



Search and rescue: Coping with what you've experienced during coronavirus

This information is for anyone in the search and rescue service, whether you're in a voluntary role, a paid position, manage a team, or help people by responding to calls.

If you require this information in Word document format for compatibility with screen readers, please email: publications@mind.org.uk

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We know the pandemic isn't over, even though some parts of society are starting to go back to the way they were before. As a responder in the search and rescue service, things at work might feel as busy as ever.

You might still be dealing with new rules during shifts, and you might be going to more jobs than before the pandemic. You might feel differently about your role to how you did previously.

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 coronavirus, you might have been dealing 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.

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.

"We see people at their worst through the nature of our activity. Then what do we do after six hours of searching – cold, wet and hungry? We jump in our cars and go home." – Steve, volunteer in the search and rescue service

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.
- **Practise mindfulness.** [Mindfulness](#) is a technique which involves making a special effort to notice what's happening in the present moment (in your mind, body and surroundings), without judging anything. Mindfulness can help you to notice the negative and positive feelings you're having.

Below are some of the things members of the search and rescue service 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 be talking about:

- **Situations or events that put pressure on us.** This might 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 people who are in distress and need urgent care.
- **Our reaction to being placed under pressure.** This might be the feelings we get when we have demands placed on us that we find difficult to cope with. For example, feeling worried about how you'll manage to reach people on time when you're so busy.

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.

"I've had some stress and sleepless night over incidents I've attended and I know other personnel that have experienced a mental health problem." – Simon, volunteer in the search and rescue service

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.

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. Because of coronavirus, you might have been forced to make some difficult decisions while working or volunteering. For example, you might have had to prioritise caring for one person, while knowing there were others

who also needed your help. This might make you feel conflicted, or like you could have done more.

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 role less
- less confident about making decisions at work
- less motivated to do your role.

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.

"I remember on one occasion, we were dealing with a serious fatality. The whole incident kind of imprinted itself on my brain." – Nick, search and rescue team leader

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 role less, or don't feel motivated to do it anymore

- like you're not doing your role as well as you used to

Burnout in the search and rescue service

"I had been working away for long periods, working long hours and I was exhausted. I hadn't realised that my resilience was dropping until I dealt with a serious incident."

[Read Ross's story](#)

Dissociation

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

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 [dissociation](#), including tips on how to take care of yourself when you dissociate.

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.

"Mountain rescue can be quite stressful at times. We deal with difficult situations including casualties who have taken their own lives." – Izzy, mountain rescue service

Changes to your lifestyle and role

- There may be **new rules to follow**, like wearing more personal protective equipment (PPE).
- **The environment might have changed.** For example, you might not be allowed to gather in groups in break rooms. This might have affected the closeness or friendships you feel with others in the service.
- The **type of calls you answer, or incidents you attend**, might have changed. You may have gone through periods of time which were much busier, followed by times which were much quieter.
- **If you're a volunteer in search and rescue**, you might volunteer as it feels like a break or escape from your usual working life. The changes caused by coronavirus may have made it less enjoyable.
- **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.

"When I first joined the team in the early nineties, we were doing around 60 rescues per year. Now we regularly attend 100-120 rescues a year." – Nick, search and rescue team leader

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](#).

Dealing with more traumatic incidents

- You may have attended a **higher number of suicides**. Read our information on what to do if you've been [bereaved by suicide](#).
- **Hearing stories from colleagues** can also feel traumatic, even if you weren't there yourself.

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

"Dealing with the day to day calls and incidents in addition to the day to day running of an emergency service can be as stressful sometimes, if not more, than an incident itself." – Simon, volunteer in the search and rescue service

Relationship changes

- Being more stressed or dealing with more difficult incidents might have had an **impact on relationships at home**. You might find 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 other people in the service**, if you've been working from home more, aren't able to see them outside of your shift, or aren't taking breaks together anymore.
- If you volunteer in the service, you might **miss the camaraderie you had with other volunteers**.
- You might worry about **passing on coronavirus** to the people you care about. This may have added strain to your relationships.

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 role**, or like you aren't getting the search and rescue experience you were expecting. You might feel like you've lost the love you once had for the role.

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 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 role 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

- **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 your role in search and rescue already feels quite target-focused, try thinking of something which isn't related to your role.
- **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](#). If you're a volunteer, you may still find these tips helpful.

"My rescue colleagues have been hugely supportive. Even the tiniest little gesture can mean so much – invites to go climbing, invites for coffee, just someone coming around and dropping in for a chat." – Nick, search and rescue team leader

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 on this page. 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 your shift patterns are irregular, 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](#).

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.** You could try another manager you trust, a colleague, or a staff or volunteers network.
- **Speak to someone you don't work with.** You might prefer to talk about how you're feeling with someone who's not in the service, like a friend or family member. It might feel hard speaking to loved ones about the things you deal with in your role, 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 practising mindfulness.** [Mindfulness](#) can help you to focus on the present. It can also help to clear your head, and make you feel calmer, which might help when dealing with stressful situations.

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

“There are so many people who have experienced similar things. So it's important to know that you're not alone in feeling this way.” – Nick, search and rescue team leader

Feeling more positive

- **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. This 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 in your role, 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. During your shifts, some things might be returning to how they were before. But 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 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 in the service.** If you're worried about going back into the office or station, or you're worried about some of the rules changing again, try speaking to your manager or someone else you trust in the service. Together, you might be able to think of some ways to make working a bit easier.
- **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 pages 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 resources, services and organisations which offer support for people in the search and rescue service.

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 student, 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.

“Having someone to talk to when I needed it was probably the biggest help. Having the ability to use the EAP was extremely helpful. They didn't judge or give opinions – they just let me talk through the issues and feelings I had.” – Ross, coastguard rescue

Stigma in the search and rescue service

We know it can be difficult to reach out for help, especially when so much of your job is spent helping others. It can feel like there's a stigma in search and rescue, 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 [other 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.

Challenging stigma in search and rescue

“He asked me what was so terrible about admitting that I might have temporary depression. I agreed it was possible and that there was nothing bad about admitting this. This illustrated to me how deeply instilled the stigma can be.”

[Read Andy's story](#)

Support from organisations

- [Blue Light Together](#) is a website listing the range of help services, websites and publications about emergency responder mental health, as well as real life stories from people in the search and rescue service.
- [Mental health courses for people in search and rescue](#). You could access mental health first aid training which covers stress and anxiety, post traumatic stress disorder and acute traumatic stress disorder for those working or volunteering in search and rescue.
- 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 importance of seeking help

“The first time I saw a counsellor, I broke down in tears. Being able to talk to someone who was non-judgemental helped a lot. More than anything else, she has equipped me with the ability to realise if I am dipping back down again.”

[Read Nick's story](#)

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.

“We are one big 999 family in the emergency services. Look out for your friends and colleagues and support them when they need it. Break the stigma of mental health in our role.” – Andy, search and rescue paramedic

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References are available on request.