

Welcoming volunteers with experience of mental ill health

Overview

This information sheet is designed to help your organisation recognise the value of welcoming volunteers with experience of mental ill health and offer practical advice on how to create inclusive and welcoming environments. Whether you're new to involving volunteers with lived experience of mental ill health or to improve your current approach, this information will help you attract, engage and support a wider range of volunteers, and to prepare for scenarios which may arise.

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Supporting volunteers with experience of mental ill health

An awareness of the mental health and well-being of all volunteers is important in providing a welcoming, safe and meaningful volunteering opportunity in which volunteers can thrive and support your organisation to make a difference. Good quality volunteering experiences may support well-being, particularly improving aspects of well-being, by providing a sense of purpose and connection, confidence and knowledge

In addition to keeping a person-centered ethos (a focus on supporting each different and unique individual's needs, preferences and values) when supporting people with lived experience it is helpful for organisations to have in place a simple strategy for mental health. This should be agreed by your governing body, managers, staff and volunteers and should outline **your commitment to maintaining a positive ethos around Mental Health**. Ideally, your aim is to be a mentally healthy environment where mental health is talked about openly the same as physical health.

Ways you could demonstrate this include,

- Displaying and promoting information that encourages everyone to look after their mental health and emotional wellbeing
- Making adaptations in your environment to accommodate what an *individual* might need e.g. seating arrangements to encourage connection, chill out spaces to allow for periods of calm.

- Ensuring that you have the correct policies and procedures in place and that they are available to everyone should the need arise.
- Providing training to volunteer managers to enable them to understand, supervise and support volunteers with experience of mental ill health.
- Ensuring that volunteers feel part of the team so that they feel seen and heard and are not isolated. You can do this by, for example, asking for their input around service provision, treating them as the experts they are or creating social opportunities involving other volunteers and staff.
- Providing peer support and/or groups for people with experience of mental ill health are useful and can be set up for support, encouragement and sharing of best practice.
- Find ways to get people (staff and volunteers) talking about mental health. This takes away stigma and fear around mental ill health and allows people to let you know when they're struggling e.g. awareness raising webinars, training around mental ill health and emotional wellbeing, time away from the role to take care of their mental health and reimbursement of expenses for all volunteers.

Remember

You could promote the '[5 Ways to Wellbeing](#)' from the New Economics Foundation. These are 'Connect, Be Active, Take Notice, Keep Learning and Give'. You could introduce these into team discussions and staff and volunteer planning session.

Welcoming volunteers with lived experience of mental ill health

As a volunteer manager

It is important to extend **a positive welcome** to people who have lived experience of mental ill health. Mentioning this in the role description (and any other literature relating to volunteering) that supports this is vital. For example, 'we welcome people from/with ... (emphasis on personal qualities rather than qualifications)' or 'please come and talk to us...' This presents you and your organisation as more approachable and can give a potential volunteer the encouragement that is needed. This starts to build trust between you (as your organisation) and the volunteer. Further down the line, at the point at which you interview the individual, this can further be built by having an ethos of openness and honesty but also being willing to have difficult conversations and sitting in that discomfort so that the volunteer feels heard and validated (skills around active listening can be found on [VeryWell Mind](#))

Ensure that your **policies and procedures** and risk assessment support inclusion for individuals with mental ill health. This needs to be considered whilst maintaining a person centred, holistic approach to them and their volunteering, celebrating the skills and experiences that they have brought. To enforce the ethos of valuing the individual, of openness and of sharing

consider a Wellness Action Plan (WAP) with the potential volunteer. Share it and explain its purpose, the fact that it is tailored to each individual regardless of the challenges they face and reviewed regularly. Suggested questions for a Volunteer WAP are included below.

Consider your support offering – this needs to be manageable for both you and the volunteer. Regular support both formal (such as supervision) and informal ('cuppa and catch up' type activities) are beneficial to all volunteers, in particular for reassurance and connection. One-to-one sessions are important for opportunities to debrief or to share personal or sensitive information and also for reviewing elements of the WAP should this be needed. Flexibility is needed as much as is possible to accommodate for any issues that a volunteer might encounter (e.g. time of day, appointments, medication).

