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INSIGHT

Sustaining Yourself under Pressure in FM



Introduction

FM professionals are the people who keep buildings working and people safe, often invisibly. When it goes well, nobody notices. When it goes wrong, everybody does, and the first phone call is to you. That combination of accountability, unpredictability and constant availability is what makes the work meaningful. It is also what makes it demanding.

Many capable FM and estates leaders cope by working harder. They answer every call, solve every problem personally and treat availability as a badge of honour. It works for a while. Then the habits that made them reliable become the thing that makes the job unsustainable, and the organisation has quietly come to depend on their willingness to be always on.

This guide is about working practice, not wellbeing theory. It covers how to design your week, make on-call workable, set boundaries with bosses and stakeholders, delegate properly, triage decisions, recover after incidents, build a support network and recognise when the role itself is the problem. These are habits and structures you can put in place with your manager and your team.

It does not offer medical advice, and nothing here replaces support from qualified professionals. If your work is affecting your health, speak to your GP or another appropriate professional, and use any support your employer provides. What follows is the practical, commercial side: how to run a demanding role so that you can still do it well in three years.

Name the pressure before you try to manage it

Not all pressure is the same, and the right response depends on the source. Vague stress is hard to act on. Specific pressures can usually be addressed.

In FM, the common sources fall into a few groups. There is accountability pressure: you are responsible for compliance, safety and service, and you know what a failure means. There is availability pressure: the sense that you must be reachable and ready at all times. There is resource pressure: too little budget, too few people, too many sites. There is relationship pressure: demanding stakeholders, difficult contractors, conflicting expectations. And there is volume pressure: simply too much, arriving too fast.

Spend twenty minutes writing down what is actually weighing on you, then sort it into those groups. You will often find that one or two categories account for most of the load, and that they need different fixes. Availability pressure needs a rota and escalation rules. Resource pressure needs a business case. Relationship pressure needs a conversation.

This is useful because it turns a feeling into a list of problems. Some you can solve yourself, some need your manager, some need a decision from above. Knowing which is which is the first step to getting help in a form someone can act on.

- Write down your top five sources of pressure and label each one.
- Mark which ones you can change, influence or only accept.
- Note which have got worse in the last year and why.
- Decide which one you will address first.

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Calm under pressure is a skill



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Design the week instead of reacting to it

A reactive week is one in which the phone sets the agenda. In FM you cannot remove interruptions, but you can protect enough planned time to do the work that prevents them.

Start by blocking time for the important and not urgent: reviewing the compliance register, walking the sites, meeting contractors, one to ones with your team, planning and thinking. Put them in the diary as appointments. If they do not have a slot, they will not happen, and the cost of neglecting them shows up later as incidents.

Be realistic about how much you can protect. Aim for a pattern, not perfection. For example, keep the first hour of the day for planning, a fixed time for walking the site, and one afternoon a week with no meetings. When an incident displaces them, move them rather than deleting them.

Also design the edges of the day. Decide when you start and finish when nothing is wrong, and when your phone is off or silenced outside rota hours. If you are not on call, make that real. A leader who responds to everything at all hours teaches the organisation that nobody else needs to be on the rota.

Review the week every Friday. What took your time that should not have? What did you avoid? What will you change next week? Five minutes of honest review beats a month of vague resolutions.

- Book recurring slots for site walks, compliance review and team one to ones.
- Keep one meeting-free block each week.
- Decide your normal start and finish times and tell your team.
- Use a Friday review to adjust the next week.

Make on-call sustainable

On-call is where many FM roles quietly become unsustainable. The answer is not to avoid it, because estates need out-of-hours cover. It is to build it properly.

A good arrangement has a rota that shares the load across enough people, a clear definition of what justifies a call, a defined first line before it reaches you, and a way of recording call outs so the pattern is visible. If you are the single point of contact for every site, every night, that is a design failure, not a personal one.

Write escalation criteria. Which events need a senior manager and which can be handled by a duty engineer or the contractor? Put them on one page that the control room, the security team and the contractors all use. Most unnecessary calls come from people not knowing whether something is important. Remove the doubt and the calls fall.

Then look at recovery. If someone has been called out in the night, what do they do the next day? Time off in lieu, a later start, a lighter day. Agree it in advance so that nobody has to ask or feel they are being weak by taking it.

Finally, look at the data. If call outs are frequent, ask why. Repeated failures in the same plant, the same contractor or the same site point to a problem that should be fixed, with a case you can take to your manager.

