

Managing the wellbeing of your volunteers

Volunteers are at the heart of many of our organisations. Some volunteers may come to your organisation through [social prescribing](#) as a way to improve their wellbeing, which means you may be more likely to have people coming to volunteer with you who need additional support. The following resource will help support you in managing your volunteers' wellbeing.

Volunteer Wellbeing Framework

You may have heard about the [Five Ways to Wellbeing](#), which have been developed by the New Economics Foundation. It can be really helpful to think of volunteering within this framework;

Connect – feeling close to, and valued by others, is a fundamental need.

Keep Learning – staying mentally active and continued life learning can help enhance self-esteem, encourages social interaction and can lift people out of low mood.

Be active – staying physically active is important not only for physical but for mental health, and getting the body moving is essential for increasing wellbeing.

Take notice – is all about being in the moment, enhancing your self-understanding and making positive choices.

Give – individuals who give back to communities, sharing their time and skills with others on a regular basis, are more likely to rate themselves as happy.

Volunteering can fit into all of the categories above. So, ensuring the wellbeing of the people who support your work is crucial to keep them, and the organisation, thriving.

Volunteer Burnout

Some volunteers can struggle with burnout or feeling overwhelmed. Burnout is the gradual process by which a person, in response to prolonged stress and physical, mental and emotional strain, detaches from work and other meaningful relationships. The result is



lowered productivity, cynicism, and confusion. The person is usually left feeling drained and having nothing more to give.

There are signs to help identify burnout in your volunteers:

- A volunteer who usually prides themselves on doing a thorough job is now looking for shortcuts and cutting corners
- They may appear cynical, angry or increasingly irritable
- A volunteer may be complaining and not be enjoying their role, where they previously were excited about participating
- A lack of energy or looking/feeling of exhaustion, or a struggle to get enthusiastic about a new activity
- They may be dismissive of previous accomplishments or feel low in self-esteem
- Avoiding people and closing off to others, and wanting to be alone
- A lack of empathy and/or sympathy for others
- Their usual coping structures may become 'unglued' and they feel disorientated or have irrational reactions.

Prolonged periods in burnout are linked to real physical problems including cardiovascular complications, high blood pressure, and even premature heart attacks. Lingering in this state is dangerous for both physical and mental health.

Why tackle burnout?

Besides wanting to support someone who is struggling, a volunteer experiencing burnout may stop showing up or leave the organisation altogether. They are also an advocate for your organisation and the impact of reputational damage caused by word of mouth can bring down the mood of a whole organisational and contribute to creating a toxic culture and low morale.



Who does burnout effect?

There are no hard and fast rules on who is likely to experience burnout - it can happen to anyone and everyone at any point.

Other life stresses, like managing health problems or strain in family life, could also put volunteers at risk for burnout. In these cases, volunteering isn't the root cause, but they may still need to change their schedule, lighten their workload or even take a break from volunteering. It's important to be mindful of your language around to avoid piling on unnecessary pressure. Don't forget to consider time and volunteer holidays, to allow volunteers time off without feeling guilty.

Strategies

How can we prevent our volunteers experiencing burnout? What procedures can we build in to our practise?

- Be honest about what the role involves. Think about your recruitment adverts, volunteer agreement and any role descriptors and ensure they realistically reflect the role you are wanting them to undertake
- Ensure any initial training sets the volunteer up for the role and provide ongoing development opportunities as the role develops
- Offer a trial period to give the volunteer the chance to see if they like the role
- In your volunteer agreement, agree a maximum amount of hours and ensure this is adhered to
- Talk to your volunteers about making sure that they take time off from volunteering – just like staff members do
- Support and supervision is key to ensuring that you, as an organisation, are getting the best of your volunteers, but also ensures that you can spot signs of burnout early on
- Build in flexibility – can a volunteer try another role, change their hours or day or take a break from their commitment?
- Make sure they know what to do if they cannot volunteer, who to contact and what will happen - it's important to remove worry and reassure volunteers in this situation
- Make them know the value and impact of their volunteering – celebrate your volunteers where you can and communicate it to others.

What can I do?

- Be a role model - lead by example and practise good self-care. It's important to take time for ourselves. Its mean that we can give from a place of plenty rather giving from empty
- Protect yourself - setting realistic limits is not a negative reflection on your work ethic or your ability to go the extra mile so try and set boundaries
- Encourage 'fun' things that volunteers can do, whether as a group or on their own
- Talk to volunteers about wellbeing and self-care. You could create a 'wellbeing board' or space to share communication and positive news
- Have resources available that outline who volunteers can go to and where can they find more support. In the first instance the volunteer might want to speak to their local GP, but you could also find out what other local support services are available
- Check in with any volunteers experiencing difficulties, even if they are not currently volunteering – a little card or phone call to let them know you are thinking of them can make a world of difference. Aim to be a friend and, without pressure, check in on them to see how they are doing
- Burnout can happen even when coordinators take preventive measures. When it does, volunteer organizers should remain sensitive to what a person is going through



and remain reassuring to them. In some cases, a volunteer may believe burnout is a sign of weakness and something that proves they're not cut out for the work

