sad, or guilty from time to time is normal, especially for people working in emotionally demanding roles such as animal care. These feelings often come and go and may improve with rest, support, or time away from stress. However, when difficult emotions persist, intensify, or begin to affect daily life, they can start to affect overall mental health and may become a cause for concern.

For animal carers, ongoing exposure to distressing situations can sometimes lead to:

- **Compassion fatigue** – a state of emotional and physical exhaustion that develops over time. Your loved one may seem drained, detached, or less able to feel empathy, even though they still care deeply. This is not a lack of compassion, but a sign they have been caring for too long without enough emotional recovery.
- **Post-traumatic stress (PTSD)** – this can happen when the mind struggles to process repeated or intense stress. It may affect sleep, emotions, and behaviour, leading to nightmares, persistent anxiety, emotional numbness, or efforts to avoid reminders of work experiences.
- **Perpetration-Induced Traumatic Stress (PITS)** – a form of trauma that can occur when someone is required to cause harm as part of their job, such as performing medical procedures or taking an animal's life. This type of stress is often associated with deep feelings of guilt, shame, or moral conflict and can be especially difficult to talk about.
- **Secondary traumatic stress** – stress that develops from witnessing pain or suffering, even if the person is not directly causing it. This can lead to symptoms similar to PTSD.
- **Depression or anxiety** – long-lasting emotional distress that can affect thoughts, energy, and daily functioning, leading to persistent sadness, worry, or a feeling of being overwhelmed.



As a family member, you may notice that your loved one seems “stuck” in a low emotional state for weeks or months, rather than having occasional bad days. They may withdraw, seem overwhelmed by small things, or struggle to enjoy life outside of work. These changes can be subtle and gradual, but they are important signals.

If this happens, it may mean your loved one needs additional support. This could involve starting a conversation with your family member (*see below for conversation starters in section 3*) but can also include encouraging them to talk with a coworker who understands the role such as a workplace wellbeing or mental health first aid officer, or to seek help from a mental health professional.

# 03

## Support and talk to children / teenagers

Having a home environment where animal research is understood and not judged is one of the best ways to support your animal carer. When family members try to understand the work, it makes it easier for animal care workers to talk about their day and how they are feeling. This helps reduce the feeling of isolation and makes everyone feel more connected and supported.

Conversations about animals in research can feel daunting for families, particularly when children or teenagers begin asking thoughtful — and sometimes confronting — questions. It can be tempting to avoid the topic, soften the truth too much, or change the subject altogether. However, open and age-appropriate conversations are one of the most important ways families can support animal care staff.

Children and young people are often more capable of understanding complex ideas than we expect, especially when information is shared honestly, calmly, and in language that matches their stage of development. Being truthful does not mean sharing every detail — it means choosing accurate words, providing the right level of information, and answering questions as they arise, rather than avoiding them.

This section aims to help families talk about animal research in a way that is respectful, clear, and developmentally appropriate. By selecting language carefully and not shying away from the subject, families can help children and teenagers develop trust, empathy, and a realistic understanding of the work animal care staff do and the care, responsibility, and ethical decision-making that underpin it.

### Ages 0–7 years

**Focus:** Safety, kindness, and care

At this age, children think in very concrete terms and are strongly influenced by tone and emotion. The goal is to help them understand that animals are cared for by adults whose job is to keep them safe and comfortable.

Key messages

- Animals are looked after by caring adults
- Some animals help doctors and vets learn how to help others
- There are rules about being gentle and kind

Example language

*“Some animals help doctors and scientists learn how to make people and pets better.”*

*“The people who work with animals are helpers, like vets and animal technicians, and they look after them every day.”*

*“The animals have food, warm places to sleep, toys and people who check on them.”*

If questions about killing or harm arise, answer simply and honestly, without extra detail:

*"Sometimes animals don't live forever, and that can be sad. The people caring for them try very hard to be kind."*

## Ages 7–12 years

**Focus:** Purpose, responsibility, and rules

Children in this age group often want to know why something happens and whether it is fair. They can begin to understand ethics and responsibility when explained clearly.

