



Forensic
Focus

2024

FORENSIC FOCUS INVESTIGATOR WELL-BEING SURVEY RESULTS

Emerging Themes and Implications

By

Paul Gullon-Scott BSc, MA, MSc, MSc, FMBPsS

www.forensicfocus.com | contact@forensicfocus.com

I Contributors

Paul Gullon-Scott BSc, MA, MSc, MSc, FMBPsS

Visiting Fellow Southampton University
Spectrum Consultancy Forensic Mental Health & Wellbeing Lead
Associate Lecturer Anglia Ruskin University
Higher Assistant Psychologist NHS

Paul has over 30 years of experience in policing, digital forensics, and more recently forensic psychology. He specialises in addressing the intersection of mental health and high-stress investigative fields, focusing on developing supportive frameworks to mitigate the psychological impact on professionals exposed to traumatic material.

Paul is dedicated to improving mental health within the digital forensics field through his contributions to research, his work with *Forensic Focus*, and his collaboration with Southampton University. As a leading online resource for digital forensic professionals, *Forensic Focus* features Paul's articles and interviews, which explore mental health stressors in the field, such as secondary traumatic stress and burnout, as well as effective coping strategies.

His collaborative work with Southampton University further advances research into the psychological challenges faced by digital forensic investigators.

Forensic Focus

Forensic Focus is a leading online platform dedicated to digital forensics and incident response (DFIR) professionals. Established in July 2002, it has become a central hub for industry news, discussions, and resources. The platform offers a range of features to support professionals in the field, including forums for active discussions on technical, procedural, software, and hardware topics, regular news updates, and in-depth articles on the latest developments and best practices. Forensic Focus also provides insights through expert interviews and interactive webinars, alongside job listings and career guidance for those pursuing or advancing in digital forensics.

Contents

<i>I Foreword</i>	4
<i>I Executive Summary</i>	5
<i>I Background</i>	7
<i>I Methodology</i>	8
Data Collection	8
Survey Design	8
Qualitative Insights	8
Data Analysis	9
Ethical Considerations.....	9
Limitations.....	9
<i>I Key Themes</i>	10
Insufficient Mental Health Support in Digital Forensics	10
Emotional Impact of Case Exposure and Work Pressures.....	11
Coping Strategies: Effective and Potentially Harmful Approaches	12
Privacy and Anonymity Concerns: A Barrier to Seeking Help.....	14
Suggested Resources: Tailored Support for Digital Forensic Investigators	15
Impact on Productivity, Physical Health, and Relationships	16
<i>I Call to Arms: Supporting the Mental Health of Digital Forensic Investigators</i>	18
<i>I Conclusion: Fostering a Supportive Environment for Digital Forensic Investigators</i>	19
<i>I Message to All DFIs</i>	20
<i>I References</i>	21

I Foreword

The Forensic Focus Investigator Well-Being Survey 2024 offers a powerful and essential insight into the mental health challenges faced by those working in digital forensics. These professionals dedicate themselves to uncovering the truth, often at great personal cost, as they navigate emotionally demanding environments and regularly confront highly distressing material. This report not only highlights the resilience and professionalism of digital forensic investigators but also underscores the urgent need for tailored support to protect their mental, emotional, and physical well-being.

The findings shed light on the impact of insufficient mental health resources, the emotional toll of constant exposure to harrowing cases, and the barriers that prevent individuals from seeking help. They also reveal the adaptive coping strategies employed by investigators, some of which are healthy and effective, while others carry significant risks. The survey demonstrates that while the challenges are profound, there are actionable steps that organisations can take to create safer, more supportive work environments.

This document serves as a call to action for organisations, leaders, and policymakers to recognise the unique pressures faced by digital forensic investigators and to prioritise their well-being. By fostering empathetic leadership, providing access to trauma-informed professionals, and ensuring confidentiality in mental health support, we can help create workplaces where investigators feel valued and supported. My hope is this report guides the path towards meaningful change, ensuring that those who dedicate themselves to such critical work can do so with the resilience and care they deserve.

Sincerely,

Paul Gullon-Scott BSc, MA, MSc, MSc, FMBPsS
paul.gullon-scott@forensicfocus.com

I Executive Summary

The *Forensic Focus Investigator Well-Being Survey 2024* highlights the significant mental health challenges faced by professionals in the digital forensics field. These individuals work in high-pressure environments, often exposed to graphic and emotionally distressing materials, including evidence of violence, abuse, and other serious crimes. The survey reveals critical insights into how these stressors impact their mental, emotional, and physical health, as well as their relationships and professional performance.

Key themes that emerged from the survey include:

1. **Insufficient Mental Health Support:** Respondents expressed frustration with the inadequacy of current resources, citing generic Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) that fail to address the unique psychological demands of digital forensics work. Many reported hesitancy to seek help due to fears of stigma, judgment, or professional repercussions.
2. **Emotional and Physical Toll of Work:** Prolonged exposure to distressing cases has led to recurring nightmares, emotional exhaustion, and burnout among investigators. Symptoms such as anxiety, depression, insomnia, and physical health issues like migraines and fatigue are prevalent, underscoring the need for early intervention and structured support.
3. **Unhealthy Coping Mechanisms:** While some respondents reported positive coping strategies, such as exercise and mindfulness, others admitted to using unsustainable methods, including alcohol and substance use, to manage stress. These habits can have long-term negative effects on personal and professional lives.
4. **Privacy and Anonymity Concerns:** Investigators highlighted the importance of confidentiality when discussing mental health issues. Many fear that seeking support could jeopardise their security clearance or professional standing, creating a significant barrier to accessing help.
5. **Impact on Productivity and Relationships:** Mental health struggles have affected investigators' ability to focus and maintain accuracy in their work, leading to slower case progress and mistakes. Additionally, the emotional burden has strained personal relationships, as investigators often feel isolated or unable to share their experiences with loved ones.