- Share the rota across enough trained people.
- Write one page of escalation criteria and circulate it.
- Log every call out with its cause and its duration.
- Agree recovery time in advance, including time off in lieu.

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Better decisions under pressure



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Set boundaries with your boss and your stakeholders

A boundary in a work context is not a refusal. It is a clear statement of what you will do, when and with what trade-off. Done well, it increases trust, because people learn what to expect.

The most useful boundary conversation is about priorities. When your boss adds a new request to a full plate, do not simply absorb it. Ask which of the existing items should move. This is not obstruction, it is project management. You might say: I can take that on, and to do it properly I would need to push the contractor review back to next month. Is that acceptable?

Do the same with stakeholders. Tell them what a realistic response time is for a routine request and what counts as urgent. Agree it, and then keep to it. People tolerate a clear service level far better than inconsistent heroics.

Also agree availability with your manager. What do they expect outside normal hours when you are not on call? Many managers have never been asked, and assume it. Ask the question, agree the answer and note it. If the answer is that you should be reachable at all times, that is information about the role.

Practise a few sentences in advance, because they are harder to say in the moment: I can do that by Thursday if the audit work moves. I am not on call this week, so the duty manager is your contact. That is outside what we agreed, can we talk through the options?

- Ask what should move whenever a new priority arrives.
- Publish realistic response times for routine and urgent requests.
- Agree your out-of-hours expectations with your manager once, explicitly.
- Rehearse two or three calm sentences for the awkward moments.

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Leadership without the noise



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Delegate authority, not just tasks

Many pressured FM leaders say they have no time to delegate. The truth is usually that they have not made it safe to delegate, so everything returns to them.

There is a difference between handing over a task and handing over authority. A task is: please chase this contractor. Authority is: you own the relationship with this contractor, you can approve work up to this limit, and you tell me about anything above it. The second takes more effort to set up and saves far more time.

Start by listing everything that currently only you can do. For each item, ask why. Is it a skill, a relationship, an approval, or simply habit? Skills can be taught, relationships can be introduced, approvals can be set with limits, and habit can be broken. Pick two items and begin.

Build deputies for the critical roles. If one person is the only one who understands the fire strategy, the building management system or the key client, you have a single point of failure and the organisation is exposed when they are away. Documenting and cross-training takes effort, but it is the best insurance for a leader who wants to take a holiday.

Accept that the work will be done differently. If the outcome is safe and good enough, let it go. Stepping back in at every deviation teaches your team to stop deciding.

- List what only you can do and challenge each item.
- Delegate with a clear limit, a clear owner and a clear reporting point.
- Name and train a deputy for each critical responsibility.
- Judge delegated work by outcome and safety, not by whether it matches your method.

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Good judgement is quiet

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Use decision rules to cut the noise

A great deal of pressure comes from decision volume. Everything seems to need an answer now, and every answer feels important. Decision rules reduce the load.

First, triage. For each item ask two questions: is it a safety, legal or serious service risk, and does it need to be done by me? Anything that is a risk is handled immediately or escalated properly. Anything that is not a risk and not yours gets passed on with a clear owner. What remains can be scheduled.

Second, separate reversible from irreversible decisions. If a decision can be undone cheaply, make it quickly with the information you have and move on. If it cannot, such as signing a long contract or taking on a major liability, slow down, get advice and sleep on it. Most daily decisions are reversible, and treating them as if they were not is a major source of delay and stress.

Third, set standing rules in advance. For example, approve any reactive spend under an agreed limit without asking, always involve the health and safety lead for a particular category of incident, never agree a contract variation by phone. Standing rules turn a hundred small decisions into none.

Finally, avoid deciding when you are exhausted or angry if you can. For anything that matters and is not urgent, wait until the next morning. It is a simple discipline, and it prevents a lot of regrets.

- Triage by risk and by ownership before acting.
- Decide reversible matters fast and irreversible ones slowly.
- Write standing rules for repeat decisions.
- Delay non-urgent decisions made when you are depleted.

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Quiet authority gets results



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Recover properly after incidents

Major incidents are part of the work: a flood, a lift entrapment, a power loss, a serious complaint, a near miss. How you handle the aftermath matters as much as the response, both for the organisation and for you.

Start with a proper handover. When an incident ends, hand the loose ends to someone who has the capacity to hold them. Write a short summary of what happened, what is still open and who owns it. This lets you stop carrying the list in your head.

