



EU Aid Volunteers

We Care, We Act



Toolkit on self-care when working with vulnerable people

5 steps to look after your mental health when volunteering at home or abroad in humanitarian settings



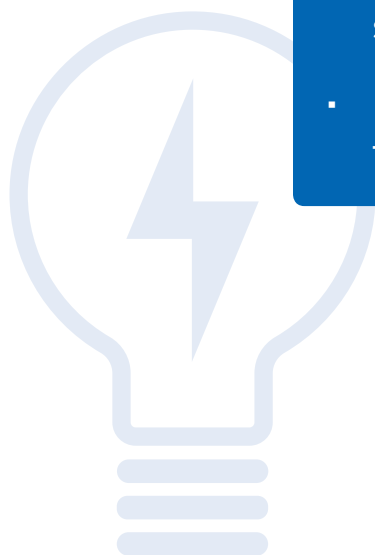


This toolkit is a resource for volunteers working with vulnerable people in humanitarian settings, whether volunteering at home or abroad.

By addressing challenges which can be faced in hard situations, this toolkit aims at providing simple personal coping strategies to look after one's mental health.

What to expect and how to deal with psychological issues for those working with vulnerable people in humanitarian settings at home or abroad:

- **Challenges and solutions**
Frustration, emotions, personal life sacrifice, additional risks
- **Personal coping strategies**
The SALSA tip



CHALLENGES & SOLUTIONS

1 How to deal with frustration

Working with vulnerable people in humanitarian settings can result in volunteers feeling helpless, frustrated or even guilty. Whilst it is a normal reaction to witnessing the variety of problems that service-users can face (i.e. financial, social, psychological, housing issues), one should always keep in mind that it is beyond our scope to solve all problems.

What to remember when feeling frustrated

- ✓ Accompanying and supporting is part of our roles. Set personal limits and remind yourself that everything is not within your powers and within your hands.
- ✓ Allow yourself to talk in-depth about your emotions, the obstacles you faced and your frustrations to others. Peer support, team building and/or psychological support are vital. It should not be seen as a negative stigma but as part of your wellbeing, to prevent frustration and further problems when working with vulnerable people in humanitarian settings.
- ✓ Always debrief.

2 How to break the hold of emotions

Creating emotional bonds with service-users is normal, especially as we may be the only people they trust due to previous traumatic life experiences. Working in humanitarian settings involves a service-user focused approach which results in the need to regulate those emotions in order to avoid the danger of seeing oneself in service-users' personal situations. Always remember that creating such limits positively impacts service-users as it empowers independence.

3 How to break the circle of over-working

Avoiding personal life sacrifice due to over-work is vital for one's mental health. Remember never to forget about your own focus by adopting simple habits in your daily life.



Techniques to break the hold of emotion

- ✓ **Distraction:** choose an enjoyable activity to take your mind off things: read, watch a movie, listen to music, change physical setting, talk to someone, etc.
- ✓ **"Enough!" technique:** think, say or shout within oneself "Enough!" "No!" when figuring out you returned to thinking too much. Afterwards, focus your minds on something else: a list of things you want to do, an activity, etc.
- ✓ **Postpone:** reserve 30 minutes every day to do nothing more than speculate, so that when random thoughts appear at other times, you can tell yourself to think about it during the allotted time. You will then be better able to deal with and to distance yourself from emotions when the time comes.
- ✓ **Repeat a block of personal messages:** the order isn't important, and they work to hinder the drag of the mind: "Thank you. I love you. Forgive me." These provide a positive "meditative" technique.
- ✓ **Write your thoughts:** writing them down helps to organize them, find sense and acknowledge how exaggerated some of them are.