The report underscores the urgent need for organisations to prioritise the well-being of digital forensic investigators. Recommendations include the development of tailored mental health resources, such as access to trauma-informed professionals, confidential forums for peer support, and leadership training focused on empathetic management rather than prioritising targets over people, which leads to a work force who feel unsupported and undervalued.

By normalising discussions around mental health and implementing proactive, evidence-based interventions, organisations can foster a healthier and more productive workforce while recognising and respecting the unique challenges of this critical profession.

This survey serves as a pivotal step in understanding the needs of digital forensic investigators and provides actionable insights for creating a supportive, compassionate, and effective workplace culture.

I Background

Digital forensic investigators play a vital role in uncovering evidence for criminal and cyber investigations, often working with sensitive and highly distressing material. Their expertise is critical in combating crimes such as fraud, terrorism, and child exploitation. However, the nature of their work exposes them to unique stressors that can take a significant toll on their mental and physical well-being. Repeated exposure to graphic content, high workloads, and the pressure to meet tight deadlines often leaves investigators coping with anxiety, burnout, and secondary trauma. These challenges are compounded by a workplace culture that prioritises productivity and case outcomes over employee well-being.

Despite the growing recognition of mental health challenges in law enforcement and related professions, the specific needs of digital forensic investigators have been largely overlooked. Generic support programs, such as Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), fail to address the complex psychological demands of this work, leaving many investigators feeling unsupported and isolated. Furthermore, concerns around confidentiality and stigma prevent professionals from seeking the help they need, creating additional barriers to mental health care.

The *Forensic Focus Investigator Well-Being Survey 2024* was initiated to address this gap in understanding and to provide a clearer picture of the challenges faced by digital forensic professionals. By gathering direct feedback from those working in the field, this study aims to illuminate the emotional, physical, and professional impact of their work, the coping strategies they employ, and the resources they feel are necessary to better support their well-being. Ultimately, the findings of this study seek to guide organisations, leaders, and policymakers in implementing effective, tailored interventions that prioritise the health and resilience of these essential professionals.

I Methodology

The *Forensic Focus Investigator Well-Being Survey 2024* was designed to collect comprehensive and actionable insights into the mental health and well-being of digital forensic investigators. This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection to explore the unique challenges faced by professionals in this field.

Data Collection

The survey was distributed online to a diverse cohort of digital forensic investigators across private organisations, law enforcement agencies, and other sectors globally. Participants were recruited through a call by Forensic Focus, ensuring a wide range of perspectives and experiences. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of complete anonymity and confidentiality to encourage honest and open responses. In total, 227 digital forensic investigators participated in the survey, which was open to UK and international respondents.

Survey Design

The survey comprised a mix of closed-ended and open-ended questions to capture both measurable data and in-depth narratives. Key areas of focus included:

- **Mental health challenges:** Questions addressed common issues such as anxiety, depression, burnout, and secondary traumatic stress.
- **Coping strategies:** Respondents were asked to describe the methods they use to manage stress, both positive and potentially harmful.
- **Workplace support:** The survey explored perceptions of available mental health resources, their adequacy, and barriers to accessing them.
- **Impact on productivity and relationships:** Questions examined how mental health struggles affected professional performance and personal relationships.
- **Desired resources:** Respondents provided input on what tailored interventions and support systems they would find most beneficial.

Qualitative Insights

Open-ended questions were included to allow participants to share their personal experiences and perspectives in their own words. These narratives were analysed thematically, by pulling out shared commonalities and themes across the participant responses to identify overarching constructs.

For example, recurring themes such as "stigma around seeking help" or "the emotional toll of case exposure" emerged through this approach, offering detailed insights into the challenges faced by investigators. This provided a structured approach to distil rich qualitative data into meaningful findings that complement the quantitative results.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data are presented as descriptive statistics and percentages, to show numbers of participants responding to which options in the closed questions. The insights from the analysis of qualitative responses then added depth to this, illustrating the human impact behind the numbers and uncovering complexities that cannot be captured through statistics alone. This dual approach ensured a robust understanding of the issues while capturing the nuance of individual experiences.

This methodology provided a comprehensive framework for understanding the well-being of digital forensic investigators, allowing the study to identify key areas for intervention and actionable recommendations for improving support systems in the profession.

Ethical Considerations

The survey was conducted with strict adherence to ethical research principles. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of complete anonymity and confidentiality to encourage honest and open responses. Data were securely stored and used solely for the purposes of this study.