### Key messages

- Research helps improve health for people and animals
- Animal welfare is taken seriously
- Research only happens under strict rules

### Example language

*"Scientists sometimes study animals when they need to understand diseases before treating people or pets."*

*"There are very strict rules about how animals are cared for, and people check on them every day."*

*"Research with animals is only allowed if it's really necessary and can't be done another way."*

### If your child asks, "Is it fair?"

*"That's a really good question. Adults think very carefully about that, and it's something people continue to look at and find better ways."*

*"I think it is fair because it helps us save people from terrible illnesses and we can usually make sure the animals don't suffer much. But it is OK if you disagree."*

## Ages 13+ (Teenagers)

**Focus:** Ethics, complexity, and open discussion

Teenagers are capable of understanding nuance and may want to explore ethical questions in more depth. This is an opportunity for honest conversation rather than simplified answers.

## Key messages

- Animal research is regulated and reviewed
- There are ethical limits and oversight
- Alternatives are actively developed and encouraged

## Example language

*“Animal research is used when scientists can’t get answers another way, but it’s closely regulated.”*

*“Ethics committees, vets, and animal care staff are involved in deciding what can happen.”*

*“Many researchers work hard to reduce animal use and replace it with alternatives where possible.”*

*“We don’t have all the answers. We do it because we believe more good comes from it than harm, but the ethical questions are hard and we should keep asking them.”*

## Encourage discussion:

*“People have different views on this, and it’s okay to question it.”*

*“What part of this feels most uncomfortable or confusing for you?”*

## When teenagers are interested in the field

Some teenagers may become curious about working with animals in research themselves. If they are considering careers in animal technology or the life sciences that depend on it open conversations about the realities of the work can help them make informed decisions.

Parents can support this by helping teenagers:

- Understand the range of roles involved in animal research
- Recognise the importance of animal welfare and ethics in the field
- Think about how to explain their interest in the work when speaking with teachers, career advisors, or university admissions staff

For example, a teenager might say:

*“I’m interested in working in animal research because it helps improve health for both people and animals, and I think animal welfare in research settings is really important. It merges my love of animals and science.”*

