

THE CHECK-IN

A conversation tool for first responders and the people who lead them

This is not a diagnostic test. There is no score. These questions are designed to start an honest conversation — with yourself, with your supervisor, or with someone you trust. The job changes people. That is not weakness. It is the predictable result of carrying a heavy load for a long time. The only way it becomes a problem is when nobody talks about it.

FOR YOU

Use this to check in with yourself honestly — one domain at a time. No grades. Just honesty.

FOR LEADERS

Use this to check in with someone on your team before things escalate beyond a conversation.

Seven domains. Plain questions. No grades. Just honesty.

If a question stops you — sit with it. That is the one worth paying attention to.

SEVEN DOMAINS

- 01** Sleep & Rest
- 02** Body & Pain
- 03** Mind & Focus
- 04** Mood & Behavior
- 05** Relationships & Home
- 06** Identity & Purpose
- 07** Vicarious Exposure

SLEEP & REST

The foundation everything else runs on

When did you last wake up feeling actually rested — not just functional?

Not “I got through the shift.” Actually rested.

How many hours did you sleep last night? Is that typical?

Shift work, court, overtime — they all eat sleep. Most people underestimate the debt.

Do you fall asleep easily but wake up at 2 or 3am with your mind already running?

That pattern is one of the clearest signs of a system under chronic load.

IF THIS DOMAIN IS ELEVATED — NEXT STEPS

Sleep is not a luxury. It is operational readiness.

- Talk to your doctor about sleep quality specifically — mention your shift schedule and ask about sleep apnea screening.
- Track it for two weeks. Note bedtime, wake time, how you felt. Patterns show up fast.
- For supervisors: If you see fatigue signs, the conversation starts with: “How are you sleeping?”



BODY & PAIN

What you have normalized that you should not have

What hurts right now that you have stopped mentioning because it is just always there?

Chronic pain becomes invisible when you live with it long enough. That invisibility is the problem.

When was your last physical? Did you tell the doctor everything — or did you minimize?

Most responders tell their doctor 60% of what is actually going on. The other 40% matters.

Are you moving your body in a way that helps it recover — or just grinding through?

IF THIS DOMAIN IS ELEVATED — NEXT STEPS

The body keeps score whether you look at it or not.

- Schedule a full physical. Ask specifically about testosterone, thyroid, blood pressure, and sleep apnea.
- Be honest with your doctor about the job — shift work, adrenaline cycles, what you are exposed to.
- For supervisors: A person who refuses light duty after injury is not tough — they are afraid. That fear is the conversation.

MIND & FOCUS

The drift that happens so slowly you do not notice it

Are you making small mistakes you would not have made five years ago — and explaining them away?

Cognitive drift is what happens to a brain that has been in high gear for years without a real break.

Do you find yourself struggling to stay present — in conversations, at home, in situations that used to hold your attention?

Have you had your head rattled — physically — and never really followed up on it?

TBI in law enforcement is significantly underreported. One unaddressed concussion can affect mood and judgment for years.

IF THIS DOMAIN IS ELEVATED — NEXT STEPS

Cognitive drift is not a character flaw. It is a signal.

- If you have had head injuries, tell your doctor specifically. Ask about neuropsychological evaluation.
- If you are struggling to focus, sleep is usually the first place to look. Address sleep before assuming anything else.
- For supervisors: Cognitive changes before discipline. If someone's judgment is off, ask what's going on first.

MOOD & BEHAVIOR

The part that affects everyone around you

Has your tolerance gotten shorter — with your family, your team, strangers — in ways you do not recognize until after?

The job did not make you mean. It ran your reserves down.

Are you drinking more than you used to? More than you would admit to someone you respect?

Alcohol is the most common coping tool in first responder culture and the least talked about.

Is there a call, an incident, or a period of your career that still shows up — in your sleep, in your head?

IF THIS DOMAIN IS ELEVATED — NEXT STEPS

What looks like attitude is usually pain that has nowhere to go.

- Talk to someone. Peer support, chaplain, therapist, trusted friend. Start somewhere.
- If alcohol is part of this, that conversation belongs with a doctor or counselor. EAP is confidential.
- For supervisors: “Something seems different with you — are you okay?” opens doors that write-ups close.

When you walk in your front door, do you bring something in with you that your family has learned not to mention?

If your family is walking on eggshells, that is information.

Are your relationships — with your partner, your kids, your friends — getting more distant? Have you noticed?

If the people who love you most filled out this questionnaire about you — what would they say that you have not said yet?

This is the hardest question on the list. It is also the most useful one.

IF THIS DOMAIN IS ELEVATED — NEXT STEPS

The job takes. It does not give back on its own.

- Have a real conversation with someone at home. Not a debrief — a conversation where you listen more than you talk.
- If the relationship is in trouble, find a couples counselor who understands first responder culture.
- For supervisors: Family strain is one of the strongest predictors of on-duty impairment.

IDENTITY & PURPOSE

Who you are when the uniform comes off

If you could not do this job tomorrow — who would you be?

If this question is hard to answer, that is important information. Identity fusion is a strong predictor of crisis at transition.

Do you still believe in what you are doing — or are you running on muscle memory?

Cynicism is not a character shift. It is what happens when purpose gets worn down without being replenished.

What do you do — outside the job — that has nothing to do with the job?

IF THIS DOMAIN IS ELEVATED — NEXT STEPS

The job ends. You do not.

- Start building something outside the badge now — not when you retire. Hobbies, relationships, skills, community.
- If purpose feels hollow, talk to a peer, chaplain, or counselor — not about crisis, but about direction.
- For supervisors: Help your people build an identity beyond the job. It keeps them alive after it.

VICARIOUS EXPOSURE

For dispatchers and those who witness without being present

Dispatchers receive calls, send responders into danger, hear situations unfold in real time — and have no ability to influence the outcome. They are recipients of trauma without physical presence and without cultural recognition that what they carry is real. This domain is for them — and for anyone whose exposure comes through someone else. (Research basis: Kindermann et al., 2020)

Are there calls you have taken or dispatched that you still hear — in the silence, in your sleep?

The absence of a physical scene does not make the exposure less real. Research is clear on this.

Do you feel like your stress is legitimate — or do you minimize it because you were not there?

The belief that vicarious trauma does not count is one of the most damaging things in dispatch culture. It counts.

When a call goes badly — what do you do with that after the headset comes off?

IF THIS DOMAIN IS ELEVATED — NEXT STEPS

You were there. Just not in the way anyone can see.

- Name it. What you carry from those calls is a legitimate occupational injury.
- Seek peer support or counseling from someone who understands dispatch-specific exposure.
- For supervisors: Post-incident support must include dispatch — every time, not as an afterthought.

WHAT YOU DO WITH THIS

This tool does not give you answers. It gives you better questions — and better questions lead to the conversations that actually matter.

If something in here landed hard, do not put it back in the drawer.

Talk to someone. A peer, a supervisor who has earned your trust, a chaplain, a counselor, your doctor, or the person at home who already knows something is off.

Getting help is not the end of your career.

Ignoring this is.

HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT · AWARD-WINNING MEMOIR

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