Limitations

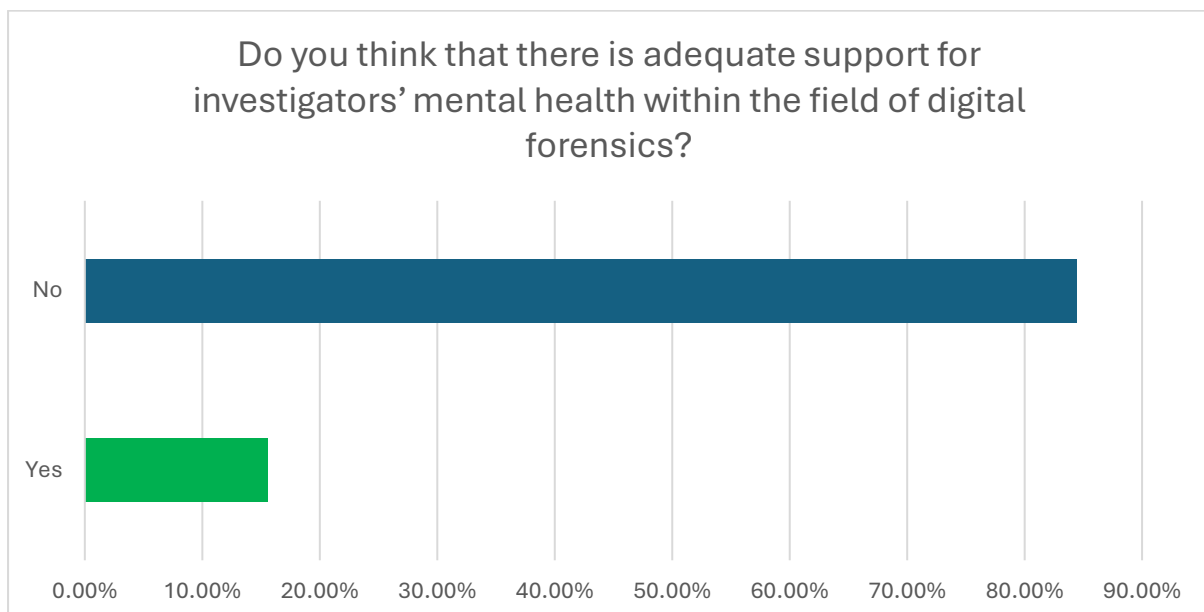
While the study aimed to include a broad range of perspectives, participation was self-selected, which may have introduced some bias. Additionally, the reliance on online distribution may have excluded individuals with limited access to digital platforms.

I Key Themes

Digital forensic investigators work on the front lines of cyber and criminal investigations, often dealing with some of the most distressing and sensitive materials. As themes from the *Forensic Focus Investigator Well-Being Survey 2024* reveal, this crucial work can take a toll on mental and physical health, impact work productivity, and influence relationships with family and friends. This report explores the survey's emerging themes, shedding light on the mental health needs of digital forensic professionals, the coping mechanisms they employ, and the critical need for supportive resources tailored to this unique, high-stress field.

Insufficient Mental Health Support in Digital Forensics

One of the most prominent themes from the survey is the general sense of inadequacy regarding mental health support in digital forensics. Only a small portion of respondents feel they have adequate resources, with many citing a lack of access to appropriate mental health support. Many respondents express frustration with employer-provided resources, often describing these resources as overly broad, having a uniform approach, and lacking the specificity needed for digital forensics professionals. The survey revealed that 84% of investigators feel current support systems are inadequate, highlighting a critical gap in meeting the unique needs of digital forensic investigators (DFIs).



Given the nature of digital forensics, which can involve exposure to graphic and disturbing materials, such as CSAM (Child Sexual Abuse Material), these professionals often experience trauma and stress similar to that seen in general law enforcement and military personnel. However, the support resources available to them do not always reflect the unique psychological demands of the work. Many investigators feel that without specialised mental health provisions, their needs will remain overlooked.

This lack of tailored support has real implications. Without access to adequate mental health services, digital forensic investigators may experience heightened stress, frustration, and isolation. These issues can affect not only their mental well-being but also their relationships, productivity, and physical health. Recognising this gap and prioritising appropriate support is essential in fostering a healthier work environment for investigators.

Respondents feedback indicated the support offered was perceived as inadequate, with individuals reluctant to seek help due to stigma and concerns about being judged by peers. The internal staff providing support were seen as underqualified. It was also noted that while initiatives like SHIFT Wellness were utilised, they fell short, emphasising the need for agencies to embrace a comprehensive mental health culture.

Kelty et al. (2021) stresses the need for a shift from individual-focused strategies to systemic changes within organisations to adequately address mental health challenges in digital forensic teams. These changes are critical for preventing burnout, secondary traumatic stress, and high attrition rates among digital forensic investigators (Kelty et al., 2021).

Emotional Impact of Case Exposure and Work Pressures

Another theme that emerged is the significant emotional toll that digital forensic investigators experience from regular exposure to distressing cases. Many professionals in this field face daily encounters with evidence of serious crimes, including sexual abuse, violence, and other harrowing content. Investigators report recurring nightmares, flashbacks, and emotional exhaustion resulting from prolonged exposure to such cases. For many, this content becomes impossible to separate from their personal lives, as work-related images and memories intrude on their private time.

Investigators described encountering distressing information, such as details of terrorism and violence, which left them deeply affected, often staring into space for hours after work. Others highlighted the broader impact, mentioning nightmares, panic attacks, and strained relationships.

The emotional strain of the job can result in burnout and secondary traumatic stress. Investigators frequently describe feelings of being overwhelmed, exhausted, experiencing significant weight loss, and struggling to disconnect from work, leading to a poor work-life balance. Sadly, many feel unsupported in coping with this stress, as workplace cultures often prioritise productivity, statistics, backlogs, and case outcomes over the well-being of employees.