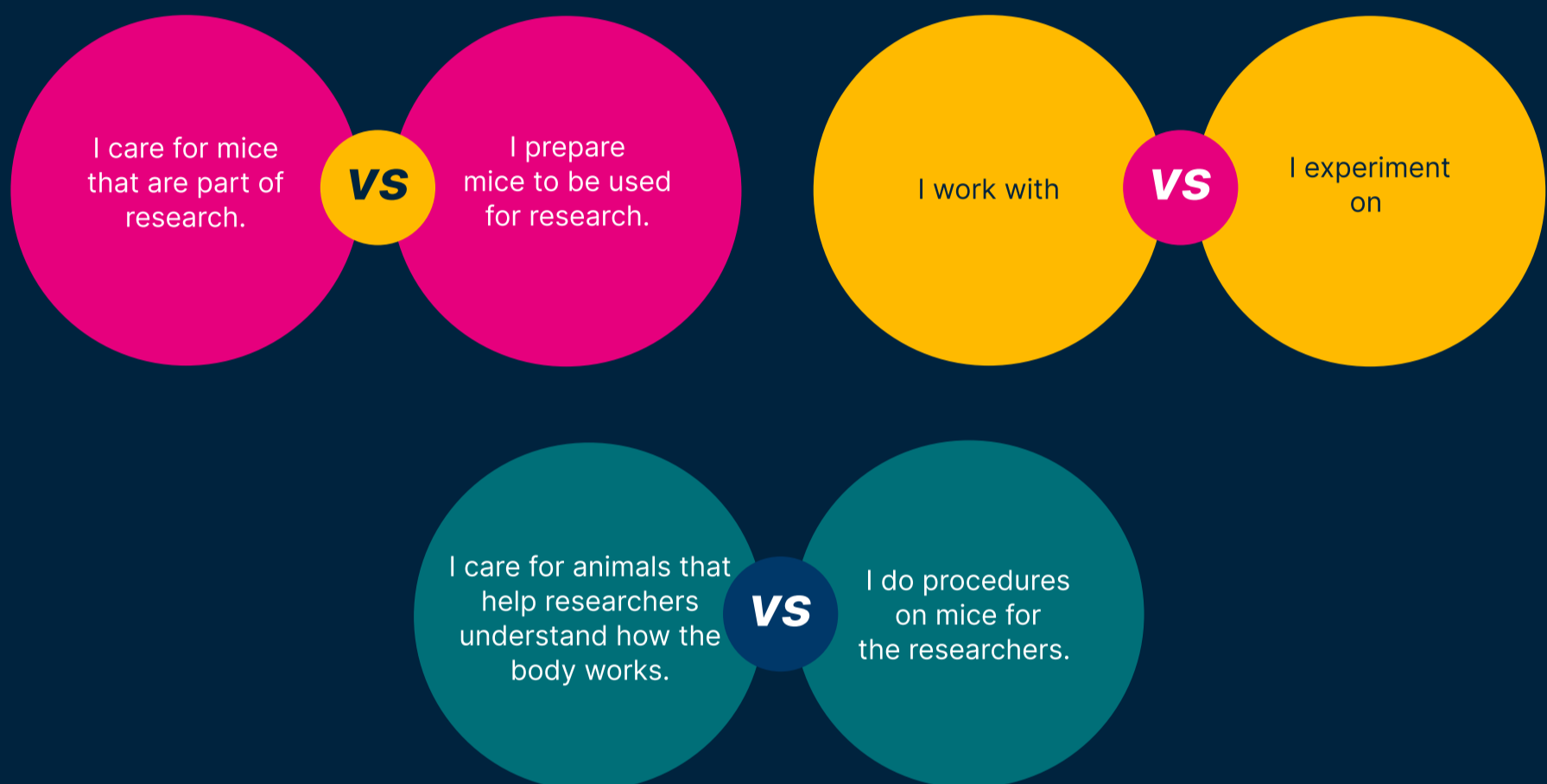
Helping teenagers articulate their values — particularly their commitment to ethical care and responsible research — can give them confidence when discussing their interests with career advisors or educators who may be unfamiliar with the field.

# Choosing language:

The language used should support the message being communicated, particularly the emphasis on animal care and welfare. For individuals who are unsure or have concerns about the use of animals in research, specific words or phrases can strongly influence how the work is perceived. Clear, careful language helps accurately reflect the high level of care involved and reduces the risk of misunderstanding or unnecessary distress. Language choices should emphasise collaboration rather than objectification, reflect care and accountability (for example, referring to “our animals” rather than impersonal terms), and highlight the purpose and compassion underlying the work.

Being selective with the language used helps children and teenagers understand the work in a way that is accurate and reassuring. Children often focus strongly on individual words, particularly if they are already unsure or sensitive to the topic. Using language that highlights care, collaboration, and purpose supports a more balanced understanding and helps prevent children from interpreting the work through a negative or distressing lens.

Compare these:



Good conversations flow naturally and often start with sharing a small piece of your day rather than asking a direct question.



## Young kids:

*Today at work I did some health checks of some mice before they were shipped to another place.*

## Older kids:

*Today I worked with a researcher to do a study on some diabetic mice, we took blood samples to test how much glucose was in their blood.*



# 04

## Support and talking to an animal care person

One of the most important steps in offering support to an animal care worker is taking the time to understand the unique pressures and emotional demands of their work.

Identifying negative wellbeing and the associated symptoms can sometimes be difficult. As a family member and someone close to the animal carer, one of the first things that you may identify is that your family member seems emotionally distant, less engaged in conversations, or struggles to “switch off” from work mode even during family time.

