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## **Providing support to volunteers when they suffer a bereavement during the course of their volunteering**

There may be times in the course of volunteering that a volunteer suffers a bereavement, whether it is the death of a patient or client, another volunteer or a member of staff. The effects of this can be profound, and volunteer managers need to ensure that they provide an appropriate level of support to the volunteer to help them through this difficult time. Many organisations who involve volunteers in the befriending of patients with terminal illnesses or in palliative care will already have a support structure in place. Other vulnerable client groups include animals, children, the homeless, older people, drug and alcohol misusers and people with mental health issues. However, a volunteer could potentially experience a bereavement in the course of any type of volunteering, and a bit of forward planning now will help to ensure that you are in a position to deal with this situation should it arise.

### **Why have a bereavement policy?**

Even if your organisation doesn't work with a client group where the issues of death and dying are prominent, it is still worth having guidelines in place to help you prepare for this scenario. Death is a fact of life and can happen to anyone at any time, including clients, staff and volunteers. Without a bereavement policy in place, you risk not having the necessary resources to help support your volunteer through this difficult time. Not only can this leave the volunteer floundering without an outlet for their emotions, it may be detrimental to their volunteering experience and result in them withdrawing from your organisation. Having a bereavement policy demonstrates your commitment to volunteers and the value that you place on them.

### **Benefits**

The benefits of having a bereavement policy apply to both volunteers and the organisation. Volunteers feel that they are being invested in when they receive training and support, and they also have the opportunity to explore any issues that are raised by the bereavement. By implementing a bereavement policy, an organisation demonstrates its commitment to good practice. This enhances the volunteering experience, and can increase retention levels.

### **What support can I offer to a volunteer who has experienced a bereavement during the course of their volunteering?**

The key issue is to ensure that you provide enough support and guidance to help the volunteer through their experience. You can do this by:

- ensuring that volunteers know that they can take as much time as they need, and can resume volunteering when they feel ready to do so

- being accessible and willing to listen if a volunteer wants to talk about their experience
  - having a list of resources to be able to signpost people to
- Here are some dos and don'ts that may be useful when deciding how to handle a bereavement situation:

### **Do**

- send a card or letter of condolence, but don't expect a reply
- be yourself
- treat the volunteer as you would normally
- give the volunteer time and space to talk
- let them know if you can understand something of their pain
- ring them, keep them updated and invite them to events, so that they still feel involved with your organisation
- ask if you can give them further support

### **Don't**

- try to provide answers
- be embarrassed if they show strong emotions or tears
- decide what they need. Let them make their own choices by giving them options
- say "I know how you feel"
- ask them to ring you

### **Forward planning**

In organisations where bereavement is the norm rather than the exception, a volunteer's induction is likely to contain bereavement information and training. This may be followed up by further training days, in which specific issues concerning death and dying can be explored. A buddying system might also be useful, so that volunteers can provide peer support for each other.

If your organisation's volunteering takes place in an outreach setting (eg in the client's home), then volunteers could phone a nominated supervisor after a visit, to feed back on the session and debrief where necessary. This also assures the volunteer that there is always a point of contact should they need additional support whilst volunteering.

Regular volunteer meetings or support groups can provide a secure and confidential environment in which volunteers can discuss issues and responses to a bereavement. Not only does this provide an opportunity to talk, but is also a way of remembering someone, which can help the grieving process.

All volunteer programmes should have a nominated point of contact for the volunteer should any questions, issues or problems arise. This person could be the volunteer manager or a supervisor, and may provide specific aftercare support, or just be accessible as a sounding board if a volunteer needs to talk through their experiences.

At the very least, you should be able to signpost volunteers to organisations that will be able to help them work through their grief. The main organisations are Cruse Bereavement Care and the Samaritans, both of which have telephone helplines, the details of which can be found below. There are many other organisations that offer specialist bereavement support services and helplines, most of which can be found on the internet or in the Yellow Pages.

## Further information

Cruse Bereavement Care  
Central Office  
Cruse House, 126 Sheen Road  
Richmond  
Surrey  
TW9 1UR  
Tel: 020 8939 9530  
Day by Day helpline Tel: 0870 167 1677  
<http://www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk/>

Young Person's Helpline: freephone 0808 808 1677  
<http://www.rd4u.org.uk/>

The Samaritans  
Tel: 08457 90 90 90 (UK)  
Email: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)  
<http://www.samaritans.org.uk/>

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy  
[http://www.bacp.co.uk/seeking\\_therapist/](http://www.bacp.co.uk/seeking_therapist/)

Scottish Council for Research in Education  
<http://www.scrc.ac.uk/bereavement/bereavement.pdf>

## Resources

BBC Relationships – Coping with Grief:  
[http://www.bbc.co.uk/relationships/coping\\_with\\_grief/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/relationships/coping_with_grief/)  
Trinity Hospice: [www.trinityhospice.org.uk](http://www.trinityhospice.org.uk)  
Befriending Network: [http://www.befriending.net/youhelp\\_volunteer.htm](http://www.befriending.net/youhelp_volunteer.htm)  
Volunteering magazine issue 111: Who is Listening?

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For more information, please contact  
Volunteering England Information Service  
[Information@volunteeringengland.org](mailto:Information@volunteeringengland.org)  
Freephone/textphone: 0800 028 3304 (M-F, 9.30 – 5.30)  
[www.volunteering.org.uk/](http://www.volunteering.org.uk/)  
- [Access all of Volunteering England's Information Sheets](#)  
- For more information on managing volunteers, please visit  
[The Good Practice Bank](#)

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