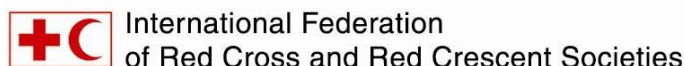


# Psychosocial Centre



## Mental Health and Psychosocial Considerations Key actions for National Societies on Caring for Volunteers in COVID-19

### Introduction

During outbreaks of COVID-19, the Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteers provide services to the affected. It is the duty and obligation of each National Society to care for the well-being of volunteers as described in Resolution *Addressing mental health and psychosocial needs of people affected by armed conflicts, natural disasters and other emergencies*<sup>1</sup> and the adopted *International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement policy on addressing mental health and psychosocial needs*<sup>2</sup> 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, fear contracting the virus, having to be in isolation or quarantine, losing colleagues etc. Volunteers may also be affected by witnessing the death of someone they supported or be exhausted by having challenging tasks.

To effectively care for and support volunteers involved in a COVID-19 response, National Societies must establish robust volunteer care system to enhance their safety and psychosocial well-being. If not adequately supported, volunteers may experience stress responses that could have a long-term negative impact on their psychological well-being. How volunteers cope with the impact of stressors related to

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<sup>1</sup> 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](https://rcrcconference.org/app/uploads/2019/12/CD19-R5-Adopted-MHPSS-need-policy-draft-resolution-FINAL-EN_clean.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement policy<sup>2</sup> on addressing mental health and psychosocial needs. (33IC/19/R2)  
[https://rcrcconference.org/app/uploads/2019/12/33IC-R2-MHPSS-\\_CLEAN\\_ADOPTED\\_en.pdf](https://rcrcconference.org/app/uploads/2019/12/33IC-R2-MHPSS-_CLEAN_ADOPTED_en.pdf)

corona virus responses will depend on their personal resources and resilience as well as the supports at home, in the community and organization. Furthermore, if not supported poor performance, high turnover and disillusionment among volunteers are to be expected.

This guidance note is a quick reference tool for National Societies to provide effective care and support to volunteers during the different phases of a COVID-19 response<sup>3</sup>.

More in-depth guidance can be found in the resolution and policy and the key IFRC Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support materials available at [pscentre.org](http://pscentre.org):

- *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 Interim guidance – March 2020*
- *Caring for Volunteers. A psychosocial Support Toolkit* and *Caring for Volunteers* training manual
- *Volunteering with the Red Cross Red Crescent in crisis situations – disasters and pandemics*

Please note, that the needed budget for caring for volunteers has to be incorporated into every plan of action from the beginning of an intervention or programme.

## Quick overview of minimum requirements in caring for volunteers

Volunteers:

- are trained on psychological first aid to be able to provide basic emotional and practical help,
- are well informed about stress reactions, stress management and positive coping
- have access to protective equipment when needed,
- have time for breaks and decent working hours,
- are supported by managers to mitigate the effect of working in the response, and a sufficient budget is allocated for the above.

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

### Support during preparatory phases

Key preparatory actions may include:

- When recruiting, ask how volunteers have managed difficult experiences in previous emergencies. Probe if have they been affected by loss of friends or family members and managed e.g. disease and search and rescue operations.
- Ensure volunteers know their limitations before engaging in operation e.g. related to personal experience, current stress level, and competencies in responding to a disease outbreak.

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<sup>3</sup> Adapted from the materials by the MHPSS team in the Asia Pacific Region

- Provide information about COVID-19 as means of transmission, signs and symptoms, prevention measures, care and treatment options. Having adequate information is a powerful tool for reducing fear and panic.
- Inform volunteers that they can decline any task at any time if they for any reason do not feel or judge that they are not capable of carrying it out.
- Discuss personal safety measures as when to wear personal protective equipment and general precautions against getting the virus.
- Explain the impact of COVID-19 on the psychosocial well-being, discuss the different ways volunteers may react to this stressful event, how they can manage their fears, emotions and take care of themselves.
- Give clear descriptions of tasks, work schedules, breaks and days off, IFRC Code of Conduct and IFRC Child Protection Policy etc.
- Train volunteers on basic psychological first aid skills; how to recognize stress responses, to listen attentively, provide practical help and encourage positive coping.
- Discuss support systems available such as family, peers, community members, line managers, etc. that they can draw on.

## Support during response phases

Key actions during response phases may include:

- Provide for the basic needs of volunteers at work as transport, materials and tools, incentives etc.
- Ensure personal safety when needed - personal protective equipment is available whenever 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.
- 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 more experienced with less experienced volunteers.
- Remind volunteers of basic self-care tips and encourage positive coping.
- Ensure volunteers are ready to handle the difficult and challenging tasks of witnessing death and providing support for bereaved families.
- Create adapted work schedules for volunteers who may be impacted by a crisis event.
- Train volunteers on handling interest from the media whilst ensuring the dignity of those media portray.
- Disseminate 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 had previously had mental health issues or lack social supports; refer such cases to available services and care in a respectful manner.
- Appreciate dedication and commitment by thanking volunteers for their service to humanity.

## Support after responses phases

Key actions after response phases may include:

- Organize lessons learnt sessions to discuss achievements and 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.
- In cases of quarantine, assist the 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, issue letters of appreciation, certificates or incentives to celebrate their contribution.

## Basic self-care tips for volunteers

Do	Don't
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Personal well-being is a priority – yours!</li> <li>✓ Make sure to be well before taking up voluntary duty</li> <li>✓ Know your limits, speak to a supervisor should you feel the task is too much to handle</li> <li>✓ Remember that having reactions during a COVID-19 response is a natural response</li> <li>✓ Find time to rest, relax and feel calm</li> <li>✓ Talk to someone you trust if you feel overwhelmed by events</li> <li>✓ Seek support from more experienced and professional colleagues</li> <li>✓ Get adequate sleep, eat regularly, and exercise</li> <li>✓ Manage your emotions in a positive way</li> <li>✓ Keep in touch with family, friends, and loved ones</li> <li>✓ Engage in rejuvenating activities such as meditation, prayer, or relaxation to renew your energy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Handle more tasks than you are prepared to</li> <li>✓ Set unrealistic expectations or demands- don't be a hero or heroine</li> <li>✓ Use substances as a way of managing difficult emotions</li> <li>✓ Withdraw from social networks, family or friends</li> <li>✓ Bottle it up and keep silent if disturbed by your feelings or work</li> </ul>

## Further guidelines and tools

at <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](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](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 with the Red Cross Red Crescent in crisis situations – disasters and pandemics*  
<https://pscentre.org/?resource=volunteering-with-the-red-cross-red-crescent-in-crisis-situations-disasters-and-pandemics>
- *14 Day Well-Being Kit*. 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>