

OPERATION FLINDERS
ONE STEP AT A TIME



Support Staff Handbook 2024

Acknowledgement of Country

Operation Flinders Foundation's Core Program takes place on Adnyamathanha Country and the office and warehouse are located on Kurna Country.

Operation Flinders Foundation acknowledges that the Adnyamathanha people are the traditional custodians of the Country on which we operate our Core Program, Yankaninna Station.

Operation Flinders Foundation recognises that 'Country' incorporates the land, water, and sky. It is also the blood, spirit, creation stories, teachings, and lore of Aboriginal people. We pay our respect to this connection, as well as to the Elders, past, present and emerging.

Purpose

This handbook is intended to serve as both an introduction and a guide for the Operation Flinders' Core Program. It outlines what Operation Flinders needs from you in the lead-up to your allocated exercise to minimise the administrative burden, assists you in organising and preparing your teams, guides you through what we will provide as part of our Core Program, and what you can likely expect upon arriving at Yankaninna Station.

Operation Flinders Mission

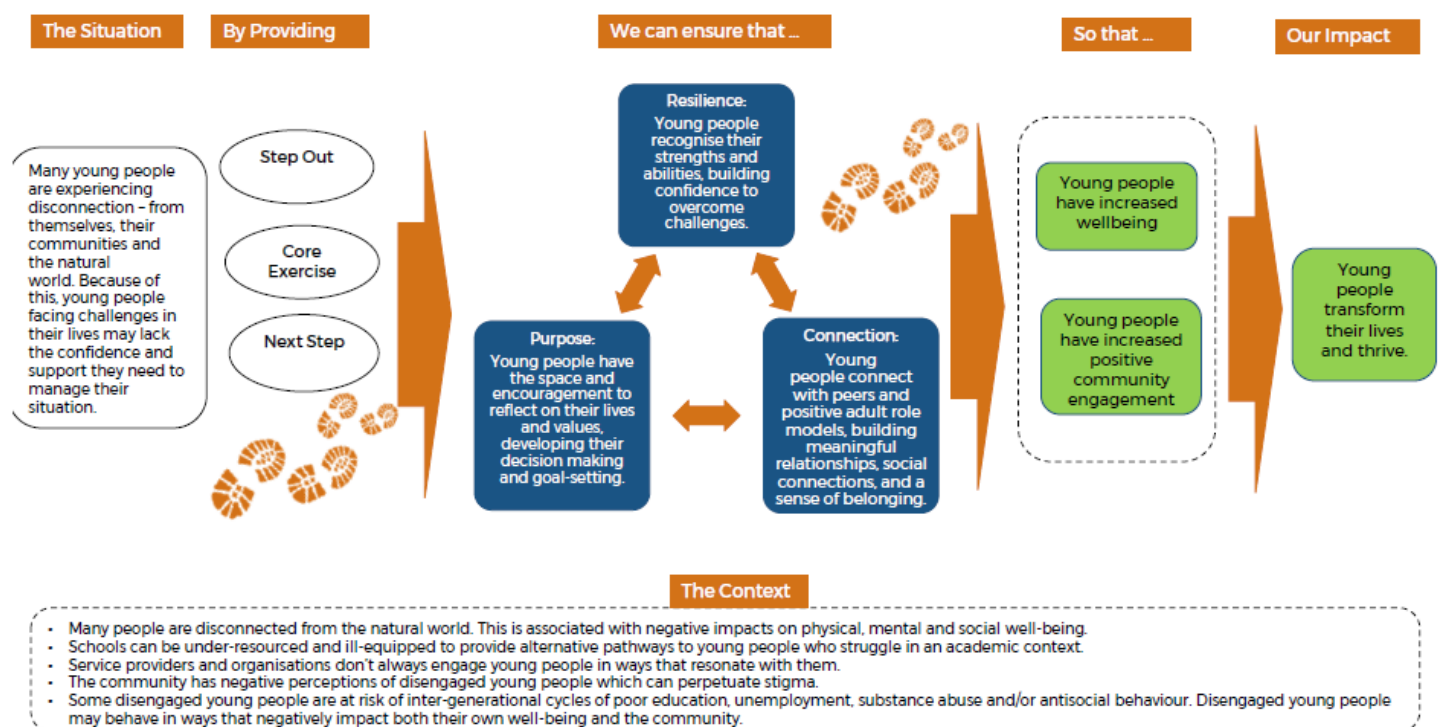
Creating opportunities for young people facing challenges through adventure therapy programs that provide demanding experiences, personal development and pathways to wellbeing and life success.

