

The hidden psychological impact of workplace investigations.

Protecting the people involved without compromising the process.



An investigation can be necessary, rigorous and procedurally fair.
And still become one of the most psychologically demanding experiences of somebody's working life.

That applies whether the investigation concerns misconduct in a police force, a serious complaint within an NHS organisation, safeguarding concerns within a school, bullying or harassment in a corporate organisation, a professional regulatory matter, or something that may eventually progress into legal proceedings.

- Something has happened, or is alleged to have happened.
- Facts need to be established.
- People may disagree fundamentally about those facts.
- Evidence must be gathered.
- Decisions need to withstand scrutiny.

None of that changes because the process is psychologically difficult, but there is another question worth asking: *How much of that difficulty is inherent in investigating something serious, and how much do we inadvertently create through the way we conduct the investigation?*

That distinction matters.

Necessary difficulty and avoidable harm.

The Faculty of Public Health recently called for a national conversation about disciplinary investigations, highlighting the potentially serious effects of poorly designed and applied processes and arguing for approaches that are more proportionate, compassionate and human-centred. It is an important challenge.

A psychologically informed investigation cannot simply mean making investigations kinder; sometimes an investigation must ask deeply uncomfortable questions, sometimes evidence must be challenged, sometimes somebody who believes strongly that they have been wronged will not have their complaint substantiated, and sometimes allegations will be upheld and an individual will face serious professional consequences.

Psychological safety does not mean psychological comfort. A psychologically informed investigation therefore needs a more demanding standard: **Can we distinguish between what needs to be difficult and what we are making difficult unnecessarily?**

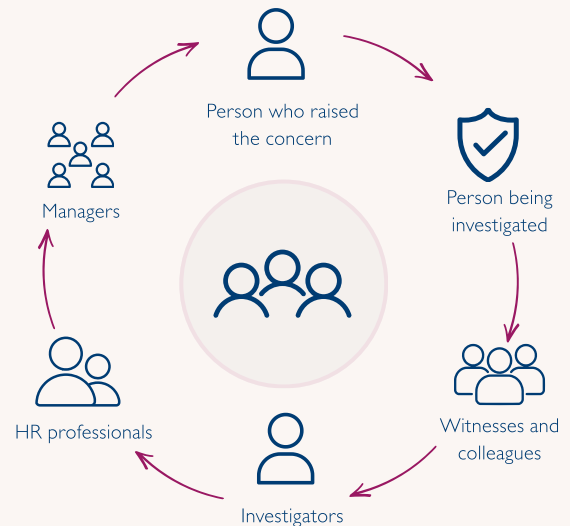
NECESSARY DIFFICULTY	AVOIDABLE HARM
 Necessary scrutiny	 Unnecessary threat
 Necessary confidentiality	 Unnecessary isolation
 Necessary uncertainty	 Unnecessary uncertainty
 Necessary duration	 Unnecessary delay
 Necessary challenge	 Unnecessary hostility
 Necessary consequences	 Avoidable harm

An investigation is not simply a process. It is a system of people.

Most investigation frameworks understandably concentrate on procedure. Things such as: terms of reference; evidence; interviews; confidentiality; decision-making; findings.

Psychologically, an investigation looks different.

- There may be a person who has reported something serious;
- Another person whose conduct or competence is now being questioned;
- Witnesses who may have relationships with both;
- Colleagues trying to understand what is happening;
- A manager trying to keep a team functioning;
- HR professionals balancing organisational, procedural and human considerations;
- At least one or more people responsible for hearing, testing, organising and making sense of everything they are told.



All are experiencing the same investigation from different psychological positions, and what helps one may create difficulty for another.

- Reassuring a complainant cannot mean implying an outcome before evidence has been tested.
- Supporting the subject cannot mean minimising what has been alleged.
- Supporting a witness cannot compromise confidentiality.
- Supporting an investigator cannot interfere with independence.

A psychologically informed investigation therefore requires multiple perspectives to be held simultaneously, which is much harder than simply being compassionate.

