

Risky roles and career stages

At the start of your volunteering role

It takes a little time to build confidence and a sense of competence. We need to establish trusting relationships with colleagues and learn to detach from the human suffering we encounter. Until this happens, you are at greater risk of psychological injury from potentially traumatic jobs.

We used to think it was helpful to show new team members the bodies of those who had died as a way of helping them get used to dealing with death and serious injury. This attempt at inoculation was well-intentioned but based on flawed logic. Science tells us that we're protected by being active and purposeful in the face of trauma; so passive viewing increases rather than reduces the risk of injury.

Creating teams where colleagues can discuss difficult jobs reinforces everyone's armour.

When you stop volunteering

This is so important we've given it a whole section on this site. Some of you will have volunteered since you were young, others may have taken up volunteering after retiring from your paid employment. Many of you continue to volunteer well into later life enjoying the sense of giving something back to your community and the close bonds with fellow volunteers. So it's hard when you need to stop, whatever the reason. Perhaps you've become a parent and don't have enough time anymore. Or perhaps you're not as physically fit as you were. This sense of loss can be more complicated if you're stopping on physical or mental health grounds. Have a look at the I'm leaving or have left volunteering section to find out more.

Stressful times outside your volunteering role

Volunteer responders often are juggling an extra ball. Not just your work / life balance but a work / life / volunteering one. As well as all these role specific stressors, you will be dealing with the challenges of everyday life at home and perhaps at work. These may be positive changes, like moving to a new house, starting a new relationship, becoming a parent, or children leaving home. Others will involve losses and heartbreak such as bereavement, ill health, relationship breakdown and practical stressors like debt or difficulties linked to discrimination and harassment.

You may have experienced traumatic events outside your volunteering role that are affecting your wellbeing and mental health. Perhaps you are a veteran of the armed forces, experienced adversity in childhood or abuse within a relationship.

All of these things can affect your ability to stay well and can trigger the warning signs listed above. Please make use of the support available to get the help you need to get through difficult times.

When you take on a leadership role

We know that change can be stressful and that even positive changes can compromise our protective armour. Being a team leader often brings additional challenges which can be both rewarding and demanding. Pride in the team may be matched by feeling under stress as we try to balance the logistics of a team of volunteers and the need to provide an essential community service. We may feel bogged down in paperwork and may miss some of the camaraderie and freedom that came before we took on additional responsibility.