Through our programs, Operation Flinders' aims to improve young peoples' sense of resilience, sense of purpose and connection with other.

Theory of Change

We've recently invested in developing a Social Impact Measurement framework supported by our Theory of Change to better understand the impact of our programs on individuals, schools/agencies and the broader community.

Operation Flinders Theory of Change



Support Staff Preparation

Support Staff play a critical role on an exercise as you are best placed to relate with, encourage, guide, and help your team of young people make sense of this transformative experience.

As support staff, you will need to prepare yourself so that you are physically and emotionally able to complete the exercise intact and contribute to positive changes for the young people whilst in the bush. To do this you need to:

- Read about Operation Flinders via our website and think about the cause, mission, objectives, and values of the Operation Flinders program.
- Watch our video - *What Happens on Exercise* - <https://youtu.be/LC6506f59QU?si=NQzgbCsplkxhaLZX>
- Understand your role as a Support Staff as well as the role of your Team Leader.
- Be physically and medically fit, preferably with knowledge, enjoyment, and experience in the bush and bushwalking.
- Make sure that you have comfortable and appropriate boots, clothing, and equipment.

First Time (New) Support Staff

New? In the first instance, your Team Leader is your go to. However, you can also speak with an experienced support staff if you would like additional information about the role. Please contact the Programs Administrator and we will seek to put you in contact with an experienced support staff who will be willing to answer any questions you may have.

The Support Staff Role

The first step is to become acquainted with the role of the Team Leader. This is vital, as the Support Staff need to understand how they as individual operators will contribute to the achievement of the team objectives. Uncertainty over respective roles will confuse the participants and can undermine positive team building and long-term outcomes. This is also applicable to the Team Leaders. The roles are quite different but complementary.

You have a duty of care towards the participants, which you are unable to delegate. A good relationship with the Team Leader and ongoing communication is vital to ensure you maintain the duty of care and that the Team Leader provides a safe and challenging experience for the group.

You should model positive, encouraging behaviour that is to be expected from cooperative team members. The team is in fact two teams: the participants, and the adult team. The adult team needs to be strong, together and present a united front. There must be consistency in how the group is to be handled and the Support Staff are to show their support for the Team Leader and are the first to implement the Team Leader's directions. It is assumed that prior discussion will occur between the Team Leader and the Support Staff so there is agreement on participant behaviour and rules. If debate is to occur, it is to happen out of earshot and eyesight of the participants in all instances.



Your Team Leader

In the weeks leading up to the Exercise, you will be allocated a Team Leader and Assistant Team Leader. Our Field Leaders are trained and experienced volunteers who support Operation Flinders by giving of their time (most have 'other' day jobs), expertise and resources to provide a safe and transformative experience for your team.

Operation Flinders provides a lot of direction and guidance to our Field Leaders on how we expect them to undertake the exercise (some of which you'll read about in this handbook). However, we also know that allowing our Field Leaders to express who they are is critical to the experience – in the same way, it is important that we allow the participants and you as Support Staff to express who you are throughout the exercise.

We strongly encourage you and our Field Leaders to take the time to get to know each other before an exercise (where possible). The Pre-Exercise Briefing provides a great opportunity for this to occur.

