

Stress and Volunteering

How to support your volunteers' wellbeing during COVID-19

In this time of crisis the contribution volunteers are making to communities across Ireland and worldwide is invaluable. As a volunteer manager or leader, your role in supporting this volunteer effort has never been more vital. Volunteer Ireland has put together a guide to some things you may need to consider changing and adapting in your volunteer programme.

Read the guide: "Volunteer Management in an Emergency."

Those who choose to volunteer in times of great stress and even greater demand are highly motivated and willing to give their all to support the most vulnerable people in our society. However, the possibility of volunteer burnout is high and almost all of us will be experiencing higher levels of anxiety than usual.

Everyone is familiar with the safety message from air cabin crews to 'put your own oxygen mask on first' in an emergency. This puts you in a place of control allowing you to safely help the person who may be struggling to get their own mask in place. It is necessary to attach the same importance to your own mental health and wellbeing and encourage your volunteers to do the same.

This is a time of change, it is vital that we invest in our self-care, maintain a regular routine, sleep, eat well and exercise within the current constraints.



Volunteer Ireland in collaboration with Mental Health Ireland has created a guide to support volunteers to maintain their wellbeing whilst volunteering during COVID-19. Please feel free to share this with all your volunteers and take some time to read through it yourself as much of the advice will apply to those leading and managing volunteers also.

Read the guide: "Your Wellbeing as a Volunteer during COVID-19."



DUTY OF CARE AND BEST PRACTICE

More than ever it is vital to have systems, processes and procedures in place to support your volunteers. These include a volunteer agreement, a volunteer policy, as well as training, ongoing support and recognition and adequate insurance, risk assessments and health and safety policies.

Volunteer Ireland provides extensive resources on all of the above and more, with specific resources in relation to COVID-19 also available.

Explore [best practice resources](#) for Volunteer Involving Organisations, or [view COVID-19 resources](#).

Maintaining best practice in volunteer management during this time will have the benefit of protecting your organisation but most importantly it will signal to your volunteers that you recognise your duty of care to them. It sends out a very strong and caring message that you value them and their contribution to your organisation.

Volunteers can find comfort in your organisation's clear and considered recruitment, induction, training and support processes. At a time of such uncertainty, providing clarity to your volunteers, about what their tasks will be and how you will support them, is vital.

RECOGNISING STRESS

By providing support and supervision regularly, it may be easier to recognise when issues around stress are emerging.

How we experience stress is subjective, so each volunteer may have a different response to any situation. As a volunteer manager it is good to recognise the physical and emotional signs of stress. Changes in our feelings, behaviour, physical health or emotional health can all be early signs of increased stress. A volunteer who seems to be increasingly “snappy” when talking to your organisation's service users, or a volunteer who may be taking more time off with stomach-aches or headaches, could indicate that someone isn't coping as well as they might.

Providing practical advice on how to deal with stressful situations when they do arise should be a part of your volunteer induction and training. You can reference or share [Mental Health Ireland's in-depth guides to managing stress and anxiety](#).



STRESS RISK ASSESSMENT

Many of the measures that would be helpful in reducing stress are also general best practice in volunteer management so you may have many of them in place already. However, undertaking a stress risk assessment is a good way to see how your organisation is doing. This is a crucial part of Health and Safety assessments, but is often overlooked as stress is undoubtedly more difficult to tackle than, say, a straightforward slip/trip hazard.

A stress risk assessment is simply a careful examination of what in a volunteer role could cause stress, and then asking yourself if you have done enough, or should do more to prevent these stressors from affecting your volunteers.

Talk to your volunteers, get them to complete a survey, observe the team as they carry out their roles and engage with them about what may be causing stress. You should focus on the stressors that could be caused by the following five aspects.



01 Demands of the volunteer role

Think carefully about the sorts of tasks you are asking volunteers to do, and why you are involving volunteers in the first place. What stressors could arise in the various volunteer roles you provide?

Different volunteers will have different abilities and traits making them better suited to taking on different roles. Ensure volunteer roles match the skills of the individual volunteer so that you're not setting them up to fail.

02 Support from managers and leaders

All volunteers need support, even more so when volunteering during an emergency. Lack of communication can be a major stress factor. Should you increase the frequency of your support and supervision of volunteers? What sort of support works for different volunteers? Some may prefer an informal chat, others may prefer to talk to you in private, or prefer group supervision carried out virtually or at a safe social distance.

03 Control over your volunteering

Give volunteers as much control and flexibility over their tasks as you can. Not having control over our workload is a major source of stress. It may be necessary to recruit additional volunteers at this time to ensure your volunteers are not overwhelmed and are able to take more time off for their own wellbeing or due to illness. Make sure you're not automatically putting volunteers on a rota without checking with them first.

Not everyone realises that stress can also be caused by not having enough to do, by being under-stimulated or unclear on what is required of you – make sure your volunteers are clear on their tasks and know they can come to you if they need guidance on what to do next.

04

Relationships within the organisation

Try to create a culture where every volunteer feels valued and understands how their involvement contributes to the organisation's mission. It is important for this recognition and acknowledgement to come from the organisation but also to be a shared support from volunteer to volunteer.

It is important that volunteers know they can talk to you if they are experiencing any difficulty, including potential conflicts or complaints. Asking an open question like "how are you?" or "are you finding anything difficult or stressful?" is simple and effective. If all volunteers are routinely asked how they are, then it's easier for them to start talking about any difficulties and you won't be the last to know if there is a problem. If a volunteer is finding it hard to cope, they may need to take time off, or stop volunteering altogether and your support is invaluable in these situations.

05

Change and how it is managed

This is a time of change for all. What your volunteer roles are or how they are carried out may be changing during this national crisis. Volunteers need to feel that the organisation is engaging with them during any period of change. Change should be preceded by consultation with volunteers on how this will affect them. Offer training to enable volunteers to cope with new systems, initiatives or equipment. Organisational change needs to be accompanied by suitable resources and volunteer numbers.

Please feel free to reach out to your **local Volunteer Centre**. They are there to support you at this time in relation to role development, volunteer recruitment and training.

BENEFITS OF MANAGING STRESS

The benefits of tackling stress for your volunteers are clear.

The volunteer experience will be better; their morale and productivity will increase; their sickness or absence will go down and; their commitment to your organisation will grow – all benefits which will enhance the impact your organisation can have on the communities and causes you support.



Ensure that all volunteers you are supporting and involved with are operating in strict adherence to the best practice and hygiene guidelines available at [hse.ie](https://www.hse.ie).

For more information on mental health and wellbeing visit [mentalhealthireland.ie](https://www.mentalhealthireland.ie).