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KNOWLEDGE HUB

RESOURCE

Necessary difficulty or unnecessary harm?

Reviewing an investigation through a psychologically informed approach.



Purpose

A robust investigation will sometimes be difficult. Allegations may need to be heard, accounts tested, inconsistencies explored and decisions made that have significant consequences.

Being psychologically informed does not mean removing that difficulty. It means looking carefully at what is necessary for the integrity of the investigation, what psychological demand the process is creating, and whether any of that demand could be reduced without compromising what the investigation needs to achieve.

Use this resource when:

- Planning an investigation.
- While an investigation is underway.
- When reviewing how investigations are usually conducted in your organisation.

1 Start with what the investigation requires.

Before thinking about how to make the process easier, be clear about what genuinely needs to happen.

- **What does this investigation need to establish?**
- **What evidence needs to be gathered or tested?**
- **Which difficult conversations or questions are likely to be unavoidable?**
- **What genuinely needs to remain confidential, and what could still be communicated?**
- **Are any restrictions or interim arrangements necessary? Why?**
- **What would be compromised if we did this differently?**

This gives you an important baseline.

Some psychological demand may be an unavoidable consequence of conducting the investigation properly. The aim is not to remove it simply because it's difficult.

2 Now look at what the process is asking of people.

Consider the investigation from the different perspectives within it.

Person raising the concern

- What are they being asked to recount, tolerate or wait for?
- Are they having to repeat difficult information unnecessarily?
- Do they know what will happen next and who they can contact?

Person being investigated

- What uncertainty are they carrying?
- Do they understand the process, what's expected of them and what can or cannot be shared?
- Have restrictions, suspension or changed duties been reviewed as the investigation has progressed?

Witnesses and colleagues

- Are people being placed in difficult positions between colleagues, relationships or competing expectations?
- Are confidentiality requirements clear and proportionate?
- What is happening in the wider team while the investigation continues?

Managers

- Do managers know enough to manage people and the working environment appropriately without compromising the investigation?
- Are they being left to contain uncertainty or difficult team dynamics without sufficient guidance?

Investigator

- What material are they repeatedly being exposed to?
- Are there particular accounts, individuals or aspects of the investigation that are having an impact on them?
- Where can they appropriately think about their own reactions, assumptions and the psychological demands of the work, while protecting confidentiality and investigative independence?

3 Separate necessary difficulty from avoidable difficulty.

Now look across what you have identified. For each source of psychological demand, ask:
Is this necessary for the investigation to remain fair, robust or independent?

If **yes**:
- How can we help the person understand why it is necessary?
- What can reasonably surround that difficulty to help them manage it?

If **no, or not necessarily**:
- What is creating it?
- Could something about the process be changed?

You may find yourself looking at things such as:

- Prolonged periods without communication
- Uncertainty about what happens next
- Unnecessary repetition of difficult accounts
- Interim arrangements that haven't been reviewed
- Unclear points of contact
- Avoidable delays
- Difficult questions being asked in an unnecessarily confrontational way
- Managers carrying responsibilities without enough information or support
- Investigators carrying psychologically demanding material without appropriate reflective or professional support

The question is not:

"How do we make this comfortable?"

It is:

"Does this difficulty need to exist for us to investigate properly?"

4 Decide what needs to change, or needs to surround it.

Not every psychological demand can or should be removed. Sometimes the appropriate response is to change something about the process, sometimes it's to communicate more clearly, or to review an arrangement that was previously necessary. Sometimes the difficult part still needs to happen, but someone needs better preparation or support around it, and sometimes nothing should change because doing so would compromise the integrity of the investigation.

For each issue you identify, consider:

KEEP	CHANGE	SUPPORT	REVIEW
This is necessary to the investigation and should remain.	The same investigative purpose could be achieved in a less psychologically demanding way.	The demand is necessary, but something needs to surround the person carrying it.	We do not yet know whether this remains necessary and need to reconsider it.

Before you move on.

A psychologically informed investigation is not one where no-one finds the process difficult. It is one in which difficulty is not created carelessly. Before continuing it's worth asking:

- What psychological demand is this investigation creating?
- Which parts are genuinely necessary?
- Which parts are we creating through the way we are managing the process?
- Who are we asking to carry something difficult - including the investigator - without having properly considered what they may need?

The purpose is not to make the investigation softer or less robust. It is to make sure that rigour and humanity are being considered together.

Published September 2026 | Eleos Knowledge Hub

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