

Wales Council for Voluntary Action

Supporting charities, volunteers and communities

4. Volunteers

4.17 Understanding mental health and volunteering



This factsheet has been designed to give you information on how to support volunteers with mental health problems. It contains information about:

- How to support volunteers with mental health problems
- Recruitment
- Your welcome for people with mental health problems
- Arrangements for day to day support
- Coping in a crisis
- Volunteering with people with mental health problems
- Equal Opportunities and mental health
- Further information
- Appendix – Wellness Action Plan

How to support volunteers with mental health problems?

Have a simple strategy for mental health agreed by your governing body, managers, staff and volunteers, setting out the following:

a) Your commitment to positive mental health

Aim to be a mentally healthy workplace where mental health is talked about openly the same as physical health.

For example, you could:

- Display and promote information that encourages everyone to look after their mental well-being.
- Consider making adaptations in the workplace e.g. seating arrangements, chill out spaces to make the environment as congenial as possible
- Ensure that you have sufficient procedures in place for handling complaints and settling differences involving volunteers.
- Provide training to volunteer managers to enable them to understand, supervise and support volunteers with mental health problems.
- Ensure that volunteers feel part of the team and that they are not isolated.
- Peer support and/ or groups for people with mental health problems are useful and can be set up for support and encouragement.

Find ways to get people (staff and volunteers) talking about mental health. This takes away stigma and fear around mental health problems and allows people to let you know when they're struggling. Promote the [5 ways to wellbeing](#) from the New Economics Foundation. These are: connect, be active, take notice, keep learning and give. Introduce this into team discussion and staff planning.

b) Recruitment

- Not everyone with a mental health problem will disclose during recruitment. Letting all volunteers know that you provide a Wellness Action Plan (WAP) – see Appendix and explaining its purpose at recruitment will raise awareness of your organisation's ethos regarding mental health. This encourages trust in the organisation and hopefully disclosure of mental health problems, if not in the beginning maybe at a later date.
- Mental health problems can happen to anyone but ex-offenders are particularly vulnerable to mental health problems which you might like to address during recruitment. For more information on recruitment of ex-offenders see [WCVA's model policy](#).

c) Your welcome for people with mental health problems

- Positively welcome volunteers with experience of mental health problems: a statement on your literature such as 'people with mental health problems are welcome to apply' can give people the encouragement they need. Ensure that policies, procedure and practices support their inclusion in the organisation.
- It can be difficult for volunteers with mental health problems to provide references. Consider carefully whether these are necessary. If they are, then be flexible about who can be a referee e.g. to include support worker, mental health professional.
 - Include mental health in your risk assessments. Are there any volunteering practises that would impact badly on someone's mental health such as lone working or difficult phone calls or emails? How do you support people in these situations? What would you do if someone, a worker, a volunteer or a client became aggressive or abusive? Physical conditions such as alcoholism and diabetes can also cause changes such as increased aggression. Why not think about what you'd do in these situations too; in that way you're not discriminating against someone with a mental health problem.

d) Arrangements for day to day support

How do you support those with mental health problems, and how do you manage the times when someone is unable to volunteer because of their health?

- Regular support and supervision is helpful for volunteers generally, and particularly for volunteers who have mental health problems. One to one sessions are important, giving the volunteer the opportunity to divulge personal information should they wish. You may want to make use of a Wellness Action Plan (WAP), provided by Mind Cymru. This gives you an idea of what to look out for so you know when someone is becoming unwell and who to contact. An outline is given in the Appendix.
- Be prepared for 'ups' and 'downs', and provide a supportive environment. Where possible, be as flexible as possible. Volunteers with mental health problems may be taking medication which could make them drowsy at certain times of the day, nauseous or unable to concentrate for long periods at a time. Volunteers are often aware of the side effects of their medication so don't be afraid to ask and discuss their needs.
- Encourage acceptance of individuality that might sometimes include behaviour that others find unusual, such as facial tics or slurring speech often caused by medication or signs of nervousness.
- Make sure that boundaries are clear. Volunteers should know how to make a complaint, the limits of what is acceptable and what would happen if their own behaviour is unacceptable. Staff should be clear of the appropriate limits to their interventions (they are not expected to be counsellors or advice givers, for example) and where to go for additional support if needed
- Don't make assumptions about people's abilities. This is particularly important for volunteers with direct experience of mental health problems.
- Respect confidentiality of volunteers' personal circumstances. The burden of confidentiality is placed on both the volunteer manager and volunteer.

e) Coping in a crisis

Consider getting people trained in [Mental Health First Aid \(MHFA\)](#) or [Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training \(ASIST\)](#) or [safeTALK training](#), so that they know what to do in a crisis.