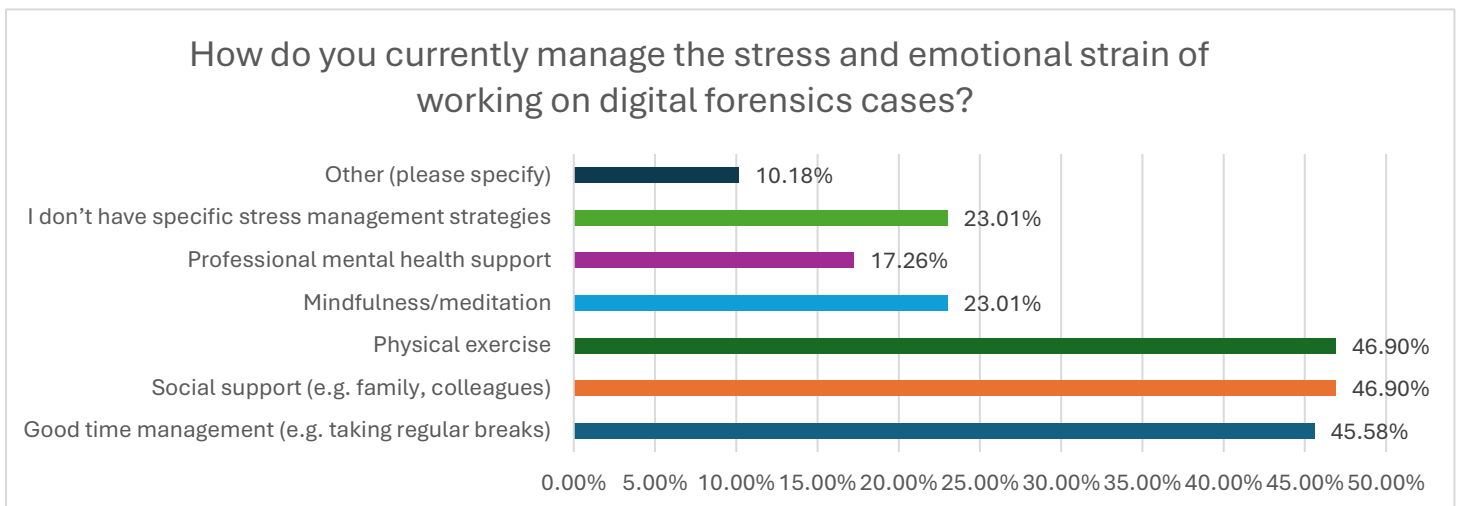
The survey highlights that emotional pressures not only affect mental health but also lead to physical issues. Many participants report sleep problems such as insomnia, anxiety, disturbing dreams, and trouble falling asleep, which are symptoms of PTSD, anxiety, burnout, or depression. Additionally, physical symptoms like chest pain, stress headaches, and migraines are common. These symptoms can create a self-reinforcing cycle of stress, which is difficult to break without timely and effective intervention.

Gullon-Scott & Johnson, 2024, underscore the necessity of robust psychological support, regular well-being checks, and the importance of educating DFIs on effective coping mechanisms to mitigate the emotional impact of their work. These findings reinforce the need for systemic changes in the way digital forensic teams are supported to ensure long-term mental health and productivity (Gullon-Scott & Johnson, 2024). Bourke & Craun, 2014, also underscore the critical need for structured support systems, effective coping strategies, and workplace interventions to mitigate the profound emotional impacts of case exposure on these professionals (Bourke & Craun, 2014).

Furthermore, the ten-year gap between these studies indicates that digital forensics teams are still battling the same systemic issues, such as insufficient supervisory support, inadequate training in trauma management, and a lack of tailored mental health resources. This continuity points to a broader cultural and institutional inaction, where productivity, statistics and backlogs take precedence over long-term mental health and well-being strategies.

Coping Strategies: Effective and Potentially Harmful Approaches

In managing the emotional demands of their roles, digital forensic investigators employ various coping strategies, some of which are very effective, while others may carry risks. Physical exercise, time with family, and mindfulness practices such as meditation emerged as common positive strategies for managing stress. Social support, especially from understanding family members and colleagues, also plays a vital role in helping many investigators cope.



Some respondents acknowledged using less sustainable methods, such as alcohol and substance use, as temporary ways to relieve stress. One individual noted that alcohol provided some relief, while another admitted to lacking specific stress management strategies and simply trying to disconnect from work at the end of the day.

Relying on alcohol or substances to cope with stress may offer temporary relief, but over time, it can have significant and often harmful effects on physical, emotional, and social well-being. Physically, it can lead to dependency, organ damage, disrupted sleep, and

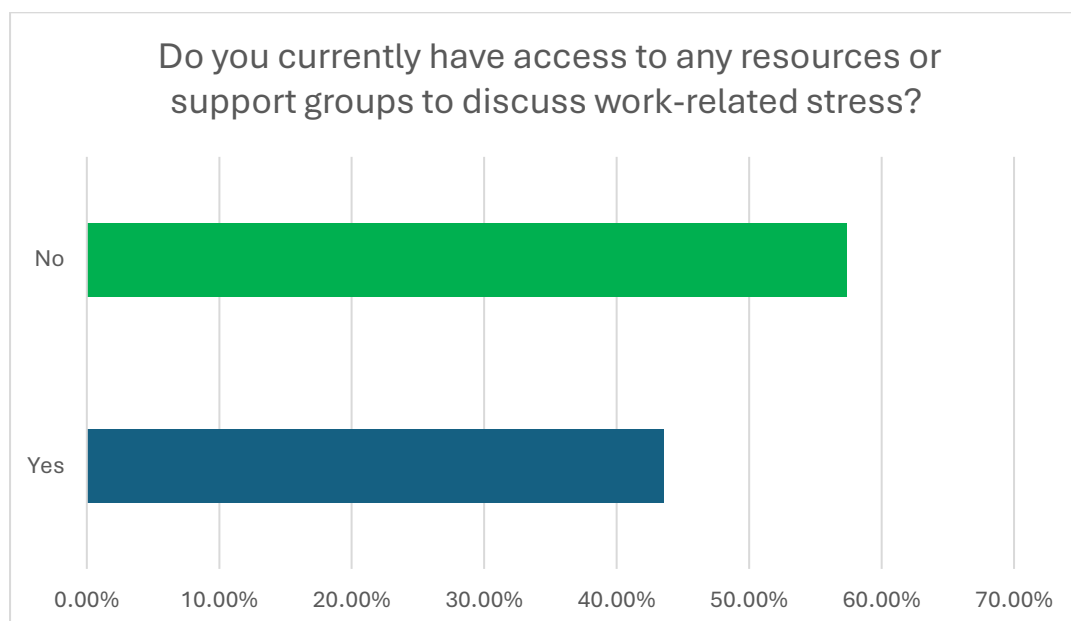
weakened immunity. Mentally, it may worsen anxiety and depression, impair memory, and reduce your ability to manage emotions effectively (Colder et al., 2019). Socially, these coping methods can strain relationships, create isolation, and even impact your work or finances. While it's understandable to seek immediate comfort, using substances can trap you in a cycle where stress remains unresolved and ultimately intensifies.

