Volunteers and Stress

Summary

We all experience stress. It's a normal part of life. How we respond to it though may sometimes cause us problems. This is true for all of us, and so it applies to volunteers just as much as anyone else.

You may not have thought about what your organisation can do to help protect volunteers against stress when volunteering with you, or to help them cope with it when they do experience it.

This Information Sheet has been written to help you consider these kinds of issues as part of your work with volunteers.

This Information Sheet covers:
- Signs of stress
- Health and Safety
- Good Practice
- A Mentally Healthy workplace

Signs of stress

It can be hard to know when we're experiencing too much stress. Changes in our feelings, behaviour or physical health can all be signs of being under increased, or too much, stress. So, for example, a volunteer who seems to be increasingly "snappy" when talking to your organisation's service users, or a volunteer who's taking more time off with stomach-aches or headaches, could indicate that someone isn't coping as well as they might. It's also worth remembering that too much stress can make existing physical or mental health issues worse, so if the support mechanisms you'd put in place to help a volunteer with additional support needs don't seem to be working anymore, stress could be a factor.

Health and Safety

Lots of volunteer-involving organisations don't realise that their duty of care applies to their volunteers just as it does to their paid employees. Further to this, in the words of the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), employers have duties under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 to "assess the risk of stress-related ill health arising from work activities"; and under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 "to take measures to control that risk". **This applies to risks to volunteers as well as to paid staff.**

Carrying out a proper risk assessment for stress will not only reduce the chance of complaints or even being taken to court by someone badly affected, it should also help avoid day to day problems such as a high turnover of volunteers.

Stress risk assessment is a crucial and legal part of Health and Safety assessments, but it's often overlooked. It's quite common to find risk assessments that just assess the physical risks to volunteers, but overlook the stress risks.

Risk assessing for stress does present challenges, partly because it may seem easier to identify a potential trip hazard than it would to identify a potential stress hazard; and partly because how we experience stress is subjective, so all volunteers will have different responses to any situation. It doesn't mean the process of risk assessment is any different, but it does mean thinking in a slightly different way about possible risk areas and how to tackle them.

For example, imagine that a volunteer called Adam finds working on the Advice Centre Reception desk stressful, but another volunteer called Zoe doesn't find it stressful at all. At first glance, it may be easier to see how both volunteers are at tangible physical risk from the piled-up boxes of old accounts that have been stacked up in the Reception area for weeks than to consider any non-physical risks.

This means that it's harder to say which parts of the volunteering opportunity on the Reception desk are potential stress hazards or not, as there are complicating factors to do with volunteers' coping strategies. Think about what the volunteers do find, or could find stressful. On the other hand, it could be that you've noticed that the Reception volunteers don't seem to stay with the organisation very long. Take Adam, for instance, it's possible that he needs more training and support, as he's not had much contact with people who are distressed or frustrated before. You could include assertiveness in your training for new volunteers, or put a policy in place that no volunteer is left alone on the

Reception desk. By providing training and having working practices such as these, your organisation could meet the "take measures to control that risk" part of the obligation.

Also, don't assume that just because Zoe isn't finding work on the Reception desk stressful at the moment, doesn't mean that she never will. For example, it is possible that situations which Zoe has previously dealt with well may become harder to cope with. Or perhaps Zoe could be faced with other difficult things going on in her life (for instance bereavement, relationship break-up, moving house). Or she may be affected by stress because of the cumulative effects of dealing with a stressful situation for a long time.

It's also really important that Adam isn't seen as, or made to feel 'weak' because he is experiencing stress. Stress shouldn't be seen as something that we have to just knuckle down and cope with.

Good Practice

Many of the measures that would be helpful in managing or reducing stress are also good practice generally when managing volunteers, so you may not need to introduce anything particularly different from the ways that you are already working with volunteers. For example, offering adequate induction, training and supervision can all help to reduce the risks of volunteers experiencing stress whilst volunteering.

