

# Volunteers & Mental Health



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# Introduction

While volunteering is often viewed as a selfless act that gives back to the community, there has been a growing body of research on the social and emotional benefits of volunteering for volunteers themselves.

For some people with disability, it may not be practical to commit to the responsibilities of paid employment. In these cases, volunteering can fill people's lives with a similar sense of purpose and routine without the ongoing obligation and expectation.

## **Mental health in Australia**

Approximately 45 per cent of Australian adults will be affected by mental illness at some time in life. Depression and anxiety disorders are the most common health issues, while others may experience substance abuse disorders, psychotic illness (such as schizophrenia) and other debilitating conditions.

Volunteering can have a positive impact on mental health generally and may improve health outcomes for people experiencing a mental health challenges. Regular social interaction and contributing to the community produces positive health outcomes including reducing depression and loneliness. Volunteering specifically has been associated with:

- Improved functioning and social participation
- Improved ability to cope with stress and reduction in stress levels
- Reduction in feelings of depression, loneliness and isolation
- Increased confidence and self-esteem
- Instilling a sense of purpose, meaning and passion
- Improved quality of life and greater feelings of happiness





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# Ideas and strategies for organisations

Given the prevalence of mental health conditions, it is likely at least one, if not several of your volunteers, already experience mental health concerns. Mental health issues can also arise at any time in a person's life. Being aware of the impact these issues can have, is therefore not only helpful for including prospective volunteers, but supporting and sustaining your current volunteers.

The following ideas and strategies can help you better include volunteers experiencing mental health concerns.





# Let people know your organisations is inclusive

Mental health issues have been highly stigmatised and many people with mental health issues have experienced direct discrimination. Make it clear that your organisation and volunteer program is welcoming of all people living with disability including those with mental health conditions.

- Include having an inclusion statement or making mental health inclusion a priority on your Disability Action Plan
- Acknowledge mental health promotion days such as 'R U Ok Day?'
- Include affirmative / inclusion statements on your website, position descriptions and other organisational documents.
- Consider advertising your volunteer roles through mental health organisations or disability employment service providers.

## Ask your volunteers

While you should never ask a prospective or current volunteer directly about their health conditions or disability, it is important to ask what your volunteer needs to best do their role.

For volunteers with a mental health condition, organising regular catch ups can be helpful in order to:

- Check on their progress in the role and provide space for them to discuss any needs or issues that arise
- Provide an opportunity to give regular, constructive feedback on their volunteering
- Promptly implement any support required
- Build trust and facilitate open, honest conversations when the volunteer is ready.

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# Managing disclosure and confidentiality

Mental health issues are often a highly sensitive and personal topic for people. Remember if someone has disclosed their mental health issue, it is likely they already have some trust in you. You can ensure you maintain this trust by listening, asking questions and showing empathy.

- It is important that all disclosures of mental health conditions are initiated by the volunteer
- If you're not sure of something they have told you, or the impact of their condition, ask them!
- Disclosures of disability or health conditions should be kept in confidence between you and the volunteer
- If you feel it would be helpful for someone else in the organisation to know (e.g. someone they are volunteering with directly) always seek permission from the volunteer and discuss how they would best like this to happen.

## Get informed and aware

Many people know someone who has experienced a mental health condition or may have experienced one themselves. However, the more information you have, the better equipped you will be to support your volunteers with a mental health issue. Information also breaks down misconceptions and stigma.

**Ask:** If your volunteer has disclosed their mental health condition, ask them questions (sensitively) about how this impacts them and what support they need. Remember everyone's experience is different and it's important to not make assumptions

**Read:** There is a lot of great information out there about mental health and how people can best be supported. Consider looking at the websites at the end of this guide for information and resources.

**Learn:** Listen to what your volunteers tell you and learn from experience. You may not get it right every time and that's OK! The most important thing is to acknowledge when something doesn't go right, ask more questions and try again.

**Prepare:** It may also be helpful to get some basic mental health awareness or first aid training, or look into having someone on staff go through Mental Health First Aid Training, which would be of benefit for all staff and volunteers in your organisation. For options on workplace training and resources see: [www.headsup.org.au/training-and-resources/educational-and-training/training-programs](http://www.headsup.org.au/training-and-resources/educational-and-training/training-programs)



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# Include family, carers or support workers



With the permission of your volunteer, including family, carers, or support workers can be helpful for both an organisation and volunteer. Support people can be a wonderful source of information and support, particularly when you are just getting to know your volunteer or at times where there is a lot of new information being received.

## **Consider including support people at the following times:**

- during induction and early stages
- at meetings, particularly where new information or feedback is being given
- to consult for information or best approaches on supporting the volunteer
- when sensitive issues arise, such as performance issues or behavioural concerns

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# Be clear and transparent about roles and expectations

As with all volunteers it is important to provide a description of the role that clearly outlines the volunteer role duties and organisational expectations. Providing as much information as possible at the start can prevent issues arising in the future and support you to address any issues that do arise. Important information to provide can include:

- What they are expected to do within the parameters of the role.
- Be as detailed as possible and outline negotiable points, where there is flexibility or adaptations can be made.
- Any expectations the organisation or volunteer program has on appropriate attire or behaviour
- Lines of reporting and communication and who the volunteer should approach if an issue arises
- Ensure that this information is provided both verbally and in written format, and there is the opportunity for the volunteer to ask questions or seek clarification.