- Assure them burnout can happen to anyone, and it does not reflect a lack of worthiness as a volunteer. Encourage volunteers to reflect and try to identify some of the factors that contributed to the burnout, if possible. The information they give could stop future adverse situations. For example, if a person says, "I was handling everything OK until I started directly engaging with the human trafficking victims" that's a sign that a change in the kind of work they perform could help
- Self-care strategies can also help a person recover from burnout. Activities like writing in a journal, meditating or long walks outdoors could help people come to terms with some of the things that caused the exhaustion and allow them to regain resiliency. If burnout is common at your organization, consider providing training and workshops on self-care.

Best practice for volunteers and their mental health

This following is taken from [Touchstone's](#) advice on key points to consider if you are going to recruit volunteers who have experienced mental health conditions, they can also provide some best practise for organisations.



- Check that an **individual really wants to volunteer** and has realistic expectations of what they can offer. Gain an understanding of their particular needs, especially any implications their condition may have on the role
- Check if the volunteer **is able to travel independently** and provide expenses to support travel costs
- Use the volunteer's specialised knowledge and lived experience of mental health. Provide them with the necessary skills and training to develop peer support groups to support other people and/or volunteers
- Offer **appropriate training** to equip them with the knowledge and skills of both the organisation and their role. **Ongoing training** will help to develop and value volunteers and their commitment, and ensure they are able to deliver their roles
- Develop a **buddying system** during the induction programme training to support all volunteers with mental health needs, but roll out to all volunteers to avoid singling anyone out
- Have **clearly defined roles and expectations**. All volunteers should have a clear explanation of their roles and responsibilities, as well as what they are and not allowed to do to meet their responsibilities. Start with a small commitment then gradually build on this
- **Match roles to volunteers**. Every volunteer will have different strengths and weaknesses and will find different situations stressful or rewarding so match roles to their skills and preferences. Having a trial period can help reduce the anxieties of the role.

- Ensure **resources are in place** for volunteers to perform their role. This refers not only to the physical and financial, but also to intangible resources such as skills, performance feedback and social support
- Being able to **make your own decision** can increase feelings of self-confidence and personal achievement. Any targets set for the volunteer should be realistic and achievable
- Provide **regular reviews and ongoing support** to volunteers using appropriate methods, e.g. regular one to one/group supervision, and support group meetings with other volunteers. Ensure volunteers know who to contact if they need support and how to get in touch with them.
- Promote a positive and healthy working environment. A creative volunteering environment can help to reduce stress on the individual. **Allow flexible volunteering hours** where possible and be open to new ideas and different ways of working. Identify ways in which the volunteer can assist the organisation while still maintaining an acceptable psychological environment
- Encourage **strong social support between volunteers** by providing opportunities for social occasions which can be combined with volunteer recognition events. Set up peer support groups where volunteers can get together, support each other and arrange to take part in activities away from their volunteer roles
- Reassure volunteers **if they become unwell** and are unable to volunteer for a time – whether that’s weeks or months – that they are **welcome to return** to volunteering when they feel able
- Good communication empowers and informs volunteers, **keeping them updated** with both the organisation and their progress. It also helps to identify any problems before they become too serious. Encourage volunteers to feedback on the organisation and their roles using a range of platforms including formal meetings, supervision, support group meetings, questionnaires, reviews and workshops. Listen to individual concerns using co-production/volunteer involvement methods
- Value all volunteers’ contributions and **offer frequent informal and formal feedback**. Saying ‘thank you’ can go a long way to making volunteers feel valued and significant and supports their wellbeing - increasing their confidence and self-esteem which will enhance their performance. End of year celebrations, newsletters, compliment letters, thank you cards and certificates of appreciation also show that an organisation appreciates volunteers’ commitment and support.
- **Provide references** for volunteers for any future placements/training/volunteering or employment opportunities.
- Follow good practice in the management of volunteers in all instances e.g. using volunteer policy, recruitment and selection, induction, training support and supervision. Take a look at our [Volunteer Management Toolkit](#) for further information.



- As an organisation, **know your limits**. If you're not able to offer suitable placements, then don't - instead offer details of alternative organisations where volunteer opportunities may be available

Remember - volunteering is usually an overwhelmingly positive experience, and putting strategies in place that promote wellbeing and avoid burnout can enhance the experience for both volunteers and the organisation. By supporting people to volunteer they are more likely to experience good wellbeing and be less susceptible to burnout. Volunteering is acknowledged as being a useful tool to promote wellbeing.



Further information

[Community First Yorkshire](#) can provide guidance and support to help you develop volunteer-friendly policies and procedures, including how to develop a culture of effective support and supervision.

Contact us on volunteersupport@communityfirstyorkshire.org.uk or 01904 704177