Headway
the brain injury association

Volunteering after brain injury

This publication offers information on the benefits of volunteering after brain injury, things to consider beforeand while volunteering with a brain injury, and how to look for volunteering opportunities.

www.headway.org.uk
0808 800 2244

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Introduction

Volunteering is voluntary work that people do without being paid that benefits a community or cause. There are many different reasons why someone might volunteer, and many different types of volunteering opportunities.

This publication offers information on the benefits of volunteering after brain injury, things to consider before and while volunteering with a brain injury, and how to look for volunteering opportunities.

You can talk through this information with our helpline on 0808 800 2244 (Monday - Friday, 9am-5pm) or helpline@headway.org.uk, although please note that the helpline is not an employment service and therefore cannot give specialist employment or volunteering advice.

The information in this publication does not replace clinical guidance from medical professionals. You should always get advice from your GP or other suitably qualified professional for help with managing the effects of brain injury.

Why do people volunteer after brain injury?

Returning to full-time, paid work can be difficult for many people after brain injury.

While there are ways to try making a return to work easier, for some people it

might not be possible to return to paid work because of the skills and commitment required. Volunteering can be a way to return to work-type activities without the strict expectations that paid work usually involves.

Volunteering also offers a chance to:

- maintain a routine
- contribute to society
- socialise and meet others with shared interests
- pursue a passion or cause that you are interested in
- add information to your employment history
- develop valuable skills

Any of these can help towards returning to paid work in the future, or generally feeling a sense of purpose and value.

Volunteering can also help people to regain confidence if they feel this has been affected by their experience of brain injury.

Things to consider before volunteering

If you are not sure whether volunteering is right for you, or you do not know where to start looking for volunteering opportunities, we hope that the information in this publication is helpful. There are also organisations that can offer useful advice - these are listed in the section Looking for volunteering opportunities.

Some general things to consider in the first place are as follows.

- Voluntary work is often quite flexible and may offer you the chance to choose your working hours. This can be especially helpful if you struggle with fatigue. However, some voluntary roles will have set working hours, so you should check this before applying.

- While it can be good to challenge yourself, be realistic about effects of brain injury that are problematic for you, and try to avoid volunteering roles that might be too difficult or unsafe. For example, if you struggle with attention and multitasking, then volunteering with young children might not be best for you. Or if you have mobility problems, volunteering for nature conservation might be difficult if the role involves walking through muddy, marshy land.

- Do remember that you can ask for adjustments to be made to your role, for example taking rest breaks when needed or having equipment provided to help you fulfilling your role. While volunteers do not have the same legal rights as paid workers under the Equality Act 2010, they should still expect fair treatment and respect, and they should not be discriminated against.

- Find out whether the voluntary role you are interested in will require any training, and consider whether you can and want to make this commitment.

- Talk to a close friend or relative about your thoughts around volunteering, as they might be able to offer helpful advice. Some parts of the country also have volunteer centres that

you can contact to discuss this with. The National Council for Voluntary Organisations has a search tool to help you with locating your nearest volunteer centre in England; visit www.ncvo.org.uk/get-involved/volunteering.

Looking for volunteering opportunities

There are many types of volunteering opportunities available, so it is often possible to find something that you will both enjoy doing, and something that matches your interests or skills. For example, you might consider volunteering in your local community, or for your local sports club if you are a keen sportsperson.

Don't forget that you can always ask about volunteering opportunities at your local Headway group/ branch or shop! Many of these rely on volunteers, including volunteers with a brain injury themselves. You can find out more about Headway's volunteering opportunities at www.headway.org.uk/donate/volunteer, or by contacting the Headway helpline on 0808 800 2244 for help with locating your nearest service.

Below is a list of organisations that can help you to look for volunteering opportunities.

- The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) provides lots of information and has a search function to locate your nearest volunteer centre in England: www.ncvo.org.uk/get-involved/volunteering.

- Do-it offers information about volunteering and also has a search function that allows you to specify your search according to what type of work you are interested in:

www.doit.life/volunteer.

- Reach Volunteering offers opportunities based on skill sets: www.reachvolunteering.org.uk.

- Charity Jobs is a database of charity sector voluntary jobs: www.charityjob.co.uk/Volunteer-Jobs.

- The Royal Voluntary Service offers volunteering opportunities in the community and the NHS: www.royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk/volunteering.

Other things to consider with volunteering

Volunteering can be a very positive experience if you pick the right role that meets your needs. Below are some things to consider when volunteering with a brain injury.

Practical considerations

- Remember that volunteering is optional; you shouldn't feel obliged to do more work or offer more time than you wish to give.

- Consider volunteering with a friend or relative. They may be able to offer you extra support and keep you motivated with your tasks.

- Ask for regular feedback from your manager or people you are volunteering with, as this can be helpful to keep you on track, feel positive about your contribution and can be especially useful if you are considering applying for paid work in the future.

- Consider how much information you want to share with others you are volunteering with about your brain injury. It is up to you how much you choose to tell, but it can be helpful to share something about this with others.

Legal considerations

- As a volunteer, you are not covered in the same way as paid employees under the Equality Act 2010. However, organisations still have a duty of care towards volunteers and should still be respectful of, and accommodate for any health needs within a work environment. If you have any concerns about the amount of support that you are getting, talk to your manager first or a health and safety representative.

- You will probably receive a volunteer agreement that outlines your responsibilities, expectations, and what support you can expect to receive. Look over this carefully and make sure that you are satisfied with the level and type of support that you will be receiving.

- Discuss any issues or concerns you have with your manager before starting your role, as it may well be that they are unaware of how your brain injury has affected you and what kind of support you might need.

Financial considerations

- Remember that you can often reclaim money that you have spent on things such as food and travel while volunteering. Discuss this with your manager.

- You might be able to volunteer and claim welfare benefits at the same time, as long as you continue to meet the conditions of the benefits you are receiving. You should also make sure that any money you get from volunteering is only

to cover volunteering-related expenses, such as travel costs or food. Further guidance on this is available from the UK government website at www.gov.uk/guidance/volunteering-and-claiming-benefits.

Coping with the effects of brain injury

- If you struggle with fatigue, try to keep time around your volunteering shifts free so that you can rest before and after. For instance, think carefully about meeting up with a big group of friends the day after volunteering as you may be more likely to feel fatigued.

- Ask your manager if there is somewhere quiet that you can take breaks in if you feel overstimulated, fatigued or develop headaches.

- If you have difficulties with organising yourself, try to keep a separate, clearly marked folder containing paperwork, certificates and any other information relating to your volunteering role (such as start and finish dates, key contacts, etc) so that this is all in one place.

- Use calendars, alarms, reminders and notes if you have problems with your memory.

We hope that this has been a helpful resource. Please consider sharing your feedback with us by scanning the QR code or by visiting our publication feedback survey https://uk.surveymonkey.com/r/hwpublications.

Learn more and support our work at www.headway.org.uk/get-involved.

This information was last reviewed in 2023.

We're here to listen.

If you need support, or have a question about brain injury, contact our free nurse-led helpline:

0808 800 2244
helpline@headway.org.uk

0115 924 0800 | enquiries@headway.org.uk
www.headway.org.uk

Head office: Bradbury House, 190 Bagnall Road,
Old Basford, Nottingham, NG6 8SF

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