



Police: Coping with what you've experienced during coronavirus

This information is for anyone working in the police force, whether you manage a team, help people by responding to calls, work from home or in an office, or are a uniformed police officer.

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We know the pandemic isn't over. But parts of society are starting to return to the way they were before.

As a responder in the police force, you might notice that some things at work, or in your home life, aren't going back to the way they were before. There might be new rules during your shift, or more jobs to respond to than before the pandemic. You might feel differently about your role to how you did previously. And for some things, you might not want them to go back to the way they were before.

This information might help you to make sense of what you've seen and experienced during coronavirus (covid-19). It's not a replacement for mental health treatment and support. But it may give you some tools to help you understand how you're feeling, and some tips on how to cope with these feelings.

Recognising how you're feeling now

We experience many different feelings every day. Feelings can help guide us in how to respond to the situations we find ourselves in. But often, we can't give a name to every feeling we're having, when we have it.

During the pandemic, you might have dealt with lots of things you found difficult, and not had the time to think about them properly. You might be having feelings now, as a result of something that happened a while ago. And as a member of the police force, you might feel like there's an expectation for you to be detached from your feelings, or like you're not encouraged to open up about how you're feeling.

Identifying some of the feelings you're having now might help you to understand what could have caused them. And once you know the causes, you might feel better prepared for how to deal with these feelings.

"In this line of work we are exposed to things which are so unnatural and we normalise that, as if this is something that doesn't bother us." – Rhiannon, Welsh police

How do I start to recognise how I'm feeling?

Recognising how you're feeling might help you to understand why you reacted the way you did to certain situations in the past. For example, you might have had a sleepless night, and not associated it with the stressful calls you'd taken that day. Maybe you had an argument with someone you care about, without really knowing why.

Putting your feelings into words could help you to understand the emotions you're having. There are different ways you can do this, and everyone's preferences will be different. Here are some suggestions:

- **Write it down.** Some people find that writing about the things they're feeling, or keeping a diary, can be helpful. If you don't want to write about it, you could try other creative ways to express how you're feeling, like drawing or painting.
- **Say it out loud.** Some people find that talking about what they're going through, or what's happened in their day, can help them to recognise how they feel about what's happened. You don't have to do this with another person – you could try it at home on your own.
- **Use techniques which help you to notice what's happening in the present moment.** For example, [mindfulness](#). Mindfulness involves making a special effort

to notice what's happening in your mind, body and surroundings, without judging anything. It can help you to notice the negative and positive feelings you're having. Mindfulness can be practised in different ways. For example, mindful eating, meditation, or doing body scans before and after your shift.

Below are some of the things members of the police force have told us they've been feeling throughout the pandemic. You might be experiencing some of these, and may also be having feelings which aren't listed here.

Stress

When we say things like "this is stressful" or "I'm stressed", we might mean:

- **Situations or events that put pressure on us.** These may be times where we have lots to do and think about, or don't have much control over what happens. For example, going to lots of high pressured incidents, or dealing with members of the public who are very distressed.
- **Our reaction to being placed under pressure.** These may be the feelings we get when we have demands placed on us that we find difficult to cope with. For example, the way your body and mind react when you're about to put yourself in a dangerous situation.

If you're experiencing [stress](#), you might feel:

- irritable, aggressive, impatient or wound up
- over-burdened
- anxious, nervous or afraid
- like your thoughts are racing and you can't switch off
- unable to enjoy yourself
- depressed
- uninterested in life
- like you've lost your sense of humour
- a sense of dread
- worried about your health
- neglected or lonely.

"It can be stressful dealing with distressed people so much, and it can often feel like you're carrying the weight of everyone else's problems." – Cassie, crime scene investigator

Anxiety

[Anxiety](#) is what we feel when we are worried, tense or afraid, particularly about things that are about to happen, or which we think could happen in the future.

Anxiety can affect:

- **our bodies.** You might feel sick, restless, or like your heart is racing.
- **our minds.** You might feel tense or nervous, or like the worst is about to happen.
- **our daily lives.** It might feel harder to enjoy your free time, and it can affect things like your relationships and work.

As a member of the police force, you may develop hypervigilance. Hypervigilance is the feeling of being on constant alert to the surrounding environment. This may be useful in your line of work. But if it continues when your shift ends, it can lead to you feeling like you're always on the lookout for potential threats or danger. This can make it harder to relax, sleep, and can contribute to feelings of anxiety.