Make sure your volunteering roles match what volunteers can reasonably do, so you're not setting them up to fail. If a volunteer has two children to take to school and nursery, and you keep putting them on the rota for the 8.30am breakfast shift, they'll always arrive late and flustered, which will be counter-productive for you, the volunteer and your service users.

Give your volunteers as much control and flexibility over their tasks as you can. Not having control over our workload is a major source of stress. For example, if a volunteer in a charity shop is not quite feeling up to being on the till and having to deal with customers, they may prefer to sort the donations instead.

Not everyone realises that stress can also be caused by not having enough to do, or by being bored or under-stimulated – which is another reason why it's important to regularly review roles and progress with volunteers. This is also another reason why you should think carefully about the sorts of tasks you are asking volunteers to do, and why you are involving volunteers in the first place. For instance, if you have old client files that need archiving and none of the paid staff want to spend hours in a cold windowless room trawling through the dusty old filing cabinets, why would volunteers want to?

By providing support and supervision regularly, it may be easier to recognise when there may be issues around stress, or to ask directly. All volunteers need support, and it's worthwhile finding out what sort of support works for different volunteers. Some volunteers might prefer an informal chat over a cup of tea or in passing, others may prefer to talk to you in private, or prefer group supervision. Try to create a culture where every volunteer feels that they can talk to you if they want or need to. This can be done really simply. Asking an 'open' question like "how are you?" or "how's it going?", or a follow on question such as "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 volunteers 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 too hard to cope, they may need to take lots of time off, or stop volunteering altogether (either on a temporary basis or permanently, but this should be the volunteer's decision).

Make sure that having breaks is seen as normal and natural. You wouldn't expect a paid member of staff to go all year without taking any of their annual leave, so make sure you're not automatically putting volunteers on the rota every month without checking with them first.

Monitoring stress and taking active steps to change things will also help you meet your commitment to equal opportunities, because doing this will help you towards becoming as inclusive to as many volunteers as you can. By supporting your volunteers - with existing physical disabilities, health issues, or mental health issues - to manage or cope with stress, you increase the chances of your volunteer's time with your organisation being successful.

A Mentally Healthy Workplace

Creating and promoting a mentally healthy workplace for everyone to volunteer in is another good practice suggestion that is both preventative, and can help volunteers to cope if they are feeling stressed.

It's helpful to create a culture where everyone feels that they can discuss stress (and emotional wellbeing or mental health issues) just as easily as they would their physical health – either in casual conversations, or in more formal settings such as supervision. An organisation where volunteers can feel just as comfortable saying "Since my mother died last year, I'm finding it much harder to concentrate and remember things", as they would saying, "Since I had those new tablets for my blood pressure, I'm feeling tired and rundown all the time", is likely to be a healthier place to volunteer.

If possible, make sure there's some quiet space for volunteers to have a break or eat lunch in. Some space to chat is good too, and this helps in creating a friendly environment, which can help to reduce feelings of isolation. Make sure there's water available, as well as caffeine-free or de-caffeinated drinks if your organisation can afford it. If you provide expenses for meals, make sure that it's sufficient to get a healthy meal option where you can.

Further information

Health and Safety Executive
The HSE's Management Standards pages explain a five-step approach to risk assessment for work-related stress.
http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/before.htm

Mind troubleshooters: Stress
http://www.mind.org.uk/Information/Booklets/Other/Mindtroubleshootersstress.htm

Mind guide to Managing Stress
Both of these resources give information on the symptoms and signs of stress, as well as practical self-help suggestions. They are available free online (there's a small charge for hard copies, depending on the quantity purchased. Please contact Mind publications for more information).
http://www.mind.org.uk/Information/Booklets/Mind+guide+to/Mind+guide+to+managing+stress.htm

Managing for mental health: the Mind employers' resource pack (Third edition), £15.99
Mind Publications
Granta House
15-19 Broadway
London
E15 4BQ
Tel: 0844 448 4448 / 020 8519 2122 ext 306
Fax: 020 8534 6399
Email: publications@mind.org.uk
Website: http://www.mind.org.uk/osb

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