Other signs might include:

- Physical signs (fatigue, changes in appetite, sleep disturbances)
- Emotional signs (mood swings, tearfulness, anxiety)
- Behavioural signs (withdrawal, irritability, substance use)



This is not an exhaustive list — you may notice other signs that seem out of character or different from your family member's usual behaviour.

If you are a child and have noticed these changes you can bring them up with another family member to see if they have also noticed. Or you can hand on the responsibility of having a conversation to another older family member. Remember, as a child, you're not responsible for fixing this and just letting another adult know is helpful and brave (See section 3).

Now that we have identified and noticed these changes the next step would be to approach your family member in hope of starting a conversation around the changes you have noticed. This may feel daunting and you may be concerned with making things worse, but the following steps and conversation starters will help.

### **Before you start the conversation:**

Set the stage. Choose the right time and place — not when they're rushing out the door or during a busy time. Find a quiet, private moment where you won't be interrupted. This might be during an evening walk, over a cup of tea, or while sitting together after dinner. Creating this safe space shows you're taking their wellbeing seriously.

### **How to approach the conversation:**

Use "I" statements to express your observations without sounding accusatory. Say "I've noticed you seem quieter lately" rather than "You've been acting strange." Be specific but gentle — "You seem more withdrawn after work," is better than "What's wrong with you?"

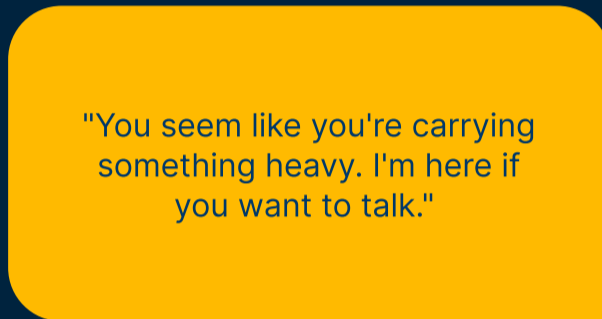
Remember that words matter. Avoid diagnosing ("You're depressed") or minimising their experience ("You're probably just stressed"). Instead, express genuine concern: "I'm worried about you" or "I've noticed things seem harder for you lately."

Most importantly, normalise the conversation. Let them know it's okay to not be okay, especially given the emotional demands of their work. If they shut down or deny anything's wrong, respect their boundaries while keeping the door open: "I understand. I'm here whenever you're ready to talk."

Conversation starter examples:



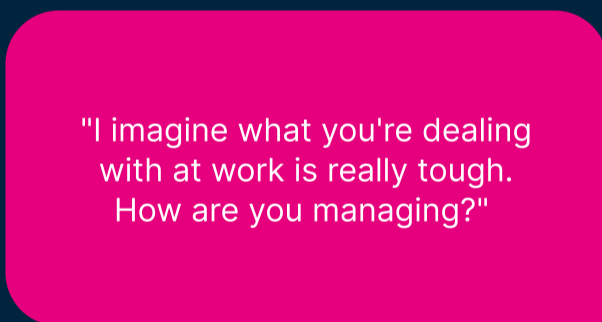
"I've noticed you've been quieter than usual lately. Is everything okay?"



"You seem like you're carrying something heavy. I'm here if you want to talk."



"I know your work can be emotionally challenging. How are you coping with everything?"

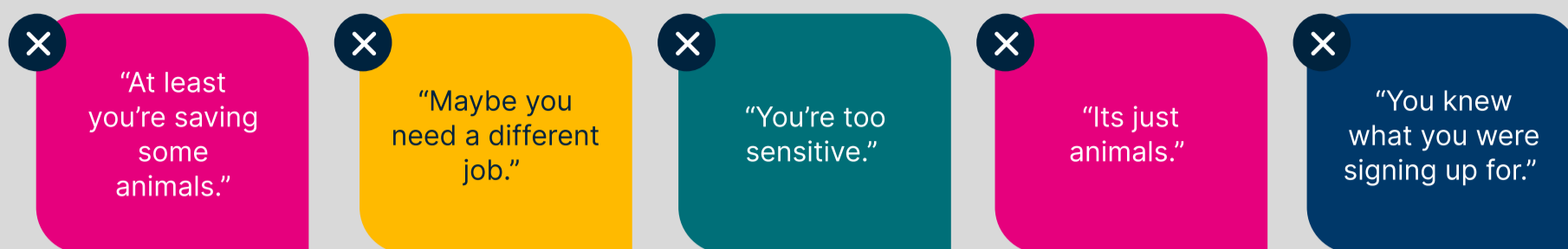


"I imagine what you're dealing with at work is really tough. How are you managing?"



