

MENTAL HEALTH AND VOLUNTEERING

A good practice checklist for organisations involving volunteers who have mental health needs.

- Working with volunteers with mental health problems is about challenging your attitude and that of others. It is important that you work with others in your organisation, so they are clear as to why you involve volunteers with mental health problems.
- As for all volunteers, check that the person wants to do voluntary work, and has realistic expectations about what they can offer.
- Remember that one in four people experience a mental health problem in any year. Often you will not know if people have a history of mental health problems.
- If you are aware that someone has a mental health problem, then carry out a careful assessment to gain an understanding of a person's particular needs. This is especially important if a person's condition could impact on their work. Consider things like the time of day, medication, or if any environments are more or less beneficial to managing a condition.
- Treat your volunteers as you would want to be treated yourself. Ask the volunteer what (if anything) they need. Also check with them what language and terms to use to describe their mental health condition. You can learn from them, as they are the expert on themselves.
- Recognise that some volunteers with a history of mental health problems may not wish to disclose their status due to the stigma attached. As they become more settled, then they may open up. There is no legislation that obliges them to do so.
- At the beginning make a clear and explicit agreement around confidentiality. Agree what to say and do in certain circumstances and what if anything to say to other workers.
- If a volunteer is receiving support from mental health services do not be afraid to ask how this might help them with the role. You can ask if the volunteer can give a contact person in mental health services if there are concerns. This can also help with finding out what approaches are helpful and, or supportive.
- Talk to the volunteer about what they will do if they find a situation challenging or unmanageable. Plan what they will do if they need to leave or need a quiet place to go. Ask them what you should do.
- Develop a clear role description that explains what the role entails, the skills needed and commitment required.

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- Agree honest two-way communication, where you are both able to give honest feedback.
- Be prepared to be flexible. Establish this during an induction period or supervision meetings. Write up clear guidelines, so you both know what to expect.
- Ensure you give volunteers the correct information about volunteering and welfare benefits or know where the volunteer can find out this information from.
- Check if the volunteer is able to travel independently, and provide volunteer expenses to support travel costs.
- Think about how you can positively prepare your organisation for working with volunteers with mental health problems. You need to recognise feelings or fears that you personally have around mental health problems, as well as those of colleagues. Focus on the positives and what volunteers can do, as well as providing training to raise awareness of the issues. Make use of your volunteers' and other contacts' specialised knowledge of mental health problems.
- Know your limits – if you can't offer a suitable placement, then don't. You can always refer them back to the Volunteer Centre for help looking for something more appropriate.
- Be aware of striking a balance between a volunteer with a mental health problem and the needs of the rest of your volunteers. Any adjustments that you make should be reasonable.
- Use a trial period. This will give both the volunteer and you a chance to “try things out”.
- Hold regular reviews with ongoing support, referring back to the individual's goals – this can help develop confidence and the opportunity to address any issues that arise.
- As with all volunteers, remember to thank them for their assistance as this can help build their confidence.
- Follow good practice in the management of volunteers (e.g. volunteer policy, recruitment and selection, induction, training, support and supervision.)

Sources:

Bates, Peter (undated), *'A Real Asset; a Manual on Supported Volunteering'*, Manchester, National Development Team

National Centre for Volunteering (2003), *'You cannot be serious! Involving Volunteers with Mental Health Problems'*, London, The National Centre for Volunteering.

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