

Risky roles and career stages

At the start of your career

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 fire fighters the bodies of those who had died in fires or accidents, 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.

Working in the retained duty system

There are some specific hazards for those of you working in the retained. You're more likely to know the people involved and, because you have to go back to work or bed after a shout, may have less time to decompress with colleagues after a difficult job.

If your station is short-staffed you may feel the need to be on call most of the time, so you don't get a break or protected time with your family and friends. Especially if you're the crew or watch manager, or work in the wholetime service as well.

However, there will be positives too, and the retained fire fighter's armour has some extra protective features. You are likely to have a strong sense of pride in providing a service to your own community and may enjoy the extra solidarity of working with close friends or family members.

When you're promoted

We know that change can be stressful and that even positive changes can compromise our protective armour.

Promotion usually brings additional challenges which can be both rewarding and stressful. We may find that we're working alone and miss the camaraderie of colleagues or find that we're now their manager and no longer enjoy the same peer support. Moving into a senior role may mean we lose the flexibility of shift work and instead need to adjust to being on call.

Don't underestimate these hazards and make sure you adapt your Protective Armour to suit your new role.

When you move into a specialist role

The expertise and status that often accompany a specialist role is likely to form a new section of your Protective Armour. Whether you're working in a station that does water line rescue or joining the fire investigation team, you will get additional training and develop new skills. But there may be hazards too, both physical and psychological.

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For example, those of you working in fire investigation can find it harder to detach because your job is to understand the back story, you are mentally rather than physically active in the face of potentially traumatic material and often working alone.

It is not inevitable that you will be injured by these fresh challenges, but it is important to understand the hazards and to do what we can to mitigate them. That's why we have Lifelines Essential # 3 "Health and Safety assessments should include psychological risk".

Taking Fire Survival Calls in Control

There are several role-specific hazards for those of you who work in Control and you will have modified your Protective Armour to deal with these. You learn how to juggle multiple competing demands on resources and how to detach as you deal with distressed callers or hear worrying the information across the airwaves.

Fire Survival Calls are a specific hazard faced by you and your colleagues. If the person dies when you're on the phone with them this increases your risk of psychological injury significantly. Even if the outcome is positive, these are stressful calls, so keep a check on yourself and your colleagues and make use of the information and advice on this website.

At the end of your career

This is so important we've given it a whole section on this site. However much you're looking forward to retirement, there are losses involved, from your colleagues, your daily routine, to your sense of identity. This is further complicated if you're retiring early on physical or mental health grounds. Have a look at the I'm leaving or have left the service section to find out more.

Stressful times outside work

As well as all these work-related stressors, you will also be dealing with the challenges of everyday life. 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 work 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, both nationally and through your service to get the help you need to get through difficult times.