

eleos

KNOWLEDGE HUB

# We already know policing can cause harm.

What are we prepared to change because we know?

There are parts of policing that are difficult because of the work itself. Seeing things most people will never see. Sitting with somebody on the worst day of their life. Making decisions when there is little time and incomplete information. Being threatened, challenged or scrutinised. Listening repeatedly to distressing material. Dealing with people who are frightened, angry, intoxicated, grieving or dangerous.

For some roles, that exposure is obvious. For others, it is easier to overlook. A call handler may hear trauma without ever attending the scene. An investigator can spend months immersed in material from one case. Someone working with digital evidence may repeatedly view content most colleagues never encounter. Supervisors carry their own work while also holding some of what happens to the people they lead.

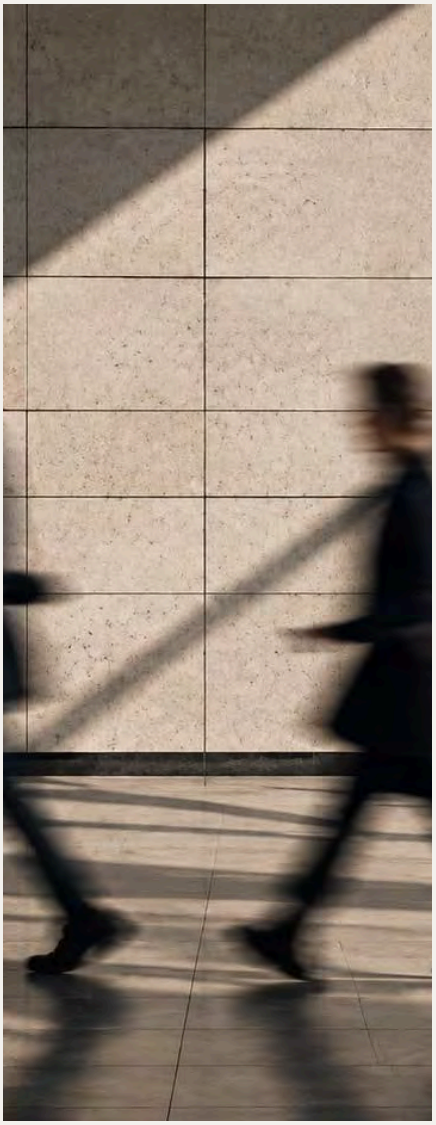
And policing does not happen in isolation from the rest of somebody's life. A difficult incident may land in a week already shaped by poor sleep, staffing pressure, a struggling colleague, financial worries, caring responsibilities or something difficult at home.

We know enough about policing to know that psychological demand is not an unexpected side effect of the job. The question is what follows from knowing that.

> *We know enough to know that psychological demand isn't an unexpected side effect of the job.*



# The difficult job isn't happening on its own.



Two people can attend the same incident and respond differently. The same person can encounter something similar twice and find that one occasion stays with them while the other does not. That does not necessarily tell us who is more resilient.

Human responses are affected by far more than the event itself. What came before it matters; so does what happened afterwards. Experience, exhaustion, personal meaning, previous exposure, the response of colleagues, what was happening at home and whether there was any opportunity to recover can all change how an experience lands.

This matters because it is tempting to divide work into things that should affect people and things that should not. A major incident is recognised as psychologically significant; months of relentless demand, repeated exposure or never quite recovering between shifts may be less visible. Often it is the combination that matters.

Someone may manage difficult work extremely well for a long time. Then another incident happens during a period when the usual things that helped them absorb the work are no longer available.

Understanding psychological demand in policing therefore means looking beyond individual incidents. It means understanding the work people are repeatedly being asked to do and the conditions in which they are doing it.

> *Human responses are affected by more than the event itself. Understanding psychological demand means looking beyond individual incidents.*

# There's a lot of life between "I'm fine" and needing therapy.

People in policing often continue functioning while something is becoming harder. They still come to work. They make decisions, answer calls, complete jobs, speak to colleagues and get through the shift. From the outside, there may be little to suggest that anything has changed.

Functioning does not always tell us what that functioning is costing.

Sleep may be getting worse. Someone may find it harder to switch off after work. They may replay jobs on the drive home, become more irritable, withdraw from people or notice that things they would once have shrugged off now stay with them. They may be perfectly capable of doing the job while having less and less capacity left when they leave it.

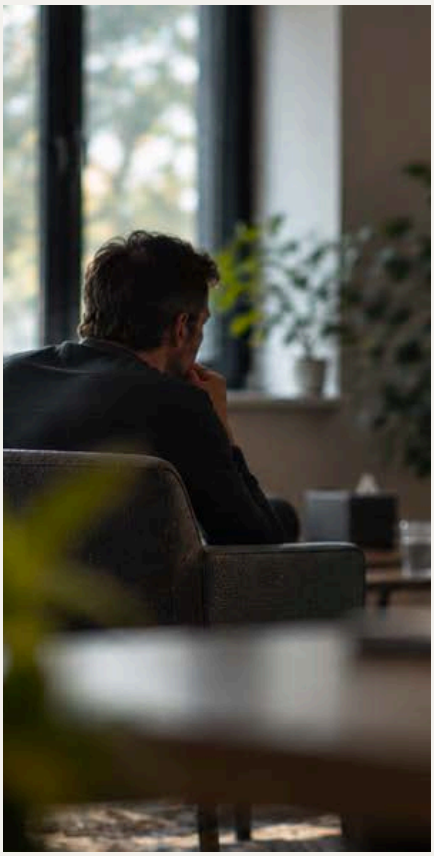
None of those things automatically means somebody is becoming unwell, but they do tell us why prevention cannot begin only when someone reaches a threshold for treatment.