There are healthier and more sustainable ways to manage stress, such as talking with someone you trust, practicing mindfulness, engaging in physical activity, or seeking professional support. These approaches not only help relieve stress but also nurture your well-being in the long run. Digital forensic investigators need access to proactive support and care, to reduce the risks that come with turning to substances to alleviate stress (Yavuz Sercekman, 2024).

The survey indicated that a number of investigators struggle to find healthy ways to unwind and may lean on coping mechanisms that ultimately pose risks to long-term mental and physical health. For example, suppression of emotions – another strategy some respondents employ – can lead to chronic stress and eventually exacerbate mental health concerns, potentially leading to burnout or physical health issues.

This variety of coping mechanisms points to a need for structured support that can provide healthier strategies, as well as guidance in navigating stress. Investigators expressed a strong interest in confidential support spaces led by professionals, where they could safely discuss work-related stress. Such spaces could offer sustainable and evidence-based coping techniques, which are crucial to developing healthy emotional management skills that don't negatively impact investigators' lives or relationships.

Participants were also asked if they had access to any resources or support groups to discuss work-related stress.



The survey revealing that 57.33% of digital forensic investigators lack access to resources or support groups to discuss work-related stress, highlights serious implications for their mental health, professional performance, and overall well-being. Without adequate support, these individuals are left to process the psychological toll of their work alone, increasing the risk of burnout, secondary traumatic stress, anxiety, and depression.

This isolation often strains personal relationships, as investigators withdraw emotionally from loved ones who may struggle to understand the challenges of their work. Professionally, the absence of support can compromise focus, lead to errors in critical cases, and slow case progress. The physical toll is equally significant, with many experiencing stress-related illnesses such as insomnia, migraines, and chronic fatigue.

The lack of accessible and confidential resources also perpetuates stigma around seeking mental health care, as investigators fear judgment or professional repercussions, including the loss of security clearance. Over time, these issues contribute to higher attrition rates, with professionals leaving the field due to unmanageable stress, further exacerbating workloads for those who remain. To address these challenges, organisations must implement accessible, specialised mental health support, which could include confidential peer forums, trauma-informed professionals, and leadership training to create a culture of empathy and understanding. Without such measures, investigators will continue to face significant risks to their mental health and the effectiveness of their vital work.

Privacy and Anonymity Concerns: A Barrier to Seeking Help

An essential aspect highlighted by survey respondents is the need for confidentiality when discussing mental health issues. Many digital forensic investigators fear that openly seeking mental health support could have professional repercussions, such as affecting job security or their professional reputation. The forensic field, often small and tightly connected, creates an environment where investigators worry that discussions about stress or trauma may lead to unintended identification or judgement by peers and supervisors.

Respondents expressed concern that disclosing personal information might lead to suspension of security clearance or a negative perception by management. Others emphasised the importance of creating a professional and anonymous environment to encourage honest communication.

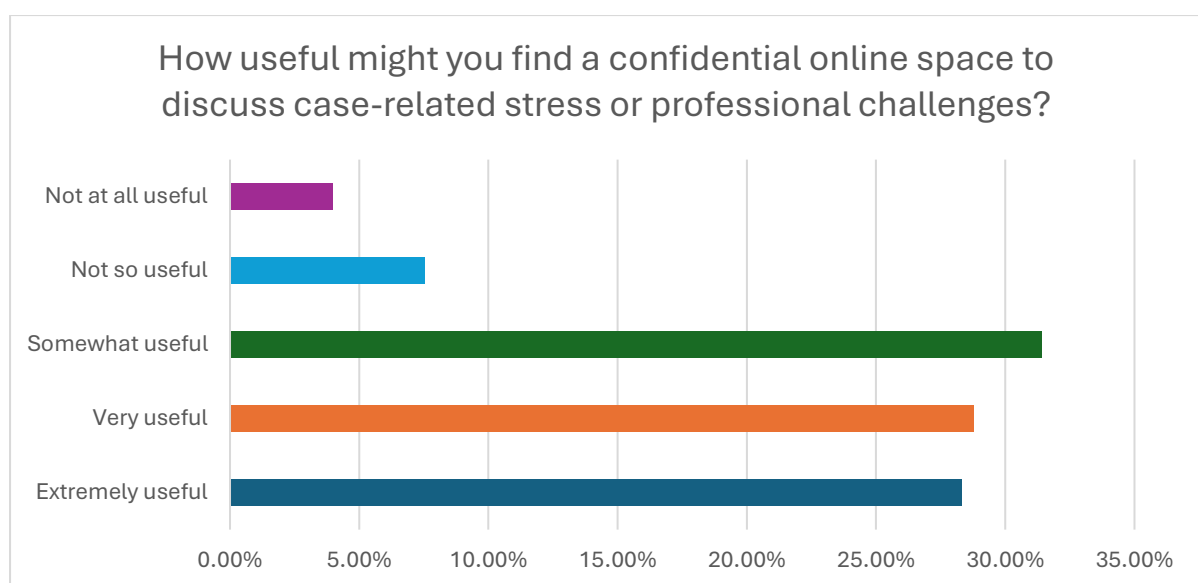
This theme of privacy concerns not only highlights the reluctance to access mental health support, and the stigma attached to seeking support, but also points to a need for protective policies that ensure confidentiality in mental health services. Investigators are interested in secure and anonymous support platforms where they can openly express concerns without fear of retaliation or disclosure to their employers.

