

Looking after your own wellbeing as a volunteer

As a volunteer, you may spend a lot of your time looking after other people, but looking after yourself is just as important.

Volunteers tend to be people who put others first, but we're better equipped to help others if we look after ourselves.

Whether you're just starting out as a volunteer, or have been doing it for many years, we have some suggestions that could make a difference.

We all have mental wellbeing, and whilst it doesn't have one set meaning, we may think about it as our day-to-day emotional state, how we feel at the moment, and how well we are coping with daily life.

Our mental wellbeing is always changing, and this change can happen moment to moment, day to day, week to week, month to month, year to year.

We all experience periods of good and poor mental wellbeing.

Good mental wellbeing doesn't mean that we are always happy or unaffected by our experiences but helps us to feel that we can cope with daily life.

Sometimes our mental wellbeing is affected by particular events or circumstances in our life, such as money worries, pressures at work or our relationships.

Other times, there may be no particular trigger.

And just as we know that keeping active and eating well helps us to maintain our physical health, looking after our mental wellbeing can be really good for our mental health.

The five ways to wellbeing, which were developed by the New Economics Foundation, can be a really useful way to think about looking after ourselves.

Volunteering can be great for our mental wellbeing. It may give us the opportunity to meet new people and connect with others, to do some physical activity, to learn something new, and to help others, which can give us a sense of purpose.

But there may be times when it feels challenging. We may experience stress or worry about the people we're supporting, guilt that we are not doing enough or perhaps that we don't have any time for ourselves, which can feel really overwhelming.

When you're volunteering, it is absolutely ok to say no to things, or to take a break whenever you need it. Looking after yourself first is really important. Here are some other suggestions of how the five ways to wellbeing can help you to do this.

Connecting with other volunteers can help us feel less alone. You could see if your organisation runs any groups for volunteers to support each other, or perhaps start your own.

Physical activity is important for both body and mind, so try to build whatever physical activity works best for you into your daily routine. This could be taking a walk at lunch time or doing some light stretches whilst watching TV.

If you are feeling overwhelmed by a stressful situation, try to take a break. A change of scenery can help you to relax, even if it is just for a few minutes.

Slowing down and paying attention to our surroundings can really help us take notice of how we're feeling. You could try taking a few deep breaths as a kettle is boiling.

Try to make time to do an activity you really enjoy doing on a regular basis. This could be something small, like cooking a meal, ringing a friend, listening to music or doing some gardening.

It might be tricky to find the time, but doing things that bring us joy can be really stress relieving.

Doing things for others can be really fulfilling but remember to do things for yourself too. This could be planning regular breaks, asking for help if you need it, and trying to be realistic about what you can take on.

It's always OK to ask for help if you need it. It can be really important to have someone you can 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.

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 Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire NHS helpline on 111 for 24/7 advice on 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 provides 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.