We strongly encourage our Field Leaders to work with you and any goals or objectives that you have as a school/agency. This may include:

- School expectations and policies regarding how you expect participants to behave while on Exercise.
- Consideration of participants individual and collective goals.
- Adapting to participant needs and challenges.

Areas where we allow autonomy to our Field Leaders include:

- Adapting specific goals and objectives for the team within the context of the exercise in alignment with Operation Flinders Mission and Theory of Change.
- Setting team expectations and rules – the nature of working with a diverse group of Team Leaders is that they all have different leadership styles – some are autocratic, some democratic and some laissez-faire.
- Team Activities, Reflections and Debriefs – using their 'toolkits' to assist participants in learning from and making sense of their experience.
- Team Structure – including Walking Strategies, Daily Roles/Jobs
- Daily Routines – arriving at and departing camp, setting up camp, mealtimes, reflections etc.
- Route Planning – the Command Team outline the location of the team's camp for that day, how and when each team moves between each camp is decided by the Team Leader, in conjunction with Command Team.
- Additional Team Activities – such as bush camps and night hikes.

For returning Support Staff, please note that you'll likely be allocated a new Team Leader to your past exercises. We mention the above points specifically so that you can take an appreciation for the differences in how a Team Leader may choose to coordinate and manage their team.

We certainly encourage you to discuss your team with your Team Leader, including:

- Participant goals and what they may be looking forward to.
- Specific needs of participants, including medical, dietary and other considerations.
- Characteristics of your participants.
- Unique dynamics between participants.
- Knowledge of what strategies work and are challenging for your participants.
- Leadership styles that would be effective for your participants.

This will allow your Team Leader to make adjustments and plan accordingly.

Working with Your Team Leaders

Communication

If you are finding something challenging or disagree with what is happening, you are encouraged to speak with your Team Leaders. We encourage you to have these conversations without drawing attention to the matter – many Team Leaders will look to hold a leader debrief at the end of each day once participants are in bed. It is **CRITICAL** that the leadership team always works as a respectful and united team with the participants.

Recharging

Taking some time each day to be alone and away from the group is important. We all need to recharge. So please let your Team Leader know at any time if you need a break during the walk so, they can look to accommodate.

Games & Activities

Your Teams Leader will greatly appreciate if they are able to call on you to facilitate games or activities with the team. We encourage you to have some games and creative activities to initiate at different times (eg. for afternoons and long lunchtimes) such as word games, riddles, puzzles, conundrums, jokes, musical instruments, inspiring stories, poems, etc. that can engage the whole team.

Leadership Concerns

During the early stages of the exercise, you should be visited at least once by either the Exercise Commander or 2IC. This is to check that the team is “forming” during the early stages. The visiting member will speak individually with the adult members of the team. This is likewise for them to gauge if the adult team is “bonding”. You will have conversations on a couple of occasions during the exercise. Whilst any issues or matters should be resolved at the team level, if this is not possible then please bring the matter to the attention of the Exercise Commander when speaking to them.

The Walk

The bushwalk you will be on will test your physical and mental endurance. At the time, you’re likely to experience tiredness, soreness and decreasing patience. However, that is the nature of bushwalking, and it is ideal if you have some experience of bushwalking and you know what to expect, what to take and how to prepare yourself.

If you are inexperienced, you are encouraged to ask for advice on what to take and how to prepare yourself from others who have gone before you. This includes getting physically fit. You need to understand the information on safety, water, and food rationing and first aid. It is expected that the participants will be inexperienced and may do some foolish things. It is not expected that the Support Staff will do foolish things.

If you have any concerns about the level of fitness required, you must address them with the Programs Administrator or your Team Leader, as soon as possible. Issues regarding equipment to take etc. should also be addressed early so that arrangements can be made to procure the appropriate gear.



Participant Behaviour

Before the exercise, information on the participants will have been supplied by your school or agency. As support staff, it is likely that you will have been involved in this process and may have even worked with the participants and know them quite well. This information is important for the team leader to know and needs to be as accurate and detailed as possible. However, be aware the behaviour of the participants does change during the exercise. The difference in the environment causes different reactions and unexpected behaviour.