Moral injury

Moral injury describes a set of feelings you might have if you've had to do things, or see things, which go against your values and beliefs.

During the pandemic, you might have been forced to make some difficult decisions. For example, you might have had to enforce certain coronavirus rules, like asking people not to meet in public, even though this could have felt hard to do. And if members of the public respond negatively, or without sympathy for what you're trying to do, this can make these feelings even worse.

If you're experiencing moral injury, you might feel:

- guilty or ashamed
- angry
- disgusted
- conflicted.

Compassion fatigue

When you're repeatedly looking after people in distressing or difficult circumstances, this can leave you feeling physically and mentally exhausted. You can end up feeling like you don't care about people as much as you used to. This is sometimes known as compassion fatigue.

Compassion fatigue might make you feel:

- angry or irritable
- like you're enjoying your job less
- less confident about making decisions at work
- less motivated to do your job.

Trauma

Going through very stressful, frightening or distressing events is sometimes called [trauma](#). Everyone has a different reaction to trauma. You might notice the effects quickly. Or you might not notice them until a long time afterwards.

A traumatic event might make you feel:

- frightened
- under threat
- humiliated
- rejected
- abandoned
- invalidated
- unsafe
- unsupported

- trapped
- ashamed
- powerless.

“The role of being a police officer has had a continuous effect on my mental wellbeing. We see things that the general public don’t.” – Tim, police officer

Fatigue and burnout

Fatigue and burnout are more than feelings of being tired. Burnout can happen if you’re constantly under lots of pressure from work. It can make you feel:

- exhausted, like you’re drained of energy
- like you enjoy your job less, or don’t feel motivated to do it anymore
- like you’re not doing your job as well as you used to.

Burnout as a police officer

“I arrived at work but I just couldn’t connect with what was going on around me. I had been like a boiling kettle for months, with a relentless screeching noise in my head – and then, suddenly, it clicked off.”

[Read Ed’s story](#)

Disassociation

Some people find it hard to identify how they’re feeling, especially if they’ve been through something traumatic. This is sometimes known as disassociation.

If you dissociate, you may feel disconnected from yourself and the world around you. For example, you may feel detached from your body or feel as though the world around you is unreal. Dissociation is one way the mind copes with too much stress, such as during a traumatic event.

We have more information on [disassociation](#), including tips on how to take care of yourself when you disassociate.

Understanding why you might be feeling this way

Once you understand what it is you’re feeling, you can start to think about what could have caused some of these feelings. This might make you feel better prepared for how to deal with them.

Some of the things in this list might be contributing to how you’re feeling now. You might also have had experiences which aren’t included here.

Changes to your lifestyle and work

- You may have had to quickly **learn new rules and legislation**. You may have felt less confident about enforcing the new rules, or felt stressed when they changed frequently.
- Your **workload may have increased**. Some of the members of your team may have temporarily moved into different roles because of the pandemic. This might have left you feeling stressed at the amount of work there is to do.

- The **environment at work** might have changed. For example, you might have started working at home more often. This may have left you feeling lonelier, or less close to your colleagues.
- You might have **started helping out with other services more**. For example, you may have been supporting the ambulance service with driving ambulances. Learning new tasks in a short space of time might have felt stressful.
- **Lockdown may have changed your home life**. For example, not being able to go on holiday, enjoy hobbies, or do the things you usually do to relax. You may have felt like the boundary between work and home changed because of coronavirus.

“When COVID came on scene we all thought it would pass quickly. This was obviously not the case. Workloads, approaches to policing, and dealing with incidents all changed.”
– Tim, police officer

Bereavement

- **People you care about** may have died from coronavirus, or from other illnesses. You may not have been able to be there for them in the way you would have wanted.
- You may have **missed out on funerals**, or not been able to hold a funeral in the way you imagined.
- You might have **lost colleagues**. If you weren't able to pay tributes to them in the way you usually would, this may have felt even harder.

See our information on [bereavement](#).

[Info box] Get help if you've been bereaved by suicide.

[Get help](#)

Dealing with more traumatic incidents

- You may have dealt with more distressed members of the public. You may have **experienced verbal or physical abuse**.
- You may have attended **more mental health distress calls**.
- **Hearing stories from colleagues** can also feel traumatic, even if you weren't there yourself.
- You may have attended a **higher number of suicides**. Read our information on what to do if you've been [bereaved by suicide](#).

