

Staying healthy when doing voluntary work: How to successfully master psychological needs when providing voluntary help to refugees

1 Introduction

The provision of care to refugees in Germany is close to your heart. Therefore, support the institutions or organisations (for example your municipality, associations on behalf of a municipality, welfare associations, the church) that are working in this field or become active yourself in an organised way. By doing so, you are making a significant contribution to ensuring that asylum seekers in Germany are received and cared for in a humane manner. This type of work definitely creates a lot of joy and satisfaction, but sometimes it may also test you to the limits of your resilience. Challenging psychological demands of the work can also contribute to this.

With this information sheet, your social accident insurance wishes to support you in successfully dealing with the mental challenges of this work, which helps maintain your health and well-being. In the information sheet you will also find pointers concerning the responsibility of the supporting organisations and institutions in preventing mental overload. Above all, the designing of the activities is of major importance. The information sheet is mainly intended for voluntary helpers who work for local authorities or supporting organisations and are therefore insured under the statutory accident insurance scheme when they are working. Other target groups (for example self-organised volunteers, full-time employees of municipalities or providers) can also use the document. However, not all of the information is relevant to them

2 Psychological needs during voluntary refugee assistance

The following psychological challenges can pose problems for refugee volunteers:

- Unrealistic expectations relating to the voluntary work
- Diverse tasks that are sometimes difficult to solve
- Trauma amongst refugees
- Rejection by refugees or fellow citizens
- Threats or aggressive actions on the part of refugees or fellow citizens

These psychological demands can lead to physical, as well as mental and emotional overload and stress. Especially if you also have other daily obligations with a high level of commitment (for example your job or family, etc) in addition to your voluntary work, there is a risk of overload.

The following reactions can be indicators of overload:

- You feel constantly rushed, under pressure and can no longer relax.
- You cannot switch off mentally from the events you encounter in your voluntary work.
- You also experience strong inner restlessness and constant tension, also after working.
- You are irritable even when minor things occur.
- You also feel tired and mentally drained after sleeping or on days off.
- You feel powerless in the face of the challenges connected to volunteering.
- You are afraid of the next shift.

In order to prevent such reactions from occurring in the first place, you will find tips and further information below as to how you can successfully cope with the above-mentioned psychological demands and how your supporting organisation or institution should support you in this.

3 Approaches to prevent overload

3.1 Realistic expectations in relation to the voluntary work

If great commitment does not lead to the results that you hope for, it can be frustrating. This can happen to you in all kinds of voluntary work - also when working with refugees.

For example, the integration of individual refugees may not be successful, benefits applied for may be refused, refugees may be transferred to other regions or countries, or asylum applications may be rejected. This may also frequently cause you to experience strong feelings, such as sympathy, guilt, frustration in the face of your own powerlessness or anger. It is therefore very important that you go into the work with realistic expectations and do not "bottle up" these feelings.

The following tips may be helpful:

- If possible, think about the reasons why you want to help refugees at the beginning of your involvement. It would be a good idea to write these reasons down.
- Discuss your expectations with your contact person at the supporting organisation or institution or with other volunteers or full-time helpers.
- Despite all the organisational difficulties, always try to focus on the successes that you achieve through your efforts.
- Always remember that any help is an important contribution, even if it sometimes feels like a drop in the ocean.
- Speak to full-time or other volunteers or people that you trust if you feel powerless in the face of the challenges of the work. Often, other people can help you change your perspective and to see the reasons for your commitment again

3.2 Handling diverse tasks that are sometimes difficult to accomplish

When providing voluntary assistance, you are sometimes confronted with a large number of different tasks in a very short timeframe. You may only be able to accomplish some of these with a great deal of personal commitment. Perhaps this is why you are investing so much time and energy in your work that it is difficult for you to reconcile your job, family and private interests, or conflicts may arise. In addition, your personal environment may react with lack of understanding in relation to your involvement in refugee assistance.

So, how can you deal with the demands in such a way that you do not experience overload?

And what should you expect from your supporting organisation?

Clarify the work involved:

- All tasks should be clearly and unambiguously agreed between you and the supporting organisation or institution. If anything is unclear to you, you should clarify this immediately.
- In the case of more complex work assignments or projects, key points should be set out in writing where possible. Above all, this concerns the start and end of the activity or project, the necessary time to be invested, your responsibilities and the financial framework conditions.
- If there are any questions or problems concerning responsibilities or the distribution of tasks, your contact person at the organisation or institution should be consulted as soon as possible

Request support from the provider for the helpers...

