

Risky roles and career stages

The prison setting

Working within a custodial setting brings some unique challenges. The 24/7 nature of the organisation can make it hard to switch off and, like the inmates, you spend your working lives in a restricted environment with people whose behaviour can be unpredictable and hostile.

There may be times when you do not feel safe, and if you are involved in a potentially traumatic event at work, then you will be returning to the same place for your next shift. This familiar environment and community of colleagues who understand your experience can be protective, but it can also bring additional risks if you don't get a safe space to process the experience.

At the start of your career

It takes time to build confidence and a sense of competence in your new role. Establishing trusting working relationships and learning how to emotionally detach from some of the more challenging aspects of the job are key parts of this process. Until you reach that point, you may be at greater risk of psychological harm.

In the past, it was believed that exposing new recruits to traumatic materials, such as incidents involving threat or death, would help them get used to these realities. While well-intentioned, we now know this approach was flawed. Research shows that it's better to be active and purposeful when facing trauma. A passive approach can actually increase, rather than reduce, the risk of psychological injury.

Creating supportive teams where colleagues feel safe to discuss difficult incidents or material will reinforce everyone's armour.

When you're promoted

We know that change can be stressful and that even positive changes can compromise our protective armour. So, promotion in a challenging work environment, especially where you may face potentially traumatic events, can bring new pressures, both rewarding and stressful.

Moving up the ranks often changes your peer support network, and you may miss some of the camaraderie with colleagues. Research suggests that as you take on more senior roles, the risks to your wellbeing can increase. The demands of shift work, higher expectations, managing staff, balancing workloads, and meeting the needs of those in custody and their families can all take a toll. These work-related pressures can increase vulnerability to burnout, a kind of emotional, physical and psychological exhaustion, which makes self-care and social support even more important.

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

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When you work in a specialist role / setting

The expertise and status that often accompany a specialist role is likely to form a new section of your Protective Armour and often you will get additional training and develop new skills. But there may be hazards too, both physical and psychological.

Most prison work requires a combination of discipline, rehabilitation, and diplomacy but in some roles this balancing act is amplified. Perhaps you need to understand the offence in detail, encountering the human cost of this for the victims. Or maybe you are dealing with inmates who have their own experience of trauma and adversity, who are a risk to themselves and others within the prison establishment. You may face direct threats of assault, witness injury to others or be involved in restraints. Or indirect threats where you hear or read about distressing or frightening material. The risk of injury can be higher when we're passive or inactive in the face of these threats. Our fight or flight response is designed to have us respond physically.

It is not inevitable that you will be injured by these specific 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".

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 colleagues and 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.