[Info box] - If you feel unable to keep yourself safe, it's a mental health emergency.

[Get emergency advice](#)

Police Care UK has a [video explaining how traumatic incidents can affect you](#), and some techniques you could use if you experience a traumatic incident.

“Until you experience working in the police force yourself, it can be very hard to really understand the impact of a job that deals with such emotional life events.” – Angela, chief inspector

Relationship changes

- You may have started **feeling differently towards the general public**, especially if they weren't following the rules.
- **Your relationship with media, and social media, might have changed.** You may have found it harder to read news stories, especially if they were criticising the police.
- Being more stressed at work, or dealing with more difficult jobs, might have had an **impact on relationships at home**. You might have found yourself needing more support, or wanting to be left alone more.
- Lockdown and restrictions to travel might have meant **you couldn't see the people you care about**.
- You may have found yourself **missing colleagues**, if you were working from home more, weren't able to see them outside of work, or weren't taking breaks together anymore.
- You might have worried about **passing on coronavirus** to the people you care about. This may have added strain to your relationships.

"As my fiancé is high risk I was required to isolate away from her to protect her. My rock that had helped me through all of this wasn't able to be there as much and this definitely had an effect on me and my mental health." – Tim, police officer

Missing out on things

- You might have **missed out on big life events**, like going to weddings, birthdays or funerals. This might have felt frustrating, or like time was passing without you being able to enjoy it.
- You might have **missed out on doing the day to day things** you usually enjoy. For example, seeing friends, going out, or having holidays. Not having these things might have made it harder to unwind from difficult shifts.
- You might feel like you're **missing out on the rewarding or enjoyable parts of your job**, or like you aren't getting the police service experience you were expecting. You might feel like you've lost the love you once had for the job.

"When the pandemic began, things changed. This had a big impact on my mental health – just not having that connection with others affected me." – Kiwi, police officer

Hopes and fears

For many of us, the pandemic meant that things we hoped would happen, or looked forward to, suddenly felt less likely. And things we feared would happen might have felt closer to coming true. For example:

- You may have **already felt like society was becoming more divided**. The pandemic might have made this feeling even stronger.
- You may have been **looking forward to things, like weddings or holidays abroad**. These may have been cancelled or postponed, and you might feel like they'll never happen.
- If you experience **health anxiety**, the pandemic might have felt especially hard to deal with. You can find out more about health anxiety on the [Anxiety UK](#) website.

Tools and strategies to cope

When it's your job to help others, it can feel hard to take time to look after yourself. But it's important to look after your own wellbeing. Here are some strategies for coping with some of the things you might be feeling.

Getting back motivation

You don't have to feel motivated all of the time, and many of us have days where we feel less motivated at work and at home. But if you feel like coronavirus has taken away some of the love and enjoyment you once had for your job, you might find these tips helpful.

- **Set yourself achievable goals.** Try to focus on completing a small, achievable goal each day. You might find it helpful to break down each goal into smaller goals. If work already feels quite target-focused, try thinking of something which isn't related to work.
- **Reward yourself.** Once you've completed the goal, reward yourself. It doesn't have to be something big. You could try taking 15 minutes out of your day to do something you enjoy. For example, finding time to read a few pages of a book, or taking the dog for a walk.
- **Try to do some physical activity.** Some people find staying active helps them to focus and stay motivated. Exercise can help you feel more energised and responsive, especially if you do a physical role. It can feel hard to get out and do exercise when you're feeling unmotivated, but you could try starting small, and gradually increasing the amount you do. We have more tips on [how to start getting active](#).
- **Try something new.** Introducing new hobbies, interests and activities in your life can help stimulate the brain, and may help you to feel more focused. You could try making some new recipes for dinner, changing your exercise routine, or finding a new hobby.

We have more tips for taking care of yourself when [going into work during coronavirus](#).

"Music is a big part of my well-being toolkit. I listen to music a lot and I know what to put on if I feel a low mood coming, depending on what has triggered it. And playing a musical instrument gives me a boost." – Sally, retired borough commander

Coping with change

- **Take stock of how you are feeling.** If you feel able to, set aside some time to think about how you're feeling about your current situation. You could start by using some of the tips in this resource. You might also find it helpful to discuss how you're feeling with someone you trust, like a friend or colleague. You might find that your colleagues have had similar experiences to you.
- **Focus on the things you can control.** It's easy to become overwhelmed by uncertainty, and not knowing what's going to happen in the future. Instead, try to focus on the day-to-day, and the things that are in your control. You could make a plan for the next week, or few days.
- **Have a daily routine.** Routine and structure can help to reduce feelings of uncertainty. Think about all the day-to-day things that are within your control. Is there anything you could do every day, or every week, to make life feel more consistent? If you work in irregular shift patterns, are there things you could do

during your shift days, and during your non-working days, to help separate the two? Try not to feel like your routine must be rigid. Incorporating new things can help you feel motivated and give you things to look forward to.