Strickland, 2022 highlights that privacy and anonymity concerns significantly hinder digital forensic analysts (DFAs) from seeking mental health support. Analysts often avoid discussing psychological challenges due to fears of judgement, professional repercussions, and the lack of confidential reporting systems. Open-plan offices and insufficiently anonymous counselling services further exacerbate these barriers, discouraging help-seeking

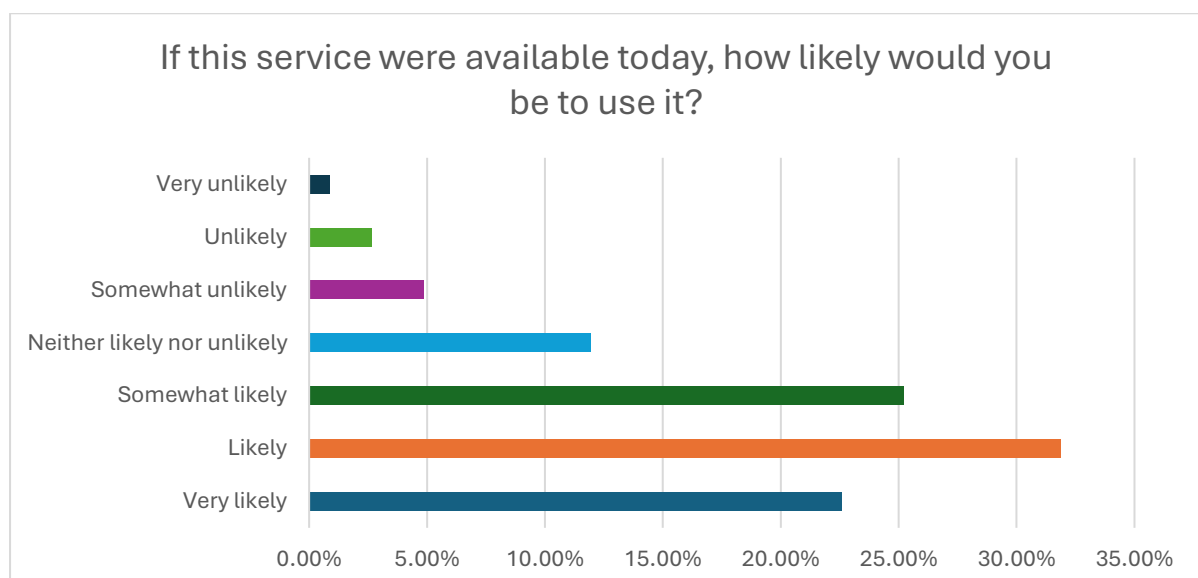
behaviours. Strickland recommends implementing anonymised support mechanisms, such as confidential hotlines, encrypted communication platforms, and peer-support networks, alongside cultural shifts to normalise mental health discussions within forensic units (Strickland, 2022).

Suggested Resources: Tailored Support for Digital Forensic Investigators

Participants were asked how useful they would find an online confidential space to discuss case-related stress or professional challenges. That is, a space where they could talk about the things that are dealt with as a digital forensic investigator as part of their job role, and the impacts of these.



Participants were also asked: if this space were available today, how likely they would be to use it.



The survey results underscore a clear need for resources specifically designed for digital forensics professionals. Respondents express dissatisfaction with general Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), which they find too broad to be effective for their unique challenges. This gap in relevant mental health resources leaves investigators without structured support that truly addresses the complex stressors inherent in digital forensics work.

Many respondents emphasised the need for resources that combine professional expertise with an understanding of the specific challenges faced by digital forensic investigators. Some noted that speaking with professionals who lack knowledge of their field is unhelpful, as they may not fully grasp the sources of stress. Others suggested that employers should prioritise access to external therapists trained in trauma, rather than relying on internal wellness programs that often feel superficial or ineffective.