- Ask your contact person at the organisation or institution to organise regular meetings of the helpers, where you can exchange experiences and lessons you have learned during your work.
- Suggest that the institution, municipality or institution

enables volunteers to attend training courses on how to deal with stress or specifically with psychological strain when providing assistance to refugees and also when responding to intercultural differences. The responsible bodies may also organise training courses themselves. Training courses on technical aspects of the work and on health and safety in the workplace also help to avoid overload.

- Recommend to your contact person at the organisation or institution that materials that simplify communication or make it possible in the first place are provided (basic information relating to accommodation or important contact points in the most relevant languages, pictograms, but also interpreters for direct communication (see also under "further information")).
- Ask whether a risk assessment has been carried out for the voluntary work (see info box).

Organise yourself ...

- Even if there are many different activities, try to work through tasks one after the other and don't constantly switch back and forth.
- Always prioritise tasks and stick to this order as much as you can.
- Make it clear to other people when you don't have time to respond to their requests.
- Give clear signals to other volunteers or full-time helpers or your contact person at the organisation or institution if you are not getting on well with tasks or feel emotionally overwhelmed by a situation. Clarify questions relating to better organisation of tasks.
- Always turn down work if you feel that there are too many tasks for you or if you don't feel comfortable with the content.

Obligations of the organisation / institution: The risk assessment helps make voluntary work better

The organisation or institution for which you work must draw up a risk assessment for all voluntary activities. The risk assessment records what risks to health and safety could arise from the activities (mental stress is also included) and what countermeasures have been taken. This may appear bureaucratic at first, but in fact the risk assessment helps you to carry out your work better. Accident risks, for example, are frequently noticed, but whether everyone finds out about this often depends on it being mentioned by chance in conversation. In these cases, the risk assessment helps to remember to address such dangers in briefings or to put up warning notices. Remember: Every helping hand that fails means an additional burden for everybody else. A further example: Talking about psychological stress helps to uncover weak points in communication, for example. Often, even a simple measure can bring about significant relief for everybody. The risk assessment helps with systematically recording and implementing this.

Ask the management of the institution or your contact persons at the organisation about the contents of the risk assessment. Encourage additions if risk factors are not covered or if the measures are not sufficient.

Factor in relaxation time...

- Take regular, short breaks when you are working (for example 10 minutes every 2 hours). If you can, go to a place where you can relax (for example meadow, courtyard, break room, if available).
- Make sure that you still have free time in addition to your voluntary work and paid work where applicable. Make a conscious decision to take time off to enjoy hobbies, socialise and play sports.
- It is best to set a fixed time frame for your commitment at the start and try not to go beyond it.
- Try out relaxation exercises (for concrete tips, see "further information").

Make use of help...

- If you have been suffering from symptoms of overload for a long time (see page 1), get medical help and talk to your contact person at the organisation or institution.
- In general, remember that overloading yourself does no one any favours. You yourself are the person who is best placed to judge when you have reached your limits! Become especially attentive to yourself if you are repeatedly being told by family members, friends, acquaintances or other volunteers that you are overworked
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Further information

Dealing with demands during voluntary work:

- DGUV Information 211-037 „Schutz der Gesundheit bei Mehrfachbelastungen durch Beruf, Ehrenamt und Familie“ (in German only): www.dguv.de/publikationen, Webcode: p211037
- The German state of Hesse has produced a guide for voluntary helpers in refugee assistance (the information is mainly in the German language, but certain information is also available in other languages): www.fluechtlingshilfe-htk.de/uploads/infos/89.pdf
- The German state of Baden-Württemberg provides a wide range of information and a handbook for voluntary helpers of refugees on its website (the information is mainly in the German language, but certain information is also available in other languages): www.fluechtlingshilfe-bw.de

Communication (pictograms):

Various providers maintain collections of pictograms for a variety of everyday situations (for example going to the doctor's, shopping, rules for communal living). Look for these via an Internet search engine (Internet search terms: "Icons Flüchtlinge", "Icons Refugees")

3.3 Dealing with traumatised refugees

Many people who have fled war and crisis zones suffer psychologically from what they have experienced in their home countries and during their flight. Some of them are psychologically traumatised. Indications of severe psychological trauma can often be seen in the behaviour of the persons affected.

Below, you will find the essential signs of severe, acute trauma

Reliving the events

- Involuntary memories
- Recurring nightmares
- Flashbacks - the affected persons suddenly find themselves back in the situation and they react in the same manner
- Strong response to certain cues (for example a grip on the arm, sirens, bangs)

Avoidance behaviour

- Memories, thoughts and feelings of situations are avoided, as well as things in the environment that bring back memories of the situations.
- Affected persons no longer leave their bed or a room in which they feel safe.
- Contact with other people is avoided.