The participants for the most part may be very streetwise. On the streets, they know all the answers, what to do, how to behave and who is in the know. Even though their behaviour is unsafe they are safe because they know their surroundings.

Being in the bush, surrounded by space with little recognisable features and without the familiar noises, sounds, smells and rituals of the familiar, puts them immediately in a dependent situation and they are compelled to make choices. The

choices to be made are limited, impersonal, and imposed by the situation and the environment with consequences that are personal and the effects relatively immediate. Participants quickly learn that relying on others, cooperation, sharing, and trust is much better for them as well as the group, rather than going it alone.

The flip side is that some participants may be from remote communities and be very comfortable in the bush, so be ready for both situations.

Group Dynamics

During the exercise, teams will often go through the basic stages of group dynamics of Honeymoon, Disintegration, Re-assembly, and Termination with the sub-phases of Forming, Norming, Storming, Performing and Mourning.

These stages are not defined and delineated as starting and stopping at predetermined times; rather they are ongoing and are often revisited during the exercise. However, the actions and behaviour of the participants can be identified as belonging to particular phases.

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| Honeymoon | Forming | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This stage begins on the drive up and continues well into the exercise. In fact, there are always subgroups forming depending on different situations, so what initially forms as a group will not be the only one nor will it be the permanent one. It will take some time before the group has its pecking order worked out and the roles of the participants defined within it. • In this stage anticipation, excitement and energy are high. There is also a great degree of insecurity felt by the participants and this shows itself in behaviour that ranges from bombastic to withdrawn. • Much of this stage can be left to sort itself out as long as it does not greatly interfere with the agreed expectations of behaviour for the group. |
| | Norming | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This phase will begin when the team is packing their packs and preparing to leave on the walk. The phase is part of the Honeymoon period, and it is the optimum time for the team leader to inform the team of the safety rules and expected group behaviour. It is also a time to initiate the ideas of rituals that establish the group's identity and uniqueness. |
| Disintegration | Storming | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As the exercise progresses, tiredness and discomfort take their toll. Reality dawns and the participant's security blanket of known behaviour and actions no longer work. They will test the limits of tolerance and patience. They will act impulsively, selfishly, and immediately. They will be manipulative and have low tolerance levels and coping skills. • Conflicts can escalate and get out of hand and Support Staff need to be particularly vigilant. Look at the actions rather than the words. At this stage, participants may be saying a lot but may or may not be doing anything. If the actions are still safe, then little needs to be done except a well-timed positive comment or an injection of humour or resorting to a group ritual to defuse the situation. If more needs to be done, then make sure that the Team Leader is kept informed of the situation and the action taken is united and planned. |
| Re-assembly | Performing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Various behaviours are seen ranging from sullen compliance to positive cooperation and camaraderie. Not all participants will be performing at the same level but then it is opportune to reflect on what positive steps have been made since the beginning of the exercise. There will be some behaviour and actions that can be positively reinforced. The team will be working at its optimum. Challenges have been overcome, fears have been beaten and achievements made. • Despite themselves, the participants have succeeded, and it is time to enjoy the feeling of group cohesion and cooperation. |

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| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The rituals established at the beginning of the exercise will have been built upon and can continue to be used to reinforce the group's uniqueness and achievements. Very rarely a situation may occur whereby the group does not seem to have progressed beyond the initial storming stage. In these cases, it is a matter of battening down the hatches, assisting the Team Leader in maintaining group safety and working with individual participants to achieve personal goals. |
| Termination | Mourning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Farewelling is a hard thing for the participants to do and it is important to handle this stage sensitively and positively. They have lived intensively through a unique experience and survived. Make an opportunity for the participants to formally finish their exercise. Acknowledge their achievements and the feelings they are experiencing. They will have changed, but they will be going back to a home, a school or an institution that has not. Prepare the participants for this and do not leave it to the last night. Participants do not always handle this stage well and you may find that some resort to behaviour that is more fitting to the forming or storming phases. This may be because they do not know how to say goodbye or thank you, but they do know how to get attention. Thus, they may resort to former behaviours that have worked for them in the past. |

Handling Problems

It is rare that a team does not have a problem so expect that yours will. Problems range from violence/ aggression and rebellion to non-cooperation and running away, either as an individual or as part of a group. Many of the strategies that you use every day will be effective however, sometimes they will not.

