Top tips: Ensuring that disabled volunteers feel included

The disability charity Scope promotes these top tips formulated by disabled volunteers themselves:

1. Concentrate on ability rather than disability.
2. Listen to the volunteer; they understand their impairment best.
3. Remember what the volunteer can do for you, not what you can do for them.
4. Be clear and consistent about the role and the volunteer’s responsibility to the organisation.
5. Be prepared to have some flexibility around role descriptions.
6. Think outside the box.
7. Ask the volunteer about their communication needs.
8. Address negative attitudes towards disability - whether from staff, other volunteers or clients.
9. Prepare to challenge and to be challenged.
10. Make sure disabled volunteers feel part of the team.

Volunteers with autism

People with autism-spectrum conditions can have a huge amount to offer as volunteers. However, some can sometimes feel overloaded by too much going on around them.

There are many ways to support someone from feeling overwhelmed, particularly in new or crowded environments.

An individual may or may not have a label of “autism” – it’s a range of characteristics and some people, particularly if elderly, may never have had a formal diagnosis. Much of the advice here is simply about putting anyone at ease.

- For some people with autism-related conditions, it can be particularly helpful to have a narrower and more defined role than usual. Start with a small, clear activity then gradually build on this if appropriate.

- Induction may be particularly important, to ensure understanding of their role.

- Check that an individual really wants to volunteer and has realistic expectations of what he or she can offer. Gain an understanding of their needs, especially any implications their condition may have on the role.
• Be aware of personal space. Someone might have a sensitivity to touch and even the experience of someone lightly brushing past them can be overwhelming.

• If you ask someone a question and they don’t respond or find it difficult to make eye contact, show kindness and remove the pressure for them to respond immediately.

• Be aware of sensory overload. It may not be a question of rudeness if someone needs to sit in a particular seat or open a window. It might be that a smell, visual stimulus, noise or sense of being too close to other people is difficult for them.

• It can help to know that some people manage their experience of stress through repetitive physical behaviours, such as tapping their fingers or flapping their hands. This is perfectly normal and when you know this it’s easier to avoid staring or making the person feel self-conscious.

• While autism is a set of characteristics that vary in impact and intensity, some people will occasionally have “a meltdown”, where they are so overwhelmed by everything going on around them that they start to shout, cry or scream. If this happens, it can be alarming. Ask them if they are OK and if there is anything you can do to help. It may be better sometimes just to give them space and time to deal with the situation.

• Whatever someone’s needs, a change as simple as using clear language, having a bit of patience, or avoiding last minute changes can help.

• The world can be an unpredictable, confusing place for people with autistic characteristics, and that makes a set routine crucial. When something unexpected happens, it can feel much more upsetting than it might to the average person.

• If plans do change, let the person know as soon as person and choose a direct way of getting the information to them. For example, rather than announcing a change in a meeting or sending out an email, a phone call or text directly to them may help them to process the change more easily. Demonstrating an understanding of the person’s needs can be reassuring as well.

• Trying to understand what others mean and how to behave can be exhausting and stressful for people with autistic traits. It can make people feel tired and isolated.

• Taking an interest in the person, how they feel and the things they like to do can help build a rapport. Inviting them to join in as much or as little as they feel able to can also help.

Volunteers with learning disabilities

Developing empathy and insight is a good first step to supporting volunteers with learning disabilities.

• Imagine:
• not being able to read this
• not being able to tell someone else about it
• not being able to find the words you wanted to say
• words coming out jumbled up
• words getting stuck, someone jumping in, saying words for you
• people assuming what you want, without checking with you
• not understanding the words, phrases or expressions
• not being able to write down your ideas
• being unable to join a conversation
• people ignoring what you’re trying to say, feeling embarrassed and moving away
• people not waiting long enough for you to respond in some way, assuming you have nothing to say and moving away.

• To be a good communicator with people with a learning disability, you need to:
  • be prepared to use different forms of communication
  • follow the lead of the person you are communicating with
  • go at their pace to check they have understood and be prepared to be creative.

• For some people with learning disabilities, it can be particularly helpful to have a narrower and more defined role than usual. Start with a small, clear activity then gradually build on this if appropriate.

• Induction may be particularly important, to ensure understanding of their role.

• Check that an individual really wants to volunteer and has realistic expectations of what he or she can offer. Gain an understanding of their needs, especially any implications their condition may have on the role.

• For many people with learning disabilities, the most important thing is to use words that are clear and straightforward to understand, to repeat if necessary and check understanding.

• Many people with learning disabilities would prefer communication that is face to face and one to one. Some will be happy to talk on the phone and some will be fine communicating in writing – for example by text or email. Keeping the words brief and clear, if possible using a large font and using bullet points can all help.

• Find a good place to communicate in – somewhere without distraction. If you are talking to a large group be aware that some people may find this difficult.

• Ask open questions; questions that don’t have a simple yes or no answer.

• Check with the person that you understand what they are saying e.g. “the TV isn’t working? Is that right?”

• If the person wants to take you to show you something, go with them.
• Watch the person; they may tell you things by their body language and facial expressions.

• Learn from experience - you will need to be more observant and don't feel awkward about asking parents or carers for their help.

• Try drawing - even if your drawing isn’t great, it might still be helpful.

• Take your time, don’t rush communication.

• Use gestures and facial expressions. If you’re asking if someone is unhappy, make your facial expression unhappy to reinforce what you’re saying.

• Be aware that some people find it easier to use real objects to communicate, but photos and pictures can help too.

