

A S U M E

Volunteering in Dementia



Learning & Self-Development

Volunteers were articulate around the process of volunteering and its implications for learning. Carers who also volunteered were often motivated by the ongoing learning opportunities “because it stimulates my brain, you know, and gets me thinking and doing things” (Carer, CCF04, Cumbria). Both carers and volunteers expressed an interest and buy-in to the learning process. Many linked it with past experiences of dementia and the motivation to learn more about it now. Volunteering was a way of learning about dementia while also offering something in return. The majority of volunteers and carers supported training or further training in regards to dementia. Self-development and learning was a strong motivation for many volunteers on both an individual and organisational level.

The theme of self-development was linked to ideas around learning, developing skills and experience. For many of the volunteers the motivation behind this was linked to career or educational development. However, career motivated aims were still linked to the ideas of altruism and ‘making a difference’.

I've never gone into it wanting praise or feedback. I suppose my main aim is self-development for my career but... I came away from my first voluntary role because I really didn't feel I was doing anything of any value. (CVF02, Cumbria)

The finding here suggests that the volunteering activity is more effective if it aligns with career aims and objectives and personal values. This was often linked to the perception that volunteering in dementia in particular can make a greater difference.

I also think your ability to make a difference or give or something is greater. So I've decided that it's the people and the whole cause of dementia, it's going to be the corner I'm going to fight. (CVF10, Cumbria)

The process of learning was linked quite strongly to the relationship that volunteers had with volunteering organisations. The organisations that volunteers were linked with were generally described as supportive and volunteers appreciated opportunities to continue on their learning journeys.

Latterly I guess I feel that I've learnt a lot and now I feel like I could still continue to learn but I think because of this new opportunity there's more potential to learn more. I don't know about contribute more because I think it would be valued equally from each organisation but for myself, so I suppose it's self-development is really my major motivation. (CVF02, Cumbria)

The motivation to learn was often influenced by the experiences – both personal and professional – that the volunteer already had. The level of learning and self-development was contingent on what level the volunteer already brought to the volunteering experience. For example, professional skills such as nursing, occupational therapy, firefighter, GP, teacher gave many of the volunteers we spoke to a base and set of professional values they brought to volunteering. Similarly, those with experience of dementia in the family or as a carer brought their experiences and skills to volunteering. Volunteers often found themselves utilising but also negotiating between their past experiences, skills and the situations they were encountering now through volunteering. For example, one GP who was volunteering in a group situation had found themselves often asked for medical advice. Because she was not in the group acting in a medical capacity she felt torn in trying to support people while not being able to be acting as their GP. Some volunteers outlined a 'balance' and process of negotiation:

So all the time you sort of balance it, but what you're using is all the skills that you learnt when you were in your previous life, which is good. It allows you to expand. So in doing that you deal with all ranges of dementia and whatever that is thrown up, and you get twice as much back as you put in in all that time. (SVM01, Stirlingshire)

The quote is interesting in its reference to a 'previous life' before volunteering in dementia and gives an indication that this type of activity can, for some volunteers, become a dominant part of their lives. Retirement featured as a strong motivation in this regard and volunteering in dementia was a chance to learn and develop in older age.

At the same time, many volunteers noted that learning when it came to dementia was just something you had to do 'on the job'. Watching carers interact with people was one of the main sources of learning for many of the newer volunteers to dementia care.

... at first, I was very fearful. I thought, I don't even know what I should do. But now I'm a little bit clear, 'cause I watch others. Part of it is observing and I've observed some...particularly some...there's some that are very good, the other carers, you know. And