Then hold a debrief within days, while memory is fresh. Keep it about the system, not the individual. What worked, what failed, what do we change? Record the actions with owners and dates, and follow up. A debrief with no actions is a conversation, and teams quickly learn to stop attending.

Take the recovery time you have agreed. After a long incident, the instinct is to carry on as if nothing happened, because there is a backlog. Resist it. Time off in lieu, a lighter day or a later start is part of how a team stays effective across a year. Model it for your team by taking it yourself.

Finally, look after the people who were there. Say thank you specifically. Check in with those who dealt with the worst of it. If someone seems to be struggling after an incident, encourage them to use the support your organisation offers, and take advice from HR on how to handle it.

- Write a one page handover at the end of every significant incident.
- Hold a no-blame debrief within a few days and track the actions.
- Use the recovery time that has been agreed, and be seen to use it.
- Thank people specifically and check in with those most affected.

Build a support network outside your own team

Senior FM roles can be isolating. You are often the only person in the organisation who does what you do, and you may not be able to share the worries with your team or your boss. A deliberate network fixes this.

Aim for three kinds of contact. First, peers: FM and estates leaders in other organisations, who have the same problems and will tell you what they did. Professional bodies, local forums and sector groups are good places to find them. Second, a mentor: someone a step or two ahead who can give perspective and honest feedback. Third, a trusted person outside the industry who can listen without needing to know the detail.

Use your employer's support where it exists. Many organisations provide an employee assistance programme or similar services. If you are a manager, know what is available for you and for your team, and be willing to point people to it.

Be a good contact in return. A network works because it is reciprocal. Share what you learn, take the call from the newer manager, and offer to compare notes.

And be clear about the limits. Peers and mentors can help with working practice, but they are not a substitute for professional help. If work is affecting your health or your life outside it, speak to your GP or another qualified professional. Doing so is a sensible act, not a failure.

- Join one professional body or forum and attend regularly.
- Find a mentor and agree how often you will meet.
- Know the support your employer offers for you and your team.
- Speak to a qualified professional if work is affecting your health.

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Leadership in facilities is a serious job



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Know when the role is the problem

Better habits can fix a lot, but not everything. Some roles are structurally unsustainable: too few people, too little authority, a culture that treats overload as normal. No amount of personal discipline fixes a role like that.

Test it honestly. Ask whether the demands are temporary or permanent. A project peak or a restructure is one thing, a standing pattern is another. Ask whether you have raised the problem clearly with someone who can change it, and what happened. Ask whether you have the authority to fix the cause. And ask whether others in the role, before you, left for similar reasons.

If you have raised it and nothing changes, you have information. Employers who care about a role will change it when a good person says it cannot be done safely or sustainably. Employers who do not will wait for you to burn out or leave. The decision then is about whether this is the place for you.

Moving on is a legitimate answer, not a defeat. When you do look, use what you have learned. Ask prospective employers about the rota, the resourcing, the escalation routes and the culture. Talk to people who have worked there. The aim is to move to something better designed, not into the same problem with a new badge.

Before you decide, speak to someone you trust about it, and take professional advice on any employment questions. Give yourself a timeline, so that you are making a choice rather than drifting.

- Separate temporary peaks from standing patterns.
- Raise the problem clearly and note the response.
- Compare your role's design with what good looks like elsewhere.
- If you move, ask the new employer about rota, resourcing and escalation first.

Sustainability checklist for FM leaders

- [ ] Write down your top five sources of pressure and label each one.
- [ ] Block recurring time for site walks, compliance review and team one to ones.
- [ ] Agree your out-of-hours expectations with your manager explicitly.
- [ ] Share the on-call rota and write one page of escalation criteria.
- [ ] Agree and use recovery time after night call outs and major incidents.
- [ ] Ask what should move whenever a new priority arrives.
- [ ] Name and train a deputy for each critical responsibility.
- [ ] Write standing rules for your repeat decisions.
- [ ] Hold a no-blame debrief after every significant incident and track the actions.
- [ ] Join a professional network, find a mentor and speak to a qualified professional if work is affecting your health.

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Leadership is a decision, not a title



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Next steps

Staying effective in a demanding role is a matter of design. Structure your week, share the load, say clearly what you will and will not do, and recover when you need to. The leaders who last are rarely the ones who work the longest, they are the ones whose operations do not depend on them being everywhere.

If you are considering whether a different role would suit you better, Maxwell Stephens is a specialist Facilities Management recruitment consultancy. Start this week with one change: write your escalation criteria on a single page and share it with everyone who calls you.

A FINE POSITION TO BE IN

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