

Key actions on caring for volunteers in COVID-19: mental health and psychosocial considerations



April 2020

Psychosocial Centre



International Federation
of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

**Key actions for National Societies on caring for volunteers in COVID-19:
mental health and psychosocial considerations**

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Adapted from the materials by the MHPSS team in the Asia Pacific Region

Front page photo: Croatian Red Cross

Please contact the PS Centre should you wish to translate or adapt any part of *Key actions for National Societies on caring for volunteers in COVID-19: mental health and psychosocial considerations*

Suggested citation: Key actions for National Societies on caring for volunteers in COVID-19: mental health and psychosocial considerations. IFRC Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support, Copenhagen, 2020.

The IFRC Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support is hosted by the Danish Red Cross.

We would like to thank the Danish Red Cross and the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs for their support in the publication of these.

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Introduction

Key actions on caring for volunteers in COVID-19 is a quick reference tool for National Societies in providing effective care and support to volunteers during the different phases of a COVID-19 response.

Across the world, Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteers are providing services to people affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. In these circumstances, it is the duty and obligation of each National Society to care for the well-being of volunteers, as described in *'Addressing mental health and psychosocial needs of people affected by armed conflicts, natural disasters and other emergencies'*¹ and the *'International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement policy on addressing mental health and psychosocial needs'*² where the needs of volunteers are explicitly mentioned:

“recognizing that the mental health and psychosocial well-being of volunteers and staff responding to humanitarian needs is often affected as they are exposed to risks and potentially traumatic events and work under stressful conditions, and that the safety, security, health and well-being of staff and volunteers are vital to the provision of sustainable quality services...”

Volunteers are impacted by COVID-19 like everyone else worldwide. They worry about being stigmatized by family and community members and may be afraid of contracting the virus. Like lots of other people, they are very concerned about having to be in isolation or quarantine and dread losing colleagues and friends, as well as their family members. Volunteers may well be affected by witnessing the death of someone they supported and could find at a certain point that they are exhausted by having challenging tasks.

National Societies must establish a robust volunteer care system in place to ensure the safety and psychosocial well-being of their volunteers. This means that National Societies are able to care for and support volunteers involved in a COVID-19 response effectively. If not adequately supported, volunteers may experience stress responses that could have a long-term negative impact on their psychological well-being. Their level of coping will depend on their personal resources and resilience, as well as on the supports available at home, in the community and from the National Society. Unfortunately, however, if not supported, it is likely that volunteers will become disillusioned and perform less well and then teams will experience high turnover.

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- 1 Addressing mental health and psychosocial needs of people affected by armed conflicts, natural disasters and other emergencies https://rcrcconference.org/app/uploads/2019/12/CD19-R5-Adopted-MHPSS-need-policy-draft-resolution-FINAL-EN_clean.pdf
 - 2 International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement policy on addressing mental health and psychosocial needs. (33IC/19/R2) https://rcrcconference.org/app/uploads/2019/12/33IC-R2-MHPSS- CLEAN_ADOPT ED_en.pdf

More detailed guidance is set out in the Movement policy and resolution on addressing mental health and psychosocial needs. The following resources are also available from the IFRC Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support at <https://pscentre.org/>.

These materials are especially relevant to the response to COVID-19:

- Guidelines for Caring for Staff and Volunteers in Crises
- A Guide to Psychological First Aid for Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and training modules
- Mental Health and Psychosocial Support for Staff, Volunteers and Communities in an Outbreak of Novel Coronavirus
- Remote Psychological First Aid during the COVID-19 outbreak
- Caring for Volunteers. A Psychosocial Support Toolkit and Caring for Volunteers training manual
- Volunteering in response to COVID-19: spontaneous volunteers

A budget for caring for volunteers should be incorporated into the plans for any MHPSS intervention or programme.

Quick overview of minimum requirements in caring for volunteers

Volunteers:

- are trained in psychological first aid to enable them to provide basic emotional and practical help
- are well informed about stress reactions, stress management and positive coping
- have access to personal protective equipment when needed
- have reasonable working hours, with time for breaks.

Managers:

- make provision for the support of volunteers to mitigate the effect of working in the COVID-19 response, including allocating funds for a well-functioning volunteer care system.

A stepwise approach before, during and after COVID-19 responses

Support before the response phase

Key preparatory actions before a response phase begins may include:

- Ensure volunteers know their limitations before engaging in operations in terms of their personal experience, current stress level, and competencies in responding to a disease outbreak.
- Provide information about COVID-19, such as its means of transmission, signs and symptoms, prevention measures, care and treatment options. Having reliable information is a powerful tool for reducing fear and panic.
- Inform volunteers that they can decline any task if for any reason they do not feel capable of carrying it out.
- Provide training on personal safety measures such as when to wear personal protective equipment and general precautions against getting the virus.
- Explain the impact of COVID-19 on psychosocial well-being, discuss the different ways volunteers may react to this stressful event, how they can manage their fears and emotions, and how they can take care of themselves.
- Give volunteers key information for volunteering, including a clear description of tasks, work schedules including breaks and days off, the IFRC Code of Conduct, the IFRC Child Protection Policy, etc.
- Train volunteers on basic psychological first aid skills; how to recognize stress responses; how to listen attentively, provide practical help and encourage positive coping.
- Discuss the support systems available to volunteers such as family, peers, community members, team leaders and/or supervisors, line managers, etc...
- Finally, should a volunteer have had previous experiences with epidemics or been involved in search and rescue operations, when recruiting, ask how volunteers have managed difficult experiences in previous emergencies.