The NHS has more information about [how to deal with change and uncertainty during coronavirus](#).

Coping with changes in your mental health

“It’s important to be kind to yourself and to remember that life can return to normal, just don’t put pressure on yourself or set yourself deadlines to recover.”

[Read Cassie’s story](#)

Dealing with stress

- **Tell your manager if you’re feeling overburdened.** It might be hard talking to your manager about your workload. You might feel like you shouldn’t complain if everyone else is also struggling, or like you’re just expected to cope. But ignoring the signs of burnout and stress can leave you feeling emotionally and mentally exhausted. Speak to your manager to see whether your workload could be adjusted.
- If your manager is contributing to your feelings of stress, **think about who else you could speak to at work.** You could try another manager you trust, a colleague, or a staff network.
- **Speak to someone you don’t work with.** You might prefer to talk about how you’re feeling with someone who’s not at work, like a friend or family member. It might feel hard speaking to loved ones about the things you deal with at work, and you might feel like you want to protect them from certain things. But remember, you can be in charge of how much you tell them. Read our tips on [starting a conversation about mental health with friends and family](#).
- **Take time for yourself.** Try to build some time into your day, just for you. Even if this is a five minute walk, or 15 minutes to read a book. Try to make this a priority, but don’t be too harsh on yourself if you can’t always find the time.
- **Try a mindfulness exercise.** [Mindfulness](#) covers different techniques which can help you to focus on the present. These techniques can also help to clear your head and make you feel calmer, which might help when dealing with stressful situations.
- **Spend some time in nature.** Spending time in nature can be good for your mental wellbeing, and has been found to help with specific mental health problems like [anxiety](#) and [depression](#). It can also help to reduce feelings of stress. You could find some ways to incorporate nature into your working day. For example, driving a more scenic route to work, or having a plant or something which reminds you of nature on your desk. Read our ideas for [how to spend time enjoying nature](#).

We have more information on [staying mentally healthy at work](#), including tips on how to cope with stress.

“I use exercise as a therapy and walking my puppy; both of which have saved my life. To work in the emergency services is stressful enough without the added extra of bottling things up.” – Georgie, police officer

Feeling more positive

It's very uncommon to feel positive all of the time, and most of us will have periods where we feel better or worse. But working during the pandemic may have left you feeling worse about yourself, your job, or society in general. The following things might help you to regain some positivity.

- **Be kind to yourself.** Try to notice when you're thinking negative things about yourself. If you had a difficult shift, are you telling yourself that you should have done better, or that it was your fault when things went wrong? Try to challenge these negative thoughts. Think about the things you did well instead.
- **List the positive things.** During the pandemic, it may have felt like all you heard was bad news. Try to think of some positive things which are happening in your life, or things you feel grateful for. It could be a good news story you heard, a positive conversation you had with a colleague, or a time you laughed recently. You could try writing down your positive things, and rereading them when you're feeling low.
- **Take a break from the news and social media.** During the pandemic, coronavirus was in the news a lot. When you're also dealing with it at work, this constant bad news cycle can become overwhelming. Try taking a break from the news and social media. You don't have to cut them out completely, but you could limit how much time you spend reading them each day.

Thinking about the future

We don't know what might happen in the future. At work, some things might be returning to how they were before. If you were working from home, you might be returning to the office, and seeing colleagues again. If you work on the ground, you might be spending less time enforcing coronavirus restrictions now.

And there may be some things which still feel different. You might still have strict hygiene measures in place. Your caseload might not be back to pre-pandemic levels.

You might find it helpful to have some strategies in place for how you'll cope with the future, and any feelings of uncertainty or worry you might have. The following things might be helpful:

- **Give yourself time to adjust.** Everyone has their own response to the changes coronavirus has caused. It's important to take things at your own pace. Try not to put pressure on yourself to fill up your social diary, or to do lots of things now restrictions have lifted.
- **Control the things you can.** Try to focus on the things you can change, rather than the things that are outside your control. For example, you could try to have at least one conversation a day with a colleague that's not about coronavirus.
- **Share your worries with someone at work.** If you're worried about going back into the office, or you're worried about some of the rules at work changing again, try speaking to your manager. Together, you might be able to think of some ways

to make working a bit easier. If you can't speak to your line manager, think about whether there's another manager, colleague or staff network you could go to.

