

HOPE

Helping Others Through Purpose & Engagement

A Handbook for Volunteers Living with BI

CONTENTS

The Benefits of Volunteering	2
What it Means to be a Volunteer	3
Successful Volunteering After BI	3
Challenges to Successful Volunteering after BI	4
Strategies for Successful Volunteering After BI	5
Problem Solving in Your Volunteer Agency	7
Your Rights as a Volunteer	10
Summary	11
References	11
My Volunteer Plan	12
My Calendar	13

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Notes



Your Role as a Volunteer

WELL-BEING - When a person has a sense of purpose, copes with stress, works productively, and makes a contribution to the community (World Health Organization).

Meaningful productive activity is key to developing a feeling of satisfaction and contribution to society. Volunteer work has been shown to have a positive effect on a person's sense of **well-being**.

Helping others has been associated with improved health, happiness, self-esteem, reduced stress and decreased depression. These are areas that people often have difficulty with after BI.

"I get back more than I give" is a common response from those who volunteer. As one individual with BI has said, "Volunteering has given me a sense of value and purpose again."

So, what are the benefits of volunteering for you?

They could include:

- Connecting to others
- Improving your health and sense of well-being
- Evaluating your future work options
- Finding enjoyment
- Being an agent of change in your community



Notes

VOLUNTEERING is defined as an **altruistic** activity, which means being helpful to other people without expecting to be paid. Volunteering can help you to develop new skills, meet new people and have fun. It can also help you feel good about yourself.

Volunteering may be a one-time experience. For example, you may help serve meals at a soup kitchen over the holidays. Or it may be an ongoing experience, such as answering the phones one day a week for a local charity.



Successful Volunteering After BI

Many life experiences contribute to your ability to be a successful volunteer. For example, you may have experience as an employee, parent, military veteran or community leader. Through these roles, you have developed work habits, knowledge, experience, and skills that can be valuable to a number of agencies or organizations. However, you have also experienced a brain injury.

Due to the injury, you might not be able to work full-time or do the type of work you used to do.



THINK ABOUT YOUR PREVIOUS WORK EXPERIENCES.

What positive work habits and skills did you gain from those experiences?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

WHAT ARE SOME OF YOUR UNIQUE CHALLENGES?

- Staying focused - especially when there are distractions
- Remembering – particularly new detailed information
- Reading social cues or signals from other people
- Doing and saying things “before thinking”
- Controlling emotions
- Cognitive fatigue - feeling “brain tired”
- Expressing yourself – finding the words and getting them out clearly
- Understanding other people – needing instructions to be said slowly or to be repeated several times
- Figuring out transportation
- Variability in skill level – you may be very skilled in one area, but have difficulty in other areas

These are some of the challenges you may face. However, there are strategies you can use to make volunteering successful. A successful volunteer experience involves a team effort between you and the agency where you volunteer.

You can help by letting the agency know your unique set of skills and challenges, and letting them know the strategies that work best for you.

Notes



Strategies for Successful Volunteering After BI

Here are some general strategies that may be helpful to you in your volunteer placement.

1. BE ORGANIZED AND PREPARED

- Being organized and prepared for the job is one of the most important skills you can have.
 - Ask yourself this question:
“What would help me be more organized?”

Here are some possible answers, based on your unique set of skills and challenges:

- Carry a small notebook where I can write things down, just for work
- Put my work schedule and tasks in my phone
- Have a daily checklist, including:
 - Transportation details
 - What I need to take to work
 - What I am going to wear
 - Questions I have for my supervisor
- Keep all of my work materials in one place
- Ask my supervisor for a drawer or workspace where I can keep my belongings
- Ask my supervisor to write down my tasks and instructions the same way every day

2. COMPENSATE FOR MEMORY PROBLEMS

You probably have some strategies that you already use to help you compensate for any memory problems. It's important to use these in your volunteer work as well. Let your supervisor know what strategies work for you. Let him/her know what you need to be successful.



Notes

Which strategies will help you be better prepared and more organized?

3. PRACTICE GOOD SOCIAL SKILLS

Research tells us that the biggest barrier to successful employment after BI is difficulty with social skills. Interacting in a confident and comfortable manner can help you communicate with others and build relationships. Poor social skills (i.e., talking on and on, not getting to the point, poor eye contact, saying something “inappropriate”) can lead to misunderstandings, and make it uncomfortable for people to interact with you. Here is a list of some of the social skills to help you in your volunteer work (Hawley and Newman, 2010, 2012).

- Use comfortable eye contact
- Ask questions
- Stay on topic
- Respect social boundaries
- Take turns talking and listening
- Be friendly and relaxed
- Get to the point
- Smile

You can practice good social skills with your family, friends or a treatment provider.

Strategy:

1. Show this list of social skills to your family/friend/treatment provider and ask for feedback – that is, ask them to tell you what you do well and what you could work on.
2. Ask them to let you know when you are having problems with your social skills. For example, ask them to remind you to take turns during a conversation, rather than talking on and on.

Notes



Which social skills do you do well at?
Which need work?

4. FEEL COMFORTABLE IN YOUR WORK ENVIRONMENT

Sometimes the environment around you can be over-stimulating. The lights may be too bright, there may be too many noises in the room, or several people may be talking at the same time. When this happens you may find it hard to concentrate and may get easily frustrated.

Strategy:

1. Be aware of your environment.
 - Is something distracting you or making you irritable?
 - Is it something that can be changed?
2. It's important to let your supervisor know that this can be a problem for you. Be proactive! Let the supervisor know before it becomes a problem.