The Flinders Ranges imposes many natural restrictions and constraints on the usual action's participants use to get their way, so allow the environment to be the teacher. Be aware of and understand the inevitability of conflict games and tantrum performances and maintain watchful non-intervention. Observe and react to what is being done and not what is being said. Act when safety issues are involved or when it is deemed appropriate by the team leader.

Monitoring Group and Individual Performance

The importance of the Support Staff role cannot be overstated. In this role, Support Staff use their skills to observe the behaviour of individuals as well as the group to gather information to predict and plan for events that may occur. This information may be used preventively, in that potential negative situations can be avoided for the individual or the group or planning and controlling a manufactured situation to gain positive outcomes.

Improvement in individual and group behaviour is incremental and often small. This is important to remember and can sometimes be lost as time goes on and energy flags. The ability to keep perspective and reinforce the positive is essential for not only the group's morale but also for your own.

Observation and monitoring of behaviour are also applicable to the adult team. The fatigue and discomfort of an extended bushwalk take their toll and the individual is not always the best in gauging their ongoing performance. The integrity and efficiency of the adult team must be maintained to optimise the team's success.

Ensure that sufficient and regular time is given so that observations and information can be exchanged. Strategies such as 'time out', positive re-enforcement and debriefing are important for all members of the team, adults as well as participants, and are ongoing responses.



Arrival Message from Leigh Creek/Copley

You must call our Ops Room on 08 8648 4719 upon passing through Leigh Creek or Copley on your way up to Yankaninna.

Your Team Leaders will be waiting, all packed except without boots on, and they will use the time it takes you to get from Leigh Creek, to get them to the insertion point on the side of the road where we'll meet you and make sure all is ready for you.

Daily Roles/Jobs

While every Team Leader is afforded the flexibility to set up the team in whatever way they decide, many opt to allocate daily roles/jobs to the participants and then rotate these during the week. The idea is that every participant has a go at each job at least once. Each job is critical to the team's well-being as well as ensuring the team can function effectively and efficiently.

Critical to the success of these roles/jobs is that we don't do the work for them! We can support, explain, demonstrate and facilitate, but it doesn't help them if you do the job for them. Engaging and empowering them in this responsibility and accountability is part of learning how to achieve something and doing something for the team.

For your information, common roles/jobs include:

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| <p>Skippers (Team Captains)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introducing the group to guests. • Supervising the Team Mascot. • Setting examples for the team to follow. • Ensuring everyone completes their duties. • Lead team discussions and ideas. | <p>Environmentalists (Cleaning)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carrying the Tinder Bag. • Supervise collection of all rubbish • Dig Slops Hole • Burning all food scraps. • Leading morning emu parades. | <p>Kenny's (Hygiene)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carrying the Toilet Bag. • Dig Toilet Holes/Trenches (when required) • Hand washing before meals. • Hands sanitisation after going to the toilet. • Keeping the toilet stocked with toilet paper. |
| <p>Pyrotechnicians – (Fire & Rubbish)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Starting & maintaining the fire. • Maintaining billies of hot water on the fire. • Rationing firewood allocations from firewood pile. • Burning all rubbish & cans. | <p>Masterchefs (Cooking)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinate warm water for washing hands & dishes • Preparing, cooking and serving meals. • Keeping kitchen area clean • Wash group dishes (pots, utensils etc) • Collecting and coordinating lunch. | |

Medical & Medication

Well before arriving at Yankaninna, please take the time to familiarise yourself with the medical needs of the participants. This includes medication that might only be required occasionally, as the change of environment in the Northern Flinders Ranges may be enough to trigger a reaction (eg. the stress of the walk, campfire smoke, dust etc. will bring out dormant asthma, so don't forget the inhaler).