There is a substantial middle ground between coping without difficulty and needing clinical intervention. It is where colleagues notice changes, supervisors know their people, recovery gets protected, difficult experiences can be acknowledged without becoming a formal referral, and people can access useful support before they have to describe themselves as struggling.

The middle ground is an important part of psychological infrastructure.

> *Functioning doesn't always tell us what that functioning is costing.*

> *Prevention can't begin only when someone reaches a threshold for clinical treatment.*



# "Support is there if you need it" asks quite a lot of the person.



Most policing organisations now have some form of support available, and that really matters. However, availability and accessibility are not the same thing.

To use support, somebody first has to notice that something is changing. They have to decide that it is significant enough to do something about. They may need to identify the right service, work out how to access it and decide whether they trust what will happen if they do. They may also have to cross an internal line from "This is just part of the job" to "I need some help with this".

For somebody who is used to functioning under pressure, that can be quite a distance.

This is one reason familiar relationships matter. A colleague noticing that somebody is quieter than usual, a supervisor asking a second question rather than accepting the automatic "fine", or a team routinely acknowledging the impact of difficult work can shorten the distance between experiencing something and receiving useful support around it.

This doesn't mean colleagues or supervisors become therapists, and nor does every difficult shift require an intervention. It means we should not build a system that depends entirely on the person under pressure being the first person to recognise what is happening, name it correctly and seek formal help.

# Some demand can't be removed. We can change what surrounds it.

Policing will always involve experiences that cannot be made psychologically easy.

There will still be sudden deaths, frightened families, violence, risk, scrutiny, distressing evidence and decisions with serious consequences. A psychologically informed approach does not pretend otherwise; instead, it asks what is foreseeable about the demand.

If a role predictably exposes people to distressing material, what happens around that exposure? If a team repeatedly moves from one demanding job to the next, where does recovery fit? If supervisors are expected to notice when their people are struggling, are they equipped to recognise changes and know what to do next? If support exists, how close is it to the point at which people actually need it? What happens after the difficult job, not only immediately afterwards, but when everybody else has moved on?

This is not simply a question of resilience. Individual capability matters, but resilience does not erase demand. We would not treat any other foreseeable occupational risk as something managed solely by asking each employee to become better at tolerating it.

Psychological demand deserves the same seriousness.

# What to take from this.

Psychological demand is part of policing, but that does not make every consequence inevitable. Some parts of the work cannot be changed; the conditions surrounding them often can.

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1

**Look beyond the obvious incidents.**
Psychological demand can come from cumulative exposure, relentless workload, responsibility, uncertainty and repeated contact with other people's distress, as well as major incidents.

2

**Coping and cost are not the same thing.**
Someone can still be doing their job while sleep, recovery, relationships or capacity outside work are changing.

3

**Prevention lies in the middle ground.**
There is important space between someone being completely unaffected and someone needing treatment.

4

**Available support is not automatically accessible support.**
The further someone has to travel psychologically or practically to use it, the more likely they are to continue without it.

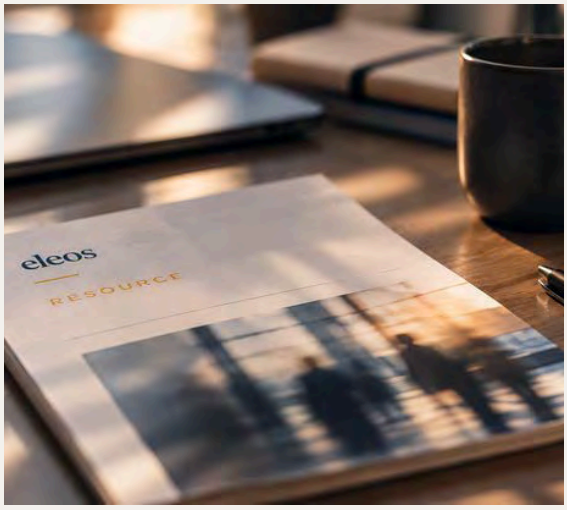
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**Start with the work.**
Ask what a role predictably requires people to carry psychologically, then consider what can reduce the demand, what protection can be put around it, how changes will be noticed, and what support needs to be close enough for people to use it.

We already know that policing can expose people to psychological harm. A more useful question now is: what are we prepared to do differently because we know?

# Explore this topic further.

If this article has raised questions or you would like to go deeper into this topic, you may find the following resources useful.




## RESOURCE

### Use the thinking.

**Understanding the demand.**
Look at the psychological demands within a policing role or team, what already protects people around them and where the gaps may be.



## LISTEN

### Hear the thinking.

**We already know policing can cause psychological harm.**
Hear the thinking explored through the everyday realities of policing and the space between coping and needing formal support.

Published August 2026 | Eleos Knowledge Hub

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