- **Remind yourself that it's OK to feel anxious about the future.** We don't know what the future holds, so it's OK if you feel uncertain about it. It's a natural response. You might find it helpful to read our tips for [taking care of yourself when you're anxious](#).

Anniversaries

You may have experienced lots of big changes to your life during the pandemic. You may have lost loved ones, or missed out on important events. And when the anniversaries of these moments come around, you might find it brings up some difficult feelings.

It can be helpful to take a moment to think about the events that have had a big impact on your life. If you want to, you could plan something on the date of the event's anniversary. You could meet up with other people who were affected. Or, you might prefer to spend some time reflecting on your own. You might find these resources helpful:

- [Cruse Bereavement Care](#) has information on coping with bereavement during coronavirus.
- Our page of [useful contacts for coronavirus](#) has a list of organisations offering bereavement support.
- Read more information on our pages about [bereavement](#) and [trauma](#).

Where to get support

There are many resources, services and organisations which offer support for people in the police force.

Support from your workplace

Ask your supervisor, line manager or colleagues if you can access specialist support, such as:

- Trauma Risk Management (TRiM)
- Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD)
- an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) helpline
- counselling services
- peer support groups.

If you are a police cadet, you might be able to access extra support through your course provider. Our [student mental health hub](#) has more tips and resources for anyone who is studying.

Stigma in the police

We know it can be difficult to reach out for help at work, especially when so much of your job is spent helping others. It can feel like there's a stigma in the police force, where you feel you have to put on a brave face and not admit that you're struggling.

It's always OK to ask for help. Reaching out can help you get the support you need to feel better. And if you don't feel comfortable speaking to someone at work, there are [organisations which might be able to help](#).

If you're a line manager, think about how you could encourage your team members to come to you if they need to talk. You might find it helpful to read [our resources on taking care of your staff](#). This includes information on how to support your team members, and how to create a mentally healthy workplace.

Tackling stigma in the police

"I loved my job and that was the frustrating thing; I couldn't tell anyone because of the stigma at work. For many people, if you've got depression, anxiety or stress then you're weak, you're a "sicknote"."

[Read Zoe's story](#)

Support from organisations

- [Blue Light Together](#) is a website listing a range of help services, websites and publications about emergency responder mental health, as well as real life stories from people working in the police force.
- [Police Care UK](#) offers practical, emotional and financial support for serving and veteran police officers and staff, volunteers and their families.
- [The Police Federation Covid-19 resource](#) has advice and information for police during the pandemic. It covers areas such as financial advice, wellbeing tips and pension support.
- [The Police Federation Welfare Support Programme](#) offers practical and mental health support, over the phone and in person.
- [The Oscar Kilo Covid-19 hub](#) has advice, guidance and signposting from the National Police Wellbeing Service around working during coronavirus.
- Our resource on [how to be mentally healthy at work](#) includes information on staying mentally healthy at work, with suggestions for what you can do if you're experiencing poor mental health.
- We have information on different [helplines and listening services](#) if you're in a crisis and need to talk to someone.

[Info box] [Samaritans](#) offers a 24/7 support line. Call 116 123 if you want to talk to someone about how you're feeling at any time.

Professional mental health support

When you're struggling to cope and self-care isn't enough, support from a professional can make a difference. This could include:

- [therapy through the NHS](#)
- [medication](#)
- [private therapy](#)
- [support from a charity or community organisation](#)
- [peer support, like a support group](#)

"The most courageous thing you can do is ask for help and it will improve. It is a big step but a very important one to take to help yourself." – Angela, chief inspector

Mind's services

- [Mind's helplines](#) provide information and support by phone and email.

- [Local Minds](#) offer face-to-face services across England and Wales. These services include talking therapies, peer support and advocacy.
- [Side by Side](#) is our supportive online community for anyone experiencing a mental health problem.

“Don't let any stigma, or thoughts of being weak or selfish get in the way of getting support. It doesn't matter who you are or how strong a character you are – this can happen to anyone at any time.” – Stuart, police sergeant

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References are available on request.