Medication Carrying & Administration

All medication must be disclosed to Operation Flinders (as part of submitted Medical Disclosures) so that our Paramedics and relevant Field Leaders can be made aware of what is being carried in the field.

Medication that is not accompanied by a medication form must receive approval to be administered by both Parent/Caregiver and on-site Paramedics.

The responsibility of managing medication is with the Field Leaders, however, some may request Support Staff to take on the responsibility of carrying the medication (if required) and assisting them to ensure all medication is administered according to prescriptions.

Support Staff are required to discuss the issuing of any medication with the Team Leader prior to it being administered so that appropriate approval can be obtained and documentation in the Field Leader Notebook can occur.

Blister Treatment

Blisters are a very likely possibility, even after taking all the right steps with boots and socks. Staying on top of these with daily foot checks and basic treatments is critical and your Team Leader will very likely call on you to assist with this.

First Aid Kits

Both the Team Leader and Assistant Team Leader will be carrying a comprehensive first aid kit designed for our unique environment. There is no expectation for you to bring a group first aid kit.

Change of Environment

Yankaninna is a semi-arid environment where the dust and smoke that you'll encounter along with the physical activity you'll be undertaking throughout an exercise is likely to trigger or extenuate 'dormant' conditions such as Asthma. Please be aware and mindful of this in preparing your team.

Sanitary Items

In the field it is important to dispose of sanitary products in an environmentally friendly and safe manner. It's usually best for a female leader to manage this with the young person; however, all Operation Flinders staff are approachable. Sanitary items need to be wrapped in toilet paper and placed in a nappy-liner (provided), to be taken to camp. At camp, the team will have a black disposal bag set up with the toilet so that sanitary waste can be discretely disposed of.

Weather Conditions

The weather in the Flinders Ranges can vary quite a lot throughout the year, and people easily underestimate the dynamic conditions that the landscape of Yankaninna can be subject to.

A general guide to the standard weather conditions throughout the year are as follows:

- March – Likely to be the hottest exercise period for the year. Long days because of Daylight Savings and an intensely dry and hot atmosphere means that heat stroke is the biggest concern. Lightweight clothing that covers much of the body is strongly recommended. Evenings and nights will generally be warm, but depending on the conditions, it can still get dramatically cold a few hours after dark.
- April/May – Potentially the most settled time of the year. Days are usually mildly warm but not cold. Evenings are cool and mornings are a bit nippy. Comfortable hiking clothes with a jacket/jumper at the ready.

- June/July – Could be the coldest time of the year, and maybe the wettest. Days can be comfortably mild or wet/windy. Evenings can be chilly and cold, mornings can be frosty or freezing. Comfortable hiking clothes with warm clothes ready to be worn. Thermal clothing/beanie & gloves is recommended. Cold & wet can mean that hypothermia is more likely in need of being monitored around this time of year.
- August – Can also be a dramatically cold time of year, and potentially very wet. Days can be comfortably mild or wet/windy. Evenings can be chilly and cold, mornings can be frosty or freezing. Comfortable hiking clothes with warm clothes ready to be worn. Thermal clothing/beanie & gloves is recommended. Cold & wet can mean that hypothermia is more likely in need of being monitored around this time of year.
- September – The beginning of Spring can mean the weather may be unstable and hard to predict. It could be warm or cold, sunny or wet. It is ideal to be prepared for either hot or colder conditions.
- October – This time of years tends to be on the warmer side, but can also be unpredictable. Heat stroke can be of concern and the nights can still get very cold. Be prepared for warmer and cooler conditions.