Importantly, if issues do arise around performance of volunteer duties or expectations of behaviour, address them as promptly and sensitively as possible, focus on the issue or behaviour rather than the person or their condition, and consider involving carers or support people in these conversations.



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# Be flexible

Where possible be flexible with duties and volunteer hours and arrangements. Some ideas include:

- Can the duties of a role be negotiated? Are there any unnecessary requirements or criteria in the position description? Can the volunteer role duties be shared by two people?
- Are you able to provide flexible hours or working from home arrangements? As with employees, being flexible can help get the right person for the role and provide the support they need to be successful.
- If someone is not performing well or enjoying their volunteer role, is there another position or different duties they can do?
- Can you be adaptable around the volunteers need to manage their daily routine, such as medical appointments?
- Is there the opportunity for regular breaks and periods for time out?

## Consider the (volunteering) environment

This can be a good time to review your organisation's physical environment for all staff and volunteers, to ensure it is a productive and calm environment conducive to promoting good mental health:

- Do you have break out spaces that allow a quiet space and low stimulation for people when needed?
- Are there any nearby outdoor spaces that people can access on breaks?
- Think about the sensory load of your environment – do you have windows with natural light? If not, have you considered indoor plants?
- What is the noise and lighting like? Could it be quieter? Dimmer?
- Are there opportunities during breaks for social connection and developing peer relationships? Making connections can foster supportive and trusting relationships.

Making small changes can make it a healthier and more supportive volunteering environment for everyone!





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# Self-care and preventing burn out

If you are supporting someone with a mental health issue it is important to look after yourself in order to prevent stress or burn out and protect your own mental health. Hearing about another person's emotional difficulties or providing ongoing support can be challenging. A few simple self-care strategies include:

- Remember that while you are there to support your volunteer, you are not responsible for their issues or condition
- Consider and develop your own boundaries. This may include allocated times where you are available for discussion and other times that are strictly allocated to other work
- Take regular breaks and develop strategies to switch off after hours.
- Find a trusted mentor to discuss difficult issues that arise or to speak with if you are feeling overwhelmed
- Access more information or resources to help you understand the issues and demands of supporting people. Organisations that provide more information on supporting people with mental health issues and self-care include:  
[www.beyondblue.org.au/the-facts/supporting-someone/looking-after-yourself](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/the-facts/supporting-someone/looking-after-yourself)  
[www.carersaustralia.com.au/](http://www.carersaustralia.com.au/)  
[www.mentalhealthcarersaustralia.org.au/](http://www.mentalhealthcarersaustralia.org.au/)
- If you feel your own mental health is suffering, access your own support through your organisation's Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or speak to your GP about other support options.



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# Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

Although they are often treated separately for human resource purposes, volunteers are an integral part of the workforce for many organisations. Some organisations therefore provide EAP counselling services to their volunteers as well as their paid employees.

Typically, these services are made available for a certain number of employees. If it is not a viable option for your organisation to provide EAP services to all of your volunteers, some organisations have had success negotiating with their EAP providers to pay for services on an individual case-by-case basis.

Part of your organisation's decision-making should include whether your volunteers are exposed to stressful scenarios or the involved in situations that take an emotional toll – for example volunteers in health or justice settings, volunteers supporting disadvantaged families, homeless support services and so on.

For any organisation, providing EAP services to your volunteers is a strong demonstration of your commitment to a healthy working environment which will have positive flow-on effect for the rest of your workforce.

Access EAP have a Volunteer Assistance Program:

[www.accesseap.com.au/services/individuals-in-focus/volunteer-assistance-program-vap](http://www.accesseap.com.au/services/individuals-in-focus/volunteer-assistance-program-vap)

## What to do if you are concerned about someone's mental health

If you are concerned about someone's mental health and feel comfortable having a conversation with them, it is ok to ask them if they need any additional support.

If the volunteer wants further support or you need further advice, the following services provide assistance, support and referrals options:

[www.beyondblue.org.au/](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/)

[www.sane.org/](http://www.sane.org/)

[www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/](http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/)

If you are concerned about someone's safety or they have expressed thoughts of self-harm immediately contact [www.lifeline.org.au/](http://www.lifeline.org.au/)

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## Further help

[www.carersaustralia.com.au/](http://www.carersaustralia.com.au/)  
[www.mentalhealthcarersaustralia.org.au/](http://www.mentalhealthcarersaustralia.org.au/)  
[www.accesseap.com.au/services/individuals-in-focus/volunteer-assistance-program-vap](http://www.accesseap.com.au/services/individuals-in-focus/volunteer-assistance-program-vap)  
[www.headsup.org.au/training-and-resources/educational-and-training/training-programs](http://www.headsup.org.au/training-and-resources/educational-and-training/training-programs)