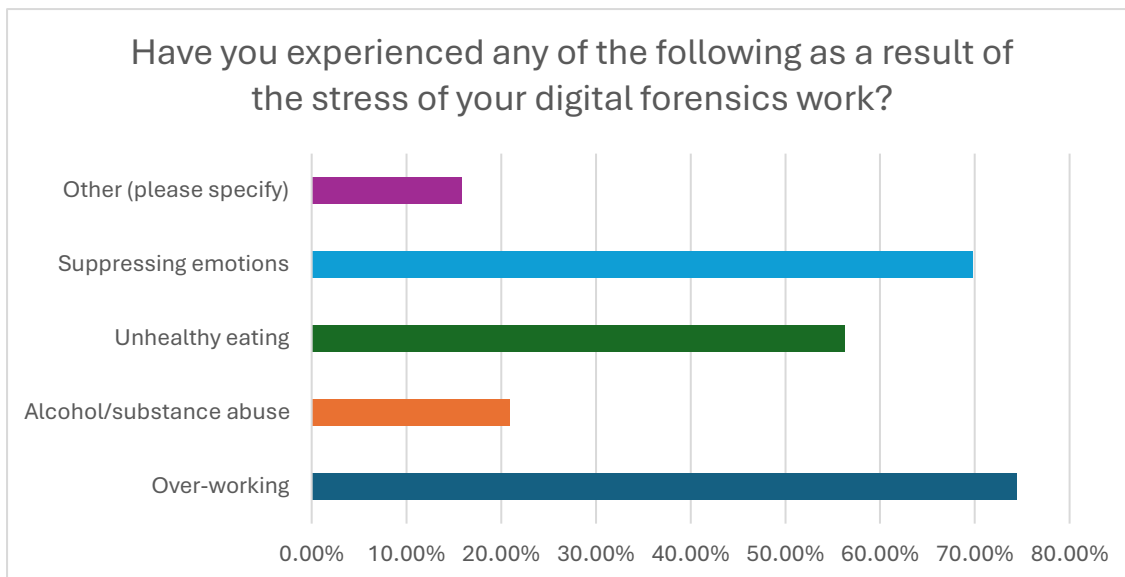
Many respondents expressed a desire for confidential online platforms where investigators can share their challenges anonymously, supported by trained moderators or mental health professionals. Additionally, they emphasised the importance of educating senior leaders about the unique stressors investigators face, as greater understanding at the leadership level could lead to more effective support.

Research highlights the importance of tailored support for digital forensic investigators to address the unique psychological and operational challenges they face. Strickland, 2022, advocates for specialised interventions such as regular debriefings, resilience training, and peer-support networks, enabling DFIs to share experiences confidentially with colleagues who understand their challenges (Strickland, 2022). Tehrani, 2018, underscores the value of regular psychological screening and education on coping strategies to mitigate the risks of trauma and burnout (Tehrani, 2018). Additionally, Wilson-Kovacs et al., 2022, emphasise the role of structured workplace support, including routine counselling, private spaces for conversations, and workload monitoring, to foster emotional safety (Wilson-Kovacs et al., 2021).

Tailored solutions such as role rotation, automated tools to reduce manual exposure to distressing material, and a supportive organisational culture are essential to safeguarding the well-being of DFIs. By implementing measures such as these, organisations can create a compassionate environment where DFIs feel valued and supported.

Impact on Productivity, Physical Health, and Relationships

Participants were asked if they had experienced any of the following as a result of their work.



The cumulative effect of stress, lack of support, and insufficient coping mechanisms extends beyond mental health, impacting productivity, physical well-being, and personal relationships. Survey respondents noted that mental health struggles often lead to reduced focus and difficulty concentrating, which can slow case progress and impact the quality of investigations.

The survey highlighted the significant impact of stress on both professional performance and personal well-being for digital forensic investigators. Many noted that constant stress affects their focus, leading to mistakes that carry serious consequences for both individuals and organisations, where accuracy is critical.

The physical effects of stress were a recurring theme, with respondents describing chronic fatigue, migraines, weight changes, and other health problems. Some shared personal experiences, such as severe weight loss from being overwhelmed or experiencing regular chest pains and stress-induced migraines.

The emotional burden of the work also strains personal relationships, as investigators struggle to separate their professional and personal lives. Many reported feeling emotionally distant from loved ones, often avoiding social interactions due to mental fatigue. Some expressed difficulty in discussing their work at home, choosing to internalise their struggles to protect their family. Others highlighted the isolation they felt, as friends and family often failed to understand the emotional toll of their work, dismissing it as “just a job” without recognising the disturbing realities investigators face.

This stress also manifests physically, as reported by participants, with DFIs reporting insomnia, headaches, fatigue, and other health issues linked to prolonged exposure to distressing materials (Burns et al., 2008; Tehrani, 2018). Moreover, the psychological toll often spills into personal relationships, with DFIs withdrawing emotionally from loved ones due to stigma or the inability to discuss their work (Strickland, 2022; Wilson-Kovacs et al., 2021). These challenges underscore the urgent need for holistic support systems to safeguard not just the professional but also the personal well-being of DFIs.

I Call to Arms: Supporting the Mental Health of Digital Forensic Investigators

Digital forensic investigators (DFIs) play a vital role in uncovering evidence and seeking justice in some of the most challenging cases, including those involving child exploitation, terrorism, and cybercrime. Yet, as revealed by the *Forensic Focus Investigator Well-Being Survey 2024*, an alarming **84% of investigators feel that current mental health support systems are inadequate, while 57% report they do not have access to resources or support groups to discuss work-related stressors**. These findings should serve as a wake-up call to organisations, leaders, and policymakers.

DFIs often face high-pressure environments, repeated exposure to distressing materials, and overwhelming workloads. This relentless strain leads to burnout, insomnia, physical health issues, and a significant toll on personal relationships. Despite these challenges, existing support systems, such as generic Employee Assistance Programs, fail to address the unique psychological demands of digital forensic work.

Investigators report they frequently fear judgment or professional repercussions when seeking help, leaving them isolated and unsupported. The time for change is now. Organisations must prioritise tailored support systems that include confidential counselling services, access to trauma-informed professionals, and consider online platforms for anonymous peer support. Leaders must foster a culture of empathy and proactive intervention, where discussing mental health is normalised and encouraged.