"I know you care deeply about your animals at work. Is that weighing on you?"

What not to say:



How to respond when they say:



Remember though, if your family member is not ready to talk then you don't want to force this conversation. Check in again in a few days. Sometimes just knowing you've noticed, and care is enough to start with.


You might also like to suggest doing activities together outside of the home that have previously brought them joy or bring them their favourite cup of tea. And remember, it doesn't matter if they don't drink the tea, just knowing that someone is there and caring for them will help.


After you have listened to your family member explain what is going on for them, you may like to explore other resources and help find providers together. The workplace may have an assistance program in place with counsellors that are familiar with the work of an animal carer. You can also reach out to external providers such as Lifeline or Beyond Blue (see details in Section 5).

# 05

## Resources

Providing support to your family member who is an animal carer is extremely important for both their mental wellbeing and for the family as a whole. The sections above outline steps that you can take to make them feel supported and cared for. Below is a list of other resources that are available for support.

 <b>Crisis &amp; Emergency (Australia)</b>	<b>Emergency Number</b> 000	<b>Kids Helpline</b> 1800 55 180	<b>Reach Out</b> au.reachout.com
	<b>Suicide Call Back Service</b> 1300 659 467	<b>Beyond Blue</b> 1300 22 4636	
	<b>Lifeline (24/7 Crisis Line)</b> 13 11 14	<b>Headspace</b> 1800 650 890	

 <b>Crisis &amp; Emergency (New Zealand)</b>	<b>Emergency Number</b> 111	<b>Lifeline Aotearoa (24-hour Crisis Line)</b> 0800 543 354   free text HELP to 4357
	<b>Suicide Crisis Helpline</b> 0508 TAUTOKO (0508 828 865)	<b>Youthline (equivalent to Kids Helpline)</b> 0800 376 633   free text 234 youthline.co.nz
	<b>(24/7 Mental Health Support)</b> Call or text 1737	<b>Depression Helpline</b> 0800 111 757   free text 4202 depression.org.nz

### Primary Mental Health Support:

1737 (Need to talk?)

- This acts as the most direct nationwide entry point for support
- For in-person youth services, refer to local Primary Mental Health or Youth One Stop Shops

### General Help:

- Family members & close support networks
- Employee Assistance Program (EAP)
  - Often available through workplaces
  - May extend to immediate family
- GP / professional services / local counselling

### Sourcing Further Knowledge:

**For general information about animals in scientific research**  
[UAROOceania.org](http://UAROOceania.org)

**More general resources from AMP (based in the USA)**  
[amprogress.org](http://amprogress.org)

**Learn more about animal technology at**  
[\*A day in the life of an animal technologist\*](#)

**View virtual tours of animal facilities at**  
[labanimaltour.org](http://labanimaltour.org)

**Information and resources on compassion fatigue from the 3Rs Collaborative**  
[3rc.org/compassion-fatigue](http://3rc.org/compassion-fatigue)



## About UAR Oceania

Understanding Animal Research Oceania is an independent non-profit organisation that supports openness and accurate communication about the use of animals in scientific research across Australia, New Zealand, and the wider Asia-Pacific region. [www.uaroceania.org](http://www.uaroceania.org)



Milton House, 123 Fitzroy Street,  
St Kilda, Victoria. 3182 Australia.

### Created By:

Olivia Cameron, Brigitt Jones, Dr Amy Tait and Bella Lear