For the person who raised the concern:

Making a complaint or disclosure can carry its own psychological cost.



They may have spent weeks or months deciding whether to say anything.



They may worry they will not be believed, fear retaliation or professional consequences.



They may have to revisit events repeatedly via statements, interviews or evidence.



Once the investigation begins, control moves elsewhere; that loss of control matters.

Clear information about what will happen, what can and cannot be promised, how decisions will be made and when contact will occur does not determine the outcome. It helps someone understand the process they have entered.

For the person being investigated: The experience is different, but no less significant.

An allegation can create an abrupt threat to professional identity, reputation, relationships and livelihood before anything has been established. That is particularly potent in professions where people's sense of self is closely tied to competence, integrity or public service such as a clinician facing a serious professional allegation; a police officer accused of misconduct; a teacher facing a safeguarding concern; or a senior executive accused of bullying. For each, the investigation may challenge not simply what they have done but who they understand themselves to be.



Allegations can feel like an attack on their character, competence and integrity.



They often have limited information and must live with uncertainty.



They may fear judgement, stigma and professional or career damage.



The process can feel invasive and disempowering.

Restrictions may be entirely necessary, however necessary confidentiality can very quickly become profound social and professional isolation. A psychologically informed process asks what appropriate contact, information and support can remain.

For witnesses and teams: They occupy an unusual position.

They may not have raised the concern and may not be accused of anything, yet they may be asked to provide information with serious consequences for people they know. A witness might simultaneously be someone's colleague, supervise them, consider them a friend, work for the person they are giving evidence about, or continue working alongside the complainant. Providing an account can therefore carry loyalty conflicts, fear about repercussions and uncertainty about what happens when everybody returns to work.

Teams rarely remain psychologically untouched while an investigation happens around them. Information gaps fill with speculation, people take sides, relationships change. An investigation can therefore alter a team even when most of that team is never formally part of the process.



They may feel pulled in different directions or face loyalty conflicts.



Partial information can create speculation, anxiety and division.

Witnesses need clarity about what is being asked of them, what will happen to the information they provide and what they can expect afterwards. For the wider team, a psychologically informed approach means recognising that information gaps, changed relationships and uncertainty need managing, even when confidentiality limits what can be shared.

For managers and HR professionals: They frequently become the containers for others' uncertainty.

The complainant wants information, the subject wants information, the team wants information. Senior leaders want reassurance that the matter is being managed. The investigator may need decisions or access.

The people in the middle may be unable to tell any of them very much, which creates a particular form of psychological demand: responsibility without complete control. Meanwhile, they may also have pre-existing relationships with those involved and still be expected to remain appropriately boundaried.

Supporting the people holding that position is not peripheral to a good investigation, it helps them continue making thoughtful decisions when pressure, emotion and competing demands are high.



Managers try to keep teams functioning while carrying the weight of uncertainty.



HR professionals balance organisational, procedural and human considerations.

Managers and HR professionals need somewhere to think clearly when they are carrying responsibility without complete control. Appropriate consultation, clear decision-making boundaries and support with competing demands can help them remain thoughtful and appropriately boundaried when pressure and emotion are high.

And then there is the investigator.

We pay surprisingly little attention to the psychological demands of investigating; perhaps this is because professionalism is easily confused with invulnerability.

An investigator's task is to remain curious without becoming aligned, empathic without becoming partial, appropriately sceptical without becoming cynical, and sufficiently emotionally engaged to understand an account without becoming overwhelmed by it. That is psychologically sophisticated work, and on top of this, the material itself may be difficult.

An NHS investigator might spend weeks reviewing the circumstances surrounding a patient's death, interviewing distressed clinicians and family members and considering whether individual actions, staffing, systems or clinical judgement contributed. A safeguarding investigator may repeatedly hear detailed accounts of abuse, whilst a person examining workplace sexual harassment may listen to multiple descriptions of humiliating or violating experiences. For a police professional standards investigator, they may be investigating another officer while understanding exactly what the professional consequences of their conclusions could be, whilst within a corporate setting, an investigation into allegations of bullying, discrimination or serious leadership failure may involve navigating competing accounts from senior people with considerable organisational influence.

