

Setting boundaries as a volunteer

One of the best ways we can look after our own mental wellbeing as a volunteer is to respect the boundaries of the organisation we're volunteering for and to set our own personal boundaries.

Understanding our boundaries helps us to volunteer with more confidence, but this isn't always easy to do, even if we have been volunteering for some time.

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.

We all set boundaries in day-to-day life, even if we are not aware of it. When we say no to an invitation because it is too short notice, or delay responding to a message or email because we are busy – we're setting a boundary.

When volunteering, boundaries mark the line between what is and what isn't acceptable. In how we help and support other people, in how we represent the organisation we are volunteering for, and just as importantly, in how we wish to be treated, what we feel comfortable doing, and the amount of time we have to give.

Having a clear understanding of what is expected of us in our role as a volunteer helps us to not overstretch ourselves and protects our wellbeing and safety, along with that of the people we're supporting.

As a volunteer, it is common to feel like we are never doing enough or that we need to do more to help. And over time, this can have a big impact on both our physical and mental wellbeing.

Boundaries are necessary for wellbeing by helping us to understand what is expected of us, to manage other people's expectations, to feel less overwhelmed and to prevent us from burnout.

But putting boundaries in place can be really difficult, and if you are finding this a challenge, know you're not alone.

Be kind to yourself. We are not always going to get it right and that's absolutely OK. It's never too late to think about our boundaries and set new ones. So here are some tips that may help.

Remember that different things work for different people. Only try what you feel comfortable with.

Tip One – be mindful of how you are feeling. We all experience stress and being under pressure if a normal part of life. But if we are becoming overwhelmed by feelings of stress and it is impacting our daily life, we may want to reflect on our boundaries and whether there are any changes we want to make.

We all experience stress differently, so our signs of stress will be unique to us. But you may want to look out for:

- How you are feeling emotionally, such as being unable to enjoy yourself, or experiencing racing thoughts.
- How you are feeling physically, such as experiencing muscle tension or feeling tired all of the time.
- And how you are behaving, such as finding it harder to make decisions or constantly worrying.

Tip Two – Understand the policies of the organisation you are volunteering for. It's likely the organisation you are volunteering for has a clear set of policies on how to work successfully with the people you are supporting, and the expectations of your volunteer role. If you are not familiar with these, ask your organisation for guidance and don't be afraid to ask questions.

Tip Three – Ask for help. Remember, you're not alone. If you feel uncomfortable or unsure in any way, speak to your volunteer organisation as quickly as possible. They will be able to support you to be clear about your boundaries and step in to support, if and when you need it.

Tip Four – Give yourself permission to say no. Saying no to the people you are supporting can be really difficult, but being clear about our role and boundaries help us to do this. It can help to explain why you have to say no. For example, saying 'this isn't part of my role', or 'this is not possible for me to help with as a volunteer', and offer an alternative solution, such as signposting to an organisation that can help or making your volunteer organisation aware of the request.

It's absolutely normal to feel guilty or selfish when saying no, but this may get better over time when we get more practice.

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's always OK to seek help, even if we're 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 helpline 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 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 or advice if needed.