

Looking after someone else's mental wellbeing as a volunteer

As a volunteer, there may be times when we become concerned about the mental wellbeing of the people we are supporting.

If someone lets us know that they are experiencing difficult thoughts and feelings, or we notice some signs that they may be struggling, it is really common to feel like we don't know what to do or say, but we're not expected to have any solutions or be an expert.

Often the most helpful thing we can do is to let people know that we're there for them by giving them space to talk, listening and signposting to expert support if needed.

But this isn't always easy. So whether you are just starting out as a volunteer, or have been doing it for many years, we have some suggestions that may help.

Everyone is different. Everyone copes with things in their own way and not everyone has outward signs, but some general things to look out for include:

- Physical signs, such as feeling tired and changes to sleep patterns, changes in appetite and pain in the body, such as headache and indigestion.
- Emotional signs, such as feeling tearful, experiencing difficulty taking in information and loss of motivation.
- Signs and behaviour, such as withdrawing and not wanting to be with people, experiencing restlessness, an increase in smoking or drinking to cope with difficult feeling, or not wanting to do things they usually enjoy.

If you notice any of these signs, it's important to remember that it does not necessarily mean that the person you are supporting is experiencing a mental health problem. It could be a sign of another health issue or something else entirely.

Always take care not to diagnose or make assumptions. Instead, don't be afraid to ask them how they are. It's really common to worry that it's not your place to ask, or that you might say or do the wrong thing, but just letting them know that you are there if and when they want to talk can be really valuable.

Use open questions, questions that cannot just be answered with a yes or no, to create a safe and welcoming for them to talk about their feelings if they want to. Here are some questions that may help you start the conversation.

If someone does want to share how they are feeling, the most important thing we can do is listen. Here are some listening tips to help you give the best support you can.

Tip One – try to give them your full attention. To really listen to someone, we need to give them our full focus without distraction. But paying attention can be a really difficult thing to do. Our mind naturally wants to wander and often in a conversation we are thinking about what we want to say to someone whilst they're still talking, meaning we rarely fully listen to everything they are saying.

The good news is that we can practice paying attention. Next time you're in a conversation with someone, try giving them your complete focus. Any time you find your

mind wandering, gently bring your focus back to them. Practicing things like mindfulness and meditation can also be a great way to develop this skill.

Tip Two – try not to offer advice or solutions. Our role is not to tell people what to do or fix anything so try not to interrupt or talk about your own experiences. Instead, encourage them to do the majority of the talking by using open questions and follow up statements such as ‘tell me more about that’. This can really help to create a safe and non-judgemental space.

Tip Three – check your understanding. Repeating back what you have heard someone say is a really good way to reassure them that you are listening, and also helps us to check that we have understood what they’re saying, rather than making our own assumptions.

And Tip Four – be patient. It may take time for someone to feel comfortable to talk about how they are feeling and they may not want to talk about it at all. All we can do is show support and reassure them that we are there if and when they need someone. Try not to rush them and let them set the pace for seeking support themselves.

Be kind to yourself – listening isn’t easy and takes practice. We’re not always going to get it right and that’s absolutely OK.

A friendly ear is a valuable source of support, but there may also be times when we can mention services or organisations that may be able to provide expert support and assistance. Ask your volunteer organisation for service recommendations or you could refer to the sources of support mentioned at the end of this video.

Remember your boundaries and ask for help. There are limits to the support we can provide as volunteers. If you have any concerns about someone’s wellbeing, including safeguarding concerns, or you feel uncomfortable or unsure in any way, speak to your volunteer organisation as quickly as possible. They will be able to support you and step in when necessary.

There may be times when someone needs to seek help more urgently, such as if they have harmed themselves and need medical attention, are having suicidal feelings and feel they may act on them, or are putting themselves, or someone else, at immediate, serious risk of harm.

Remember, you are absolutely not expected to be the person to support someone who is in severe distress or experiencing a crisis. In these instances, help them to call 999 for an ambulance and stay with them if you feel able to do so.

If they don’t need immediate physical attention, you could also encourage them to call Bucks Safe Haven crisis support service, which is open between 6pm and midnight, 7 days a week.

Contact your volunteer organisation for immediate support and always refer back to their specific policies for supporting others.

Supporting others can sometimes be stressful, so remember that looking after yourself is just as important. Looking after our own wellbeing can help give us the energy and time we need to be able to help others.

Check out the 'looking after you own mental wellbeing' and 'setting boundaries' videos for tips to protect your wellbeing. It's always OK to ask for help if you need it. It can be really important to have someone to talk to. You could talk to your volunteer organisation - they have a duty of care to support you. Or perhaps share your feelings with someone you trust. This might be a family member, or a friend, or perhaps some other volunteers.

Remember to maintain confidentiality when talking to family, friends or peers about your volunteering experience. It is important not to share any names, identify service users in any way or share any sensitive or confidential information.

If you are having thoughts and feelings that are difficult to cope with, which are impacting on your day-to-day life, you may want to seek help from your GP. It is always OK to seek help, even if we are not experiencing a specific mental health problem.

You could also call the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire NHS mental health helpline on 111 for 24/7 advice for your mental health and emotional wellbeing, including where to get help and how to access support from mental health professionals in Buckinghamshire.

Other helplines such as the Samaritans provide in the moment listening support 24 hours a day. Call them on 116 123 for free.

Healthy mind bucks is an NHS service which offers short term psychological therapies to anyone over the age of 18 experiencing difficulties with anything such as low mood, worry, panic and anxiety. Visit their website for more information on their services and how to self-refer.

At Buckinghamshire Mind, we won't give up until everyone experiencing a mental health problem gets both support and respect.

We run a wide range of services in the community across Buckinghamshire and East Berkshire to support all elements of wellbeing. So visit our website at bucksmind.org.uk for more information or contact us by email or phone for support and advice if needed.