Changes to thoughts and feelings

- Memory of events is lacking or distorted
- Negative, fear-filled beliefs (for example "I trust nobody")
- Constant negative emotions such as fear, horror, anger, guilt or also alienation
- Depressed mood, passivity, inability to feel positive emotions

Increased excitement levels

- Permanent strong mental as well as muscular tension
- Excessive vigilance
- Irritability to aggressive behaviour
- Concentration problems
- Sleep disturbances

What can you do?

Dealing with affected persons in an acute psychological crisis

- Be calm towards the affected persons.
- Show acceptance and understanding of the reactions of the affected persons.
- If possible, try to provide reassurance and comfort.
- What can you say or do?
 - For example: "you are safe here".
 - Move the affected person to a safe place of retreat (their own room, first-aid room etc)
 - In case of communication problems, provide reassurance as much as possible both verbally and non-verbally (for example slow movements, reassuring speech (phrases such as "everything is ok", "all right", "no problem" or "kein Problem"). Depending on the person and the culture, physical contact can also provide reassurance and security (putting your hand on their shoulder or arm.).
- Where possible, try to give clear instructions slowly ("come on, let's go outside/to a quiet place etc.").
- If a person is acutely confused or disoriented because of a flashback, try to accompany them back to reality. Remind them of who they are. Address them by name

and tell them for example what time it is and where you both are.

- Support affected persons in resuming a "normal" daily routine as far as possible.
- Give active advice about enjoyable activities (for example sport or creative activities in the neighbourhood).

Dealing with affected persons generally

- Don't try to work through the traumatic situation yourself with the affected persons. This requires therapeutic qualifications.
- If affected people talk about their experiences, interrupt them if you feel that they are causing you strong anxiety or are causing you to experience other negative feelings. What can you say? For example: "Sorry, I feel that I can help you better if you don't tell me".
- Refer the affected person to your contact persons at the organisation or institution. They should then refer the affected persons to a doctor, psychosocial counselling service or a psychosocial centre for refugees and victims of torture (see also "further information").
- Suggest that an overview of contact persons in physical as well as psychological crisis situations be available or displayed in various languages.
- If you are self-organised, it is better to refer affected persons to a responsible doctor
- **Symptoms on your part**

If you yourself experience symptoms of trauma due to your experiences during your work or due to the accounts of refugees, seek medical help and speak with your contact persons at the organisation or institution. Many organisations have trained collegial contact persons for psychosocial emergency care for the emergency services whom you can approach

Further information (only in the German language)

- The Federal Chamber of Psychotherapists provides advice on dealing with traumatised refugees and also specifically with refugee children in an information brochure: www.bptk.de
- The Federal Office for Civil Protection and Disaster Assistance provides the information sheet "recommendations for dealing with stressful events, information for affected persons and their relatives": www.bbk.bund.de
- In many cities, there are psychosocial centres for refugees and victims of torture. You can find an overview at: www.baff-zentren.org
- The brochure "refugee children and adolescent refugees - in schools, kindergartens and leisure facilities" can be obtained from the Centre for Trauma and Conflict Management (ZTK): www.ztk-koeln.de
- The co-ordination office "Voluntary Activities in the Refugee Sector in the German State of Rhineland-Palatinate" provides information at: www.aktiv-fuer-fluechtlinge-rlp.de/ehrenamt
- The Landesverband Soziokultur Sachsen e.V. provides information on how volunteers can deal with traumatised people at: www.soziokultur-sachsen.de/fluechtlingsarbeit/traumatisierung

3.4 Dealing with rejection

Refugees usually have to deal with terrible experiences and don't know how their future will pan out. Their social situation is usually difficult and there are often few opportunities to disengage themselves from problems and worries. Waiting for applications to be processed and dealing with negative decisions can be extremely frustrating for those affected. These stress factors can also lead to negative behaviour towards you as the helper. Rejection or distanced behaviour can also be due to cultural reasons, especially traditions in the way that men and women or also old and young people interact with each other.

How can you deal with reactions of rejection?