What habits to maintain and/or adopt

- ✓ Adopt and maintain healthy habits.
- ✓ Regular exercise: jogging, walking, stretching, yoga, etc.
- ✓ Be attentive to your daily needs: make sure you take time to stop, eat, drink. Take regular breaks.
- ✓ Sleep: even if you feel you don't require it, keeping to regular sleeping routines and respecting 'downtime' is vital to work efficiently.
- ✓ Maintain regular contact with family and friends.
- ✓ Take a weekly minimum "time off" (to the extent that this is possible).
- ✓ Make 10 to 20 deep breaths, at least once a day, observing how the air enters and leaves.
- ✓ Moments of meditation.
- ✓ Team support.

4 Enhancing equality, capacity and autonomy

Additional common risks can arise when working with vulnerable people in humanitarian settings.

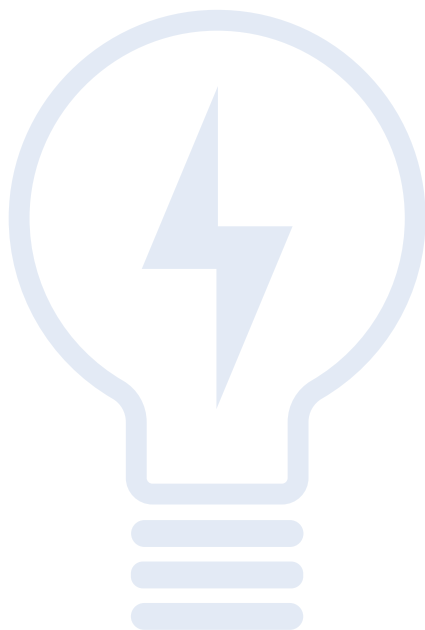
These include but are not limited to the risk of creating false expectations and/or creating unequal relationships.

False expectations can be created when a sentiment of anxiety for being unable to help a service-user results in giving bad solutions to cope with the absence of any solution available. However, whilst this is a normal reaction, one should always remember to provide clarity and honesty to service-users. Such responses will further help vulnerable people by enhancing their capacity and autonomy.

The creation of unequal relationships can result from one seeing himself or herself as a savior. Whilst this results in increasing self-esteem, it is vital to remember to build an equal relationship and remember that everybody has their own resources. Interventions allow us to create empowerment rather than creating or nourishing a relationship of dependency. Capacity, autonomy and equality are vital elements to keep in mind whilst listening, supporting and/or advocating on behalf of vulnerable service-users.

Always remember...

- ✓ To provide clear and honest advice.
- ✓ To empower vulnerable people in order to enhance autonomy, capacity and equality.
- ✓ To remain faithful in what service-users are saying .
- ✓ To remember that each individual has his/her own resources.
- ✓ To respect each human being's dignity.
- ✓ To work with compassion, care and dignity.



5 About SALSA to better look after one's mental health

S

Sharing

Share your own coping mechanisms with others so you can both benefit.

A

Acknowledgement

Acknowledge and vocalise appreciation of those around you and the work they do. People who maintain an "attitude of gratitude" are better able to experience positive moods, energy, and achieve better mental states of being. This attitude can reduce stress levels and refocuses us on the positive in ourselves and others.

L

Learning

Looking forward to and seeing new challenges as opportunities to acquire new information/skills helps to improve the feeling of control over situations.

S

Self-reflection

Recognizing and valuing your capabilities and recognizing your own vulnerability helps to enhance our capabilities and to set limits. There are many circumstances we cannot control, but what you can control is how you respond to circumstances. Take time to think about the best way to respond to situations beyond your control.

A

Ability to laugh at yourself and a situation beyond your control

Context is important, naturally, but sometimes the best way to defuse an absurd situation is to see it as such. Laugh at the situation, laugh with your colleagues.

Remember...



People possess a reservoir of wisdom learned and forgotten, but always available.



OTHER RESOURCES

www.doctorsoftheworld.org.uk

www.ncvo.org.uk/images/documents/practical_support/volunteering/volunteering-migrant-camps/Guidance_on_volunteering_safely.pdf