Make yourself aware of local support services you can signpost to your volunteers such as Gofal, Hafal, MIND Cymru & Samaritans

Everybody has mental health, volunteers and people in receipt of voluntary services are no different. Most people with mental health problems are far from being a risk to the public. Very occasionally a mental health problem can cause someone to act violently or abusively but this is very rare and usually there has been a long lead-up to that person getting very ill.

Volunteers who work with people with mental health problems

Training in MHFA and ASIST as mentioned above can be useful for volunteers to equip them to manage situations involving other volunteers with mental ill health. An awareness of boundaries is important. For example, volunteers shouldn't counsel their colleagues.

In certain organisations people can drift between being service users and volunteers. Boundaries need to be clear so that when volunteers are unwell and become service users there are clear procedures to say whether or not they can continue volunteering.

Equal Opportunities and Mental Health

A mental health condition is considered a disability if it has a long-term effect on your normal day-to-day activity. This is defined under the Equality Act 2010. It is illegal under the Equalities Act to discriminate against any kind of disability, including mental health issues.

A condition is 'long term' if it lasts, or is likely to last, at least 12 months. 'Normal day-to-day activity' is defined as something you do regularly in a normal day. For example - using a computer, working set times or interacting with people.

Although volunteers, unlike employees, are not specifically covered by equalities legislation, the spirit of the legislation should be adhered to as a matter of good practice when working with volunteers.

There are many different types of mental health condition which can lead to a disability, including:

- a. dementia
- b. depression
- c. bipolar disorder
- d. obsessive compulsive disorder
- e. schizophrenia
- f. self-harm

Further Information

The [Investing in Volunteers Standard](#) requires organisations to be open to involving volunteers from a wide range of backgrounds and abilities and commits the necessary resources (Indicator 3.1) and that where possible tasks are adapted to suit the needs, abilities and interests of individual volunteers (Indicator 4.4).

Mind Cymru website includes [free tools](#) to help you improve the mental health in your workplace www.mind.org.uk

[Various publications](#) relating to the Equalities Act 2010

See also the WCVA/CVC Information sheets:

4.12 [Volunteers and welfare benefits](#)

4.22 [Managing volunteer exits](#)

Appendix

Wellness Action Plan (WAP)

A WAP reminds us what we need to do to stay well whilst volunteering and details what our supervisors can do to better support us.

The information in this form will be held confidentially and regularly reviewed by you and your supervisor together. You only need to provide information that you are comfortable sharing and that relates to your volunteering role and context. This form is not legally binding but it will help us to agree, together, how to practically support you in your role and address any health needs.

1. What helps you stay mentally healthy whilst volunteering? (For example: taking adequate breaks, being clear about tasks)

2. What can your supervisor do to support you to stay mentally healthy whilst volunteering (For example: regular feedback and supervision, explaining wider developments)

3. Are there any situations that might arise during your volunteering that can trigger mental ill health for you? (For example: conflict, something not going to plan.)

4. How might stress/mental health difficulties impact on your volunteering? (For example: find it difficult to make decisions, struggle to focus on tasks.)

5. Are there any early warning signs that we might notice when you are starting to feel stressed/mentally unwell? (For example: changes in normal behaviour patterns, withdrawing from other people.)

6. What support could be put in place to minimise triggers or to support you to manage symptoms? (For example: extra catch-up time with supervisor)

7. If we notice early warning signs that you are feeling stressed or unwell – what should we do? (For example: talk to me discreetly about it, contact someone that I have asked to be contacted.)

Please include contact names and numbers if you would like your line manager to get in touch with someone if you become unwell.

8. What steps can you take if you start to feel unwell when volunteering? Is there anything we need to do to help you take these steps? (For example: take a break and go for a short walk, ask your supervisor for support.)

Volunteer's signature.....

Date.....

Supervisor's signature.....

Date.....

Date to be reviewed:.....

Adapted from Mind Cymru

Disclaimer

The information provided in this sheet is intended for guidance only. It is not a substitute for professional advice and we cannot accept any responsibility for loss occasioned as a result of any person acting or refraining from acting upon it.

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