Rejection by refugees

- Realise that the situation in the asylum procedure and afterwards is often difficult for the affected persons and that you may be considered to be part of the system.
- The problems of refugees are numerous, and you cannot solve all of them in a satisfactory way. This can also result in you experiencing rejection or resentment. This is not being directed towards you personally, rather towards the situation.
- If the people you care for don't show gratitude for your commitment, don't consider this as a rejection. This can also be due to the situation. Also, not every person expresses their gratitude in the same way. If you aren't sure whether your support will be helpful, simply ask openly.
- Familiarise yourself with cultural backgrounds. Many misunderstandings and conflicts are also due to cultural differences. Even gestures can mean different things in different cultures. Gender relationships also play an important role. In some countries, the legal and social code assigns different roles and rights to men and women. Therefore, as an example, it can be difficult for a woman to be heard by men from certain regions. For people who are new to Germany, this is a long-term learning process that in most cases you cannot initiate and accompany alone.
- Discuss situations you find difficult and in which you feel personally attacked directly with the affected persons or with other volunteers or even full-time helpers. Also ask your supporting organisation or institution about counselling facilities

Unfortunately, many volunteers who help refugees also encounter a lack of understanding and rejection from friends, colleagues, family or other citizens.

Lack of understanding and hostility from acquaintances and fellow citizens

- Accept that not everyone will appreciate your commitment.
- Think consciously about why providing support to refugees is important to you. You can take two or three of these reasons for discussion. Seek acceptance (not necessarily understanding) from your counterpart for these personal reasons.
- You don't have to justify your commitment to anybody! End the discussion if your counterpart doesn't wish to accept your point of view. For example, you can say "I don't think there is any point in discussing this further. We simply have different points of view".

Further information

Intercultural competencies::

Many municipalities and supporting organisations offer further training for volunteers in the areas of intercultural competence or communication. The best place to find these services is via Internet search engines. Also ask the organisation or institution about these

3.5 Handling threats and aggressive actions

Especially in collective accommodation, cramped conditions and lack of privacy, the uncertain future situation, but also cultural differences can sometimes lead to threats or even violent disputes amongst the residents. In rare cases, frustration about decisions made by the authorities can also lead to threats or attacks against their employees. As a volunteer, you may become a witness and have to act.

Sadly, threats and acts of violence by fellow citizens against refugees or against you as a helper are just as significant.

What can you do if you witness threats or violence or even become a victim of this?

De-escalating and getting help

- Do not try to intervene alone in verbal or physical confrontations, but alert other volunteers or full-time helpers, bystanders, security guards in institutions or the police, especially in cases where violence is present.
- Do not attack the person or persons from whom the violence is coming verbally or physically and maintain distance.
- If you become a witness to violence, leave the scene with the victim as soon as possible.
- If you are verbally attacked or threatened with violence yourself, make it clear that you will not tolerate it and that you will not be provoked. If possible, leave the scene immediately and inform the police or, where necessary, the security guard.
- Depending on the situation at hand, you can also inform the perpetrators that you will report the attack to the police.
- Try to note the appearance of the violent perpetrators.
- Report any incidents to the contact persons at the organisation or institution.
- They must document physical as well as psychological injuries (for example fear or stress reactions, trembling etc after an assault) in the accident book. This is important so that you are able to prove your insurance claim to your accident insurance provider.
- If you are often confronted with threats or violence during your voluntary work, attend a violence or racism de-escalation training course or ask your institution management or the contact persons at the organisation to address the topic.
- If you are afraid of racially motivated attacks or have even been the victim of an attack yourself, you can get in touch with the counselling centres of the individual federal states or individual municipalities. (Internet search term: "Beratung rassistischer Gewalt" (advice in case of racist violence)).

- If you feel that you cannot cope with a situation emotionally, seek medical help and talk to your institution management or the contact persons at the organisation

Further information

- The Berlin police have put together practical tips on how to avoid and deal with violence in public on their website and in a brochure (in German only):
www.berlin.de/polizei/aufgaben/praevention/gewalt/artikel.148262.php

Am I covered by the social accident insurance when participating in voluntary work?

If helpers take on work in supporting refugees on behalf of the city, a municipality or a supporting organisation (welfare association), they are covered by the social accident insurance. All activities related to the honorary work, including associated travel, are then insured. Depending on the type and organisational form of the assistance, an accident insurance institution for trade and industry or for the public sector may have responsibility. In case of any physical or mental injury, get in touch with your institution management or the responsible persons at the municipality or institution.

You can find more information in the brochure “in good hands”, page 82, voluntary work (page 84 in the PDF):
<https://publikationen.dguv.de/widgets/pdf/download/article/2865>

Activities that private individuals undertake on their own initiative with refugees without a mandate from the municipality or a supporting organisation, for example private excursions, sporting activities, meal invitations, etc, do not come under the scope of coverage of the social accident insurance.

In case of accidents in the private sphere, the respective statutory or private health insurance company is responsible.

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German Social Accident Insurance
Glinkastraße 40 · 10117 Berlin
Tel.: +49 30 13001-0
E-Mail: info@dguv.de
Web: www.dguv.de

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