Mental ill health is not a one-off event and it certainly is not linear – be prepared for ups and downs and provide a supportive environment for this. A system whereby the project can be contacted at any time during the working day (and support organisations shared with the individual for non-working times) is useful. Create a culture of sharing, openness, honesty and non-judgement. Maintenance of our mental health is a consideration for all and knowing the signs that we are becoming unwell is key to preventing it become problematic. It is useful to have these conversations before the event and therefore be able to track changes with the volunteer.

Have clear boundaries about what you can and can't offer and stick to them. Not only does this offer clarity but it models this for the volunteer and will

help them to utilise this within their role with you. They should know how to make a complaint, what is acceptable and not acceptable in terms of fulfilling the role but also in their own behaviour. Volunteers need to know where to seek additional support if needed. There needs to be clear steps for what is to be done within the role and who is responsible for which part – this will help your volunteers feel supported but also decrease the weight of responsibility felt by volunteers.

Things to consider

What a volunteer might need from you

The **quality of interview and interview process** can have a huge bearing on volunteers deciding whether the opportunity you are providing (and sometimes volunteering in general) is right for them. No matter how experienced you are in interviewing, please don't rush this stage. Not all of an individual's mental ill health experience will be shared at interview. Our own mental health journey can be a sensitive topic for all of us.

Take time and careful effort to:

- Put the individual at their ease (can you provide refreshments?), talk about what might be making them feel nervous if they are. This is a great opportunity to start building trust.
- Explain the process being clear about what is needed, what you will be doing (e.g. form-filling, making notes, etc) and why, and the time you have available

- Be clear about what you are needing them to do and that you might need to ask questions additional questions to clarify your understanding
- Talk together about how they might be supported in their role at each step of the process (e.g. supervision, your availability and arrangements outside of that, WAP, what happens if they need to take a step away)

You will very likely be the first point of contact

You may be the first person a volunteer encounters within your organisation. By considering the above you are promoting your organisation as one that values and celebrates the skills and experience being brought by a volunteer with lived experience of mental ill health such as resilience, perseverance, creativity and problem solving.

A consideration for both sides

It is often a challenge to volunteers with lived experience of mental ill health to obtain **references** or to even begin thinking of who they may be able to approach for this. This can create a significant barrier for an individual. As a project, you might need to be flexible around this. Think about what you actually need (and who it needs to be from) for this- could it be that instead of a professional reference you could ask for a character reference, could it be a support worker, a mental health professional.

How could you / your organisation respond to a volunteer experiencing crisis?

Knowing what to do (and not to do), how to act (or not act) and steps to follow for a volunteer in crisis can be key to reducing the fear, nervousness and stigma surrounding mental health crises themselves. Think about the training you might need to be able to support a volunteer with mental ill health such as, Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) or ASIST (Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training). Make yourself aware also of the support organisations, both local and national, that you can signpost your volunteers to if needed.

Celebrating diversity, including and valuing everyone and providing equal opportunities for all

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 difficulties.

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, at 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 supporting volunteers.

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

- Dementia
- Depression
- Bipolar disorder
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
- Schizophrenia
- Self-harm

In practical terms, as volunteer managers, we would seek to celebrate what each individual is bringing to our organisations in terms of the skills and abilities they have and also the experience they bring that might help and support others. It is working with, and shaping our practices around, these skills and experiences that allows for us to learn more about people in general and that, just as with many of the people we might support, there isn't a 'one size fits all' approach.

Further information

- [Mind Cymru](#)

Volunteering Wellness Action Plan Questions

What helps you stay mentally healthy whilst volunteering? For example, taking adequate breaks, being clear about tasks

What can your supervisor do to support you to stay mentally healthy whilst volunteering? For example, regular feedback and supervision, explaining wider developments

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

How might stress/mental ill health impact on your volunteering? For example, find it difficult to make decisions, struggle to focus on tasks

Are there any early warning signs that we might notice when you are starting to experience mental ill health? For example, changes in your typical behaviour patterns, withdrawing from other people

What support could be put in place to minimize triggers or to support you to manage symptoms? For example, extra time with your supervisor

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

What steps can you take if you start to feel unwell when volunteering?

Is there anything we need to do to help you to take these steps? For

example, take a break and go for a short walk, ask your supervisor for support

At the end of the document, we suggest you include a space for the signature of the volunteer and the supervisor and agree a date for the document to be revisited.