Support during the response phase

Support during the response phase

- Provide for the basic needs of volunteers at work such as transport, materials and tools, incentives, etc.
- Ensure the personal safety of volunteers at all times – provide personal protective equipment when needed.
- Organize daily briefing and debriefing meetings with updated information on the response and to check on volunteers' well-being and attend to those who may have special concerns.
- Conduct regular team meetings where volunteers can ask questions and share their achievements, suggestions, concerns, fears or threats and ethical dilemmas in a safe and confidential manner.
- Establish supportive supervision systems for staff and volunteers
- Remind volunteers that they can decline any task that exceeds their knowledge, skills or personal capacity.
- Balance and manage personal and work-related demands and resources to address themes such as being a hero or heroine.
- Create a peer support, peer consultation or buddy system where volunteers care and support each other.
- Partner experienced volunteers with less experienced volunteers.
- Remind volunteers of basic self-care tips and encourage positive coping.
- Prepare volunteers for the difficult and challenging tasks of witnessing death and providing support for bereaved families.
- Adapt work schedules for volunteers who may be impacted by a crisis event.
- Train volunteers on handling interest from the media to maintain the dignity of those being portrayed.
- Give information on how to manage flashbacks, nightmares or negative images that may occur in the first days after a critical event.
- Schedule time for rest, relaxation and leisure.

- Pay attention to volunteers who may be developing signs and symptoms of personal or work-related stress, who may have previously had mental health issues or lack social supports. Refer them to the appropriate services in a respectful manner.
- Appreciate the dedication and commitment of volunteers by thanking them for their service to humanity.

Support after the response phase

Key actions after the response phase may include:

- Organize lessons learnt sessions to discuss achievements and share useful learnings for future similar events.
- Share information on where to access mental health and psychosocial support services.
- Ensure volunteers know how to recognize signs of prolonged stress in themselves and others and when to seek further support.
- If volunteers need to go into quarantine, help them afterwards with their re-integration to families, teams and community.
- Keep volunteers engaged and affiliated by informing them about ongoing activities in the National Society.
- Organize thank you events, send letters of appreciation, give certificates or incentives to celebrate their contribution.

Basic self-care tips for volunteers

DO'S	DON'TS
Prioritize your own personal well-being	Don't handle more tasks than you are prepared to
Make sure you are well before volunteering	Don't set unrealistic expectations or demands - don't be a hero or heroine
Know your limits - speak to your team leader if you feel a task is too much to handle	Don't use substances as a way of managing difficult emotions
Remember that being worried or afraid during a COVID-19 response is a natural response	Don't withdraw from social networks, family or friends
Find time to rest, relax and feel calm	Don't bottle up how you feel and stay silent if you are disturbed by your feelings or by something in your voluntary work
Talk to someone you trust if you feel overwhelmed by events	
Seek support from more experienced, professional colleagues	
Get adequate sleep, eat regularly, and exercise	
Manage your emotions in a positive way	
Keep in touch with family, friends, and loved ones	
Engage in rejuvenating activities such as meditation, prayer, or relaxation to renew your energy	

Other resources

Additional COVID-19 and MHPSS related resources including podcasts can be found on the [IFRC PS Centre's website](#), as well as materials in different languages. The website will be updated as new resources become available. <https://pscentre.org/archives/resource-category/covid19>

Guidelines for Caring for Staff and Volunteers in Crises

https://pscentre.org/resource-centre?wpv-publication%5B%5D=caring-for-volunteers&wpv_aux_current_post_id=942&wpv_sort_order=asc&wpv_view_count=2301

A Guide to Psychological First Aid for Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

<https://pscentre.org/?resource=a-guide-to-psychological-first-aid-for-red-cross-red-crescent-societies>.

Basic Psychological First Aid - training module 2

<https://pscentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/PFA-module-2-Basic.pdf>

Mental Health and Psychosocial Support for Staff, Volunteers and Communities in an Outbreak of Novel Coronavirus

https://pscentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/MHPSS-in-nCoV-2020_ENG-1.pdf

Caring for Volunteers Toolkit and training manuals

<https://pscentre.org/?resource=caring-for-volunteers-a-psychosocial-support-toolkit-english>

Volunteering in response to COVID-19: spontaneous volunteers

<https://pscentre.org/?resource=volunteering-in-response-to-covid-19-spontaneous-volunteers>

Supportive supervision during COVID-19

<https://pscentre.org/?resource=supportive-supervision-during-covid-19>

14 Day Well-Being Kit

<https://pscentre.org/?resource=14-day-well-being-kit-all-english>

See other Hong Kong Red Cross resources for those in isolation and quarantine, as well as information materials for different target groups.

IASC Briefing note on addressing mental health and psychosocial aspects of COVID-19 outbreak version 1.5

<https://pscentre.org/?resource=iasc-briefing-note-on-addressing-mental-health-and-psychosocial-aspects-of-covid-19-outbreakversion-1-1>

Podcast series about MHPSS and COVID-19

<https://pscentre.org/news-and-events/video>

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