Volunteers with mental health conditions

Research by Citizens Advice found that 80% of volunteers believe volunteering has a positive effect on their physical or mental health. 60% feel it makes them less stressed. All retired volunteers surveyed felt that it keeps them mentally active. For those volunteers with a diagnosed mental illness, 75% were more able to manage their condition.¹

Here are some key points to consider if you want to recruit volunteers who have experienced mental health issues:

• For some people with mental health conditions, it can be particularly helpful to have a narrower and more defined role than usual for a volunteer. Start with a small, clear activity then gradually build on this if appropriate.

• Induction may be particularly important, to ensure understanding of their role.

• Check that an individual really wants to volunteer and has realistic expectations of what he or she can offer. Gain an understanding of their needs, especially any implications their condition may have on the role.

• Check if they can travel independently and consider providing expenses to support travel costs.

• Use the volunteer’s specialised knowledge and lived experience of mental health. Provide them with the necessary skills and training to support volunteers.

• Develop a buddy system during induction to support all volunteers with mental health needs, but roll out to all volunteers to avoid singling anyone out.

• Match roles to volunteers. Every volunteer will have different strengths and weaknesses and will find different situations stressful or rewarding, so match roles to their skills and preferences. Having a trial period can help reduce the anxieties.

• Ensure resources are in place for volunteers to perform their role. This refers not only to the physical and financial, but also to intangible resources such as skills, performance feedback and social support.

• Being able to make your own decisions can increase feelings of self-confidence and personal achievement. Any targets set for the volunteer should be realistic and achievable.

• Ensure volunteers know who to contact if they need support and how to get in touch with them.

• Promote a positive and healthy working environment. A creative volunteering environment can help to reduce stress on the individual. Allow flexible working hours where possible and be open to new ideas and different ways of working. Identify ways in which the volunteer can assist the organisation while still maintaining an acceptable psychological environment.

• Encourage strong social support between volunteers by providing opportunities for social occasions which can be combined with volunteer recognition events. Set up peer support groups where volunteers can get together, support each other and arrange to take part in activities away from their volunteer roles.

• Reassure volunteers if they become unwell and are unable to volunteer for a time – whether that’s weeks or months – that they are welcome to return to volunteering when they feel able.

• Good communication empowers and informs volunteers, keeping them updated with their progress. It also helps to identify any problems before they become too serious. Encourage volunteers to feedback on the organisation and their roles using a range of platforms including formal meetings, supervision, support group meetings, questionnaires, reviews and workshops.

• Saying ‘thank you’ can go a long way to making volunteers feel valued and significant and supports their wellbeing. This increases their confidence and self-esteem, which will be important for many with personal challenges.

• Provide references for volunteers for any future placements, training, volunteering or employment opportunities.

• As a organisation, know your limits in terms of the resources available to manage volunteers who need significant levels of support of whatever kind.

**Volunteers with visual impairments**
Remember, most people with a visual impairment have limited sight. Some have assistance dogs and some use a white cane — though not necessarily all the time. If you are unsure about something, such as offering them your arm to move from one place to another, just ask the person.

If you are uncertain about interacting with someone with a visual impairment, here are a few tips:

- Gain the person’s attention by speaking first and/or by a gentle touch on the arm.
- Introduce yourself, what you do and any other people who are nearby.
- Always talk to the person directly, rather than a sighted companion.
- In a group conversation, always make it clear who you are and who you are speaking to.
- Use verbal responses, avoid nods and head shakes.
- Verbalise your actions (“I’ll take your arm now, if that’s OK.”).
- Inform people when you are moving away from them or leaving the room.
- Remember if someone is blind, it doesn’t always mean they have no sight at all.
- Ask if guidance or support is needed or helpful.
- Provide information in an accessible way — via email or text, audio, large print or braille.

**Volunteers with hearing impairments**

Many people experience hearing loss and most still have some hearing. They may also lipread, which makes good lighting and speaking clearly and slowly important. Some people are profoundly deaf and use British Sign Language or text type services to communicate.

Make sure you focus on what will help someone with a hearing impairment to communicate with you.

- Don’t stand too far away. Make sure that the person can see your face and lips — your gestures and facial expressions will help them to understand what you’re saying.
- The person’s hearing may not be the same in both ears, so make sure you are in the best position to maximise their ‘good side’.
- Get the person’s your attention before you start talking to them. Go around to the front of them and tap them gently on the arm if you need to.
• Keep calm, smile and don’t shout! If you become embarrassed because the person can’t understand what you are saying, it will be even harder for them to follow what you say.

• If someone doesn’t catch what you say the first time, repeat it or say it in a different way.

• Slow down and speak more clearly.

• If you are communicating with someone through an interpreter or a text-based device, look at the deaf person rather than the interpreter or the screen as much as possible. It can be difficult not to turn towards a voice (the interpreter) but make sure you make eye contact and signal that you are communicating with the person via their interpreter.

• You can use text functions on phones or write things down if you can’t communicate another way.

Volunteers with physical disabilities.

If you notice that someone is disabled, perhaps because they have a visible difference such as a missing limb or they use a stick or a wheelchair:

• Ask before you help – for example, don’t assume that someone will need or want a door opening, help with a coat or picking something up; offer and listen to whether someone wants you to help.

• Be careful about physical contact – some people depend upon their arms for balance; grabbing their hand and shaking it could knock them off balance. Also, avoid touching someone’s wheelchair, stick or cane. Disability equipment is part of people’s personal space.

• Always speak directly to the person not to anyone who might be with them, including a support worker or sign language interpreter. Don’t ask about someone’s disability as small talk.