5. ADVOCATE FOR YOURSELF

ADVOCATE: SELF-ADVOCACY INVOLVES HAVING THE BELIEFS, KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS TO SPEAK UP AND ADDRESS YOUR NEEDS (HAWLEY, 2008)

You may find that you need to advocate for yourself in the volunteer workplace. There may be times when you need to let your needs be known, or to let someone know that there is a problem. Here are a few strategies that may help you with this:

- Be **assertive** in explaining what you need.

ASSERTIVE: BEING ASSERTIVE MEANS LETTING YOUR NEEDS BE KNOWN WITHOUT STEPPING ON THE RIGHTS OF OTHERS AND ATTACKING THE PROBLEM RATHER THAN THE PERSON

- Start with the word “I” when describing your needs (“I need some help” or “I am getting frustrated because...”).
- Take notes if you need to so you can remember what you have said to your supervisor.
- Follow up with your supervisor to let him/her know when the problem is resolved. (“That problem has been taken care of – thank you for helping with that!”)

Notes



Notes**WHICH STRATEGIES
WILL YOU USE
TO CONTROL
EMOTIONS?**

6. CONTROL YOUR EMOTIONS WHILE VOLUNTEERING

As you know, sometimes after a brain injury it can be harder to control your emotions. You may find that you become more easily anxious, frustrated, tearful or agitated. Sometimes in a work environment, these emotions can get in the way of what you are trying to accomplish. You may have some strategies that you already use to help you control your emotions. Using some of the strategies we have already talked about can also help you be successful.

For example, when the environment is calm and there are not a lot of distractions, you may feel less irritable.

Here are a few other strategies you may want to use as well:

Strategy:

1. Recognize your “triggers” – what are the things that set you off or cause you to feel anxious, stressed or irritable? Become aware of these triggers so you can be prepared to respond.
2. Use Calming Techniques – develop a set of skills that help you calm down.

For example:

- Breathing – focus on your breath and relax
- Self-talk – say something nice and calm to yourself such as “let it go” or “relax”
- Time out – give yourself a time out, like a team would do in a football game. Let the other person know that you need a moment; leave the room, relax, think about how to resolve your issue, and return when you are feeling better.

7. PACE YOURSELF

Sometimes after a brain injury people have difficulty trying to do too much too quickly. A person may get overwhelmed or fatigued. As you return to a work schedule, start slowly. See how it goes, and gradually add more time and responsibilities. Let your supervisor know that pacing yourself is important and will allow you to be more successful in the long run.

Problem Solving in Your Volunteer Agency

You may run into an occasional problem in your volunteer placement. Sometimes your supervisor may tell you how to resolve the problem. Other times you may have to solve the problem yourself. There are some simple steps to keep in mind when solving a problem:

Understand the Problem

- What do you want to have happen?
- How do you want the situation to end up?
- What is getting in your way?
- What information is missing that might help you decide how to solve the problem?

Devise a Plan

- Think back to other problems you have solved – could you follow the same plan?
- Are there several solutions to consider?
- Is there one solution that seems like it would be successful?

Evaluate the Plan

- Once you have decided on a plan, are there any reasons this plan might not work?
- What could go wrong?
- Are there risks?

Try it out

- Give your solution a try and see how it works.
- Ask the people around you for feedback (“How is that working?” or “Does this seem like a good solution to you?”)
- If you don’t like the results, go back and try a different solution.

Notes



REMEMBER THESE PROBLEM SOLVING STEPS!

1. Understand the problem
2. Devise the plan
3. Evaluate the plan
4. Try it out

Notes

YOUR RIGHTS AS A VOLUNTEER

As a volunteer, you have certain rights and responsibilities. It's important for both you and your supervisor to know these rights and responsibilities.

You Have the Right:

- To receive the orientation, training, and supervision needed to do your job effectively
- To be given meaningful work
- To share your concerns, feedback, and suggestions in an appropriate manner
- To be treated with respect and to feel valued and appreciated
- To receive feedback on your work and suggestions for improvement
- To be given as much notice as possible about changes that affect your assignment
- To expect that your time will be used effectively
- To ask questions

You Have the Responsibility:

- To fulfill your commitments
- To foster good communication
- To act in a professional and respectful manner
- To represent the organization positively in the community
- To follow organizational policies and procedures
- To maintain appropriate confidentiality
- To make others aware of changes in your schedule and/or ability to complete your work
- To follow all safety instructions and any other specific guidelines outlined for you
- To be honest about your skills, knowledge, motivation, and limitations



SUMMARY

We hope that this handbook will be a resource to you as you follow your own path toward successful volunteering. The benefits of volunteering await you. Volunteering requires effort, time and persistence. However, it can offer you social interaction, an increased sense of well-being, reduced stress, and a sense of purpose in your life. We encourage you to keep this handbook with you when you are volunteering to provide you with information, support and a method of organization so that you can be a successful volunteer.

REFERENCES

Hawley, L. (1990, 2008). Self Advocacy after Brain Injury, in Self Advocacy for Independent Life: An Advocacy Workbook for People with Brain Injuries and their Families, L. Hawley, (Ed.), Brain Injury Association of Colorado, Denver, CO.

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HOPE

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MY VOLUNTEER PLAN

Name of Agency: _____

Agency Address: _____

Name of Supervisor: _____

Agency Phone Number: _____

Other Important People Involved with my Volunteer Plan: _____

My Role and Duties: _____

Schedule: _____

Notes





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