It is important to note that the above is simply a guide, based on what has been experienced in recent years during these times of the year. It can still rain heavily and create flooding conditions in March, and it can still be beautifully mild in the middle of Winter. It is best to prepare yourself for any kind of unpredictable weather conditions, but hopefully the above gives you a rough idea of what to expect. And remember... we are outside all the time!

Morning of Departure

On the last morning, Support Staff will be picked up before sunrise from the closest road and driven to base camp – your Team Leader will advise of exact details the night before. There you will have a shower, a hot breakfast, a chance to buy Operation Flinders merchandise and a chat/debrief with the Exercise Commander.

Therefore... remember to pack a towel, soap and clean clothes in your base camp bag.

Please note - the participants do not get to have a shower before returning home so please be mindful not to make a deal about your shower in their presence.



After the Exercise

Immediately after the exercise, you will experience a 'high', mainly because you have survived. Within the next few days, you may experience a comedown. This is part of your mourning phase from Operations Flinders; expect these feelings. Please discuss these feelings with your fellow Support Staff or contact your Team Leader or the Op Flinders office.

Packing List

Attached to this handbook is a packing list that can be provided to each participant. The items listed in **blue** are either supplied or loaned to each young person by Operation Flinders. The items in **green** are not critical but are suggested options for you and/or the young person to consider. Support Staff are encouraged to use this Packing List as a guide.

Prohibited Items

The below items are prohibited for participants - your assistance in discouraging them before arrival at Yankaninna is appreciated:

- Phones & other electronic devices (no phone coverage and no charging facilities)
- Cigarettes & Vapes (illegal and will be reported to local police)
- Alcohol (illegal and will be reported to local police)
- Illicit and non-prescribed drugs (illegal and will be reported to local police)
- Knives, sharps or any other weapons (illegal and will be reported to local police)
- Energy Drinks

Items Specifically for Support Staff

Support Staff are welcome to supply their own items if they wish (at your own risk). Alternatively, Support Staff can loan items from Operation Flinders. *Please note* - unlike participants, Support Staff are not provided with a new sleeping bag to keep at the end of the Exercise. Instead, they will be loaned a cleaned and refurbished sleeping bag to be returned at the end of Exercise.

Further to the packing list provided to participants, Support Staff may wish to consider bringing some additional items:

- Towel, soap and clean clothes for a shower at base camp prior to departure.
- Small square piece of foam that can be used to soften your seating either on the ground or on the wooden sleepers around the campfire.
- Hiking (Lightweight) Sleeping Mat if you'd like a bit more than a few centimetres of foam to get a good sleep on. Be mindful however that Sleeping Mats that require inflation are notorious for becoming deflated due to the harsh Flinders Ranges landscape.
- Hydration Bladder (eg. Camelbak) if you'd prefer this over the Nalgene Water Bottles provided by Operation Flinders.
- Rewards such as Lollies etc. can be used to great effect. Use these rewards after discussion with Team Leader and provide them fairly and after a job well done or when you want to introduce a positive when nothing seems to be going right. However, ensure that the rewards are not anticipated payment. Make sure you take lollies that are your favourites so that you can also enjoy the treat.
- Games & Activities (as discussed above)
- Counselling tools, such as trauma-informed care, motivational interviewing and empathetic listening are all important and having these tools ready at your disposal can be beneficial.

If there are any issues in obtaining items from this packing list, please speak with your school/agency coordinator who can look to assist in the first instance. Alternatively, Operation Flinders can provide guidance and advice.

Conclusion

Operation Flinders has proven to be a challenging and rewarding experience for adults and young people alike. We hope that you, and the young people in your care, can benefit from a program that has been running for over 30 years. If you have any questions, either before or after your exercise, please contact the office as soon as possible.

Good luck and have fun!

Further Information

Exercises - <https://operationflinders.org.au/exercises/>

School & Agency Resources - <https://operationflinders.org.au/school-and-agency-portal/>