Furthermore, structured workplace strategies, such as role rotation and resilience training, can help reduce exposure to harmful materials and build better long-term well-being. This is not just about protecting investigators, it is about safeguarding justice and the communities they serve. By investing in the mental health and resilience of DFIs, organisations can ensure their workforce remains focused, productive, and supported. Let us commit to creating workplaces where DFIs feel valued and cared for, enabling them to continue their critical work with strength and clarity. **The well-being of these professionals is not optional; it is essential.**

I Conclusion: Fostering a Supportive Environment for Digital Forensic Investigators

The Forensic Focus Investigator Well-Being Survey 2024 paints a vivid picture of the mental health challenges facing digital forensic investigators. Emerging themes from the survey illustrate that while many professionals demonstrate resilience, the demands of their work leave them vulnerable to stress, physical health issues, a lack of support from supervisors or senior management, and strained relationships.

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach. By providing tailored mental health resources, ensuring confidentiality, and promoting empathetic leadership, organisations both in the private and the public sector can support their employees in a way that acknowledges the unique demands of their work. Furthermore, fostering a culture which puts the mental health of digital forensic investigators before productivity, statistics and constant complaints about backlogs and not enough work being done, can pave the way for a healthier, more engaged, and ultimately more effective and loyal workforce.

Respondents emphasised the need to normalise discussions about mental health and offer proactive support to address issues before they escalate. Some suggested implementing initiatives such as mental health first-aiders or regular check-ins to identify and manage problems early, preventing them from spiralling out of control.

As awareness of mental health in digital forensics grows, organisations have a unique opportunity to make meaningful and lasting changes that prioritise the well-being of their investigators. These professionals often face emotionally challenging and high-pressure environments, and creating supportive systems can have a profound impact on their mental health, resilience, and overall job satisfaction.

By implementing initiatives such as confidential forums, where investigators can openly share their experiences without fear of judgment, organisations can foster a sense of community and understanding. Providing leadership with enhanced training focused on empathy, communication, and recognising signs of stress ensures that managers are equipped to offer genuine support and guidance. Equally important is ensuring access to suitably qualified trauma-informed professionals who can provide specialised care, helping individuals process and manage the unique challenges of their work. These steps not only safeguard the personal well-being of investigators but also enhance their professional performance, enabling them to continue performing this critical work with focus and clarity.

By investing in these efforts, organisations can create a healthier, more compassionate workplace culture where everyone feels valued and supported, making a positive difference in the lives of their employees and the quality of their work.

I Message to All DFIs

To all digital forensic investigators, I want to take a moment to acknowledge the extraordinary work you do and the immense challenges you face. Having been a digital forensic investigator myself for 14 years, I understand the emotional toll, the relentless pressure, and the weight of the cases you handle. Your work is critical in uncovering truth and justice, but it comes at a personal cost that often goes unseen and unaddressed.

The results of this survey, and the voices of those who participated, resonate deeply. They highlight the pressing need for more tailored support and a culture that values mental health as much as productivity. You are not alone in your struggles, and your resilience is nothing short of remarkable. However, it is not enough to carry the burden alone. No one should feel isolated or unsupported in a field that demands so much.

My hope is that this report serves as a step toward meaningful change, fostering workplaces where your well-being is prioritised and your voice is heard. You deserve confidential, effective support systems and the assurance that seeking help is not a weakness but a strength. Please know that there are those, like myself and Forensic Focus, who are committed to advocating for your mental health and striving for a culture where you can thrive both professionally and personally.

You are the backbone of this profession, and your health and happiness matter. If you are struggling, I urge you to reach out to a colleague, a professional, or a trusted friend. Together, we can create a future where your invaluable work is matched by the care and support you so richly deserve. Thank you for all that you do.

Sincerely,

Paul Gullon-Scott BSc, MA, MSc, MSc, FMBPSS
paul.gullon-scott@forensicfocus.com

I References

- Bourke, M. L., & Craun, S. W. (2014). Secondary Traumatic Stress Among Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force Personnel. In *Sexual Abuse* (Vol. 26, Issue 6, pp. 586–609). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1079063213509411>
- Burns, C. M., Morley, J., Bradshaw, R., & Domene, J. (2008). The emotional impact on and coping strategies employed by police teams investigating internet child exploitation. *Traumatology*, *14*(2), 20–31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1534765608319082>
- Colder, C. R., Lee, Y. H., Frndak, S., Read, J. P., & Wieczorek, W. F. (2019). Internalizing symptoms and cannabis and alcohol use: Between- and within-person risk pathways with coping motives. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, *87*(7), 629–644. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ccp0000413>
- Gullon-Scott, P., & Johnson, D. (2024). UK-based digital forensic investigators and the impact of exposure to traumatic material. In *Journal of Criminological Research, Policy and Practice: Vol. ahead-of-print* (Issue ahead-of-print). <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCRPP-08-2023-0047>
- Kelty, S. F., McQueen, E., Pymont, C., & Green, N. (2021). Avoiding Burnout at the Digital Forensics Coalface: Targeted strategies for forensic agencies in the management of job-related stress. *Forensic Science International: Digital Investigation*, *38*, 301127. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.fsidi.2021.301127>
- Strickland, C. R. (2022). *Understanding the impact of digital forensic analysts' experiences of working with online child sexual exploitation and abuse* [Foren.Clin.Psy.D]. <https://etheses.bham.ac.uk/id/eprint/13174/>

Tehrani, N. (2018). Psychological well-being and workability in child abuse investigators. In *Occupational Medicine* (Vol. 68, Issue 3, pp. 165–170).

<https://doi.org/10.1093/occmed/kqy016>

Wilson-Kovacs, D., Rappert, B., & Redfern, L. (2021). Dirty Work? Policing Online Indecency in Digital Forensics. In *The British Journal of Criminology* (Vol. 62, Issue 1, pp. 106–

123). <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azab055>

Yavuz Sercekman, M. (2024). Exploring the sustained impact of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program: A thematic analysis. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *15*, 1347336.

<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1347336>