Investigators are not passive recipients of this material; they have to remember it, analyse it, test it, return to it and eventually make judgements about it.

Exposure is only part of the demand.

The psychological burden is not simply hearing distressing material; investigators also carry the responsibility of deciding what can reasonably be known. Two people can give genuinely different accounts of the same event, both may be distressed, both may appear credible, evidence may be incomplete, and organisational records may not resolve the difference.

Despite this, somebody still has to analyse the evidence and reach a defensible conclusion. That uncertainty can be difficult to carry, particularly when the consequences matter greatly.

Impartiality itself requires psychological work.

Investigators form impressions because they are human. They may feel sympathy for one person, frustration towards another. They may find a witness difficult. An allegation may resonate with something they have experienced previously, and a particular type of case may affect them more than another.

Professionalism is not the absence of those responses, it is the capacity to notice them without allowing them to determine the investigation. That requires self-awareness, and self-awareness is considerably harder when somebody is overloaded, repeatedly exposed to difficult material or working without meaningful opportunity to reflect.

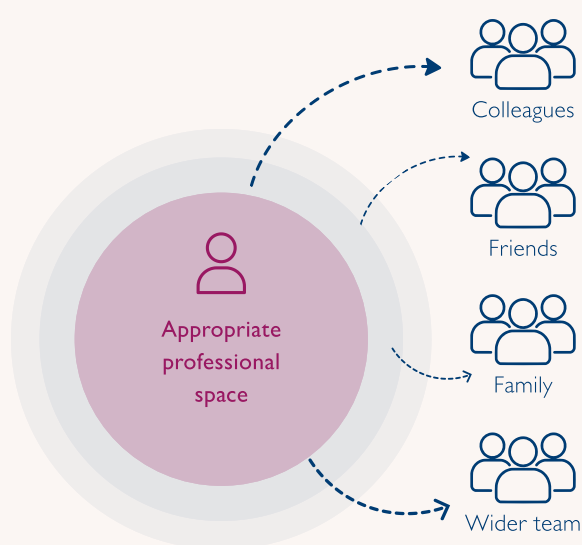
Confidentiality can isolate investigators too.

Investigators often hold information they cannot discuss with colleagues, friends or family. The more sensitive the case, the smaller the circle of people with whom they can process what they are carrying.

That creates an important organisational question:

Where does the investigator take the impact of the work?

Professional supervision, consultation and reflective support can provide somewhere to think about the effect of conducting the work without discussing it inappropriately or compromising investigative independence. The purpose is not therapy, and nor is it to influence findings, it is to help the investigator remain capable of doing psychologically demanding work with clarity, perspective and appropriate boundaries.



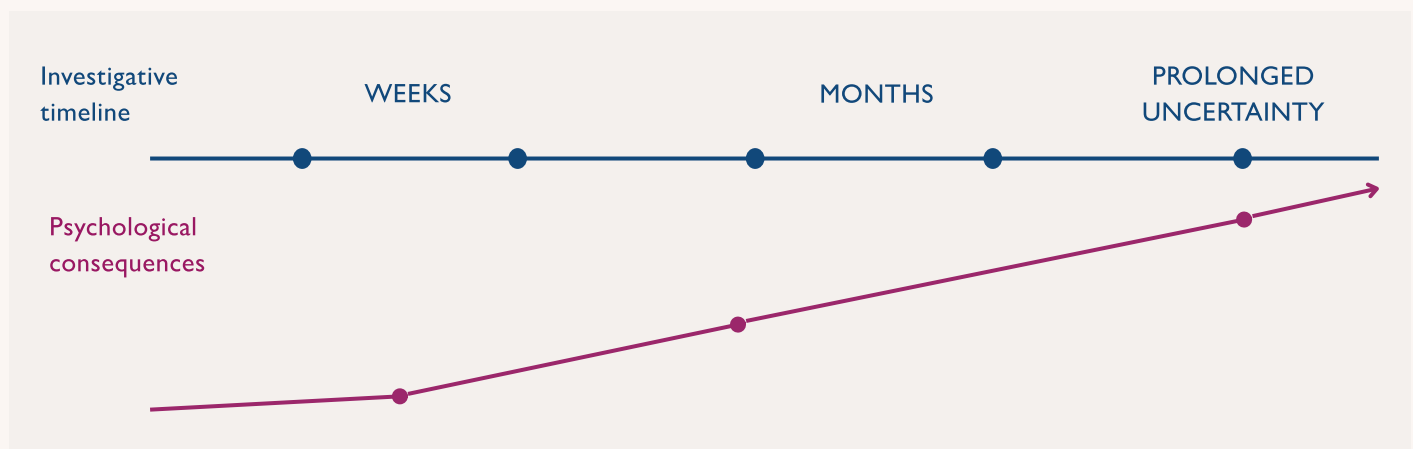
If we expect investigators to absorb difficult material indefinitely simply because it is their job, we are making exactly the same mistake organisations make elsewhere in psychologically demanding work; we are treating professional competence as protection from psychological impact. It isn't.

Time changes the experience.

Some investigations need to take a long time. Complex evidence cannot be responsibly rushed, multiple witnesses may need interviewing, legal or regulatory processes may run alongside internal ones, and new information may require further investigation.

Any delay has consequences even when it has an explanation. Weeks of uncertainty can become months, temporary arrangements stop feeling temporary, relationships reorganise around absence, people repeatedly revisit what happened, and managers continue holding teams in limbo.

The psychologically informed question is therefore not simply: *“How quickly can we finish?”* it’s *“Is every part of the time this is taking necessary, and how are we managing the impact of the time that genuinely is?”*



The outcome does not return everybody to the beginning.

A finding closes a formal question, but it does not necessarily undo everything that happened while the question was being answered.

“No case to answer” does not restore months of lost confidence or changed relationships, and a substantiated complaint does not automatically resolve the experience for the person who made it. Witnesses may continue working with people whose accounts they contradicted, teams may remain divided, managers may have to reintegrate somebody who has been absent, and investigators themselves may finish one demanding case and immediately begin another.

So psychologically informed investigation must include what happens after the finding, not because every person requires intervention, but because organisations need to notice what the process has changed.

Establishing psychologically informed investigations.

Before an investigation begins, we can consider:



PEOPLE

- Who may be affected by this process, including those conducting it?
- What support is available to the complainant, subject and witnesses?
- Who is supporting the managers and HR professionals holding the wider process?
- What is the investigator repeatedly being exposed to?



PROCESS

- What difficulty is inherent in what we need to do?
- What difficulty could we reasonably avoid creating?
- What uncertainty can we reduce?
- Are delays genuinely necessary?



COMMUNICATION & PARTICIPATION

- How will we communicate when there is nothing substantive to report?
- Are interviews designed to support reliable participation while still allowing appropriate challenge?
- If restrictions are necessary, what appropriate human contact can remain?



REFLECTION & AFTERMATH

- Where can the investigator reflect on the psychological impact of the work without compromising confidentiality or independence?
- What will need attention when the formal process ends?

The Faculty of Public Health's challenge is an important one: avoidable harm should not simply be accepted as an inevitable consequence of disciplinary investigation, but avoiding harm cannot mean removing rigour, challenge, uncertainty or consequence from processes that sometimes necessarily contain all four.

The more useful ambition is to understand the psychological demands of investigation accurately - across everyone involved - because a fair investigation is not one in which people don't experience distress, it is one in which difficult things are done because they need to be done, not because we have failed to notice a better way of doing them.



Perhaps the final test should be broader than whether the process was followed correctly.

We should also be able to ask: **Did we understand what this process required of the people inside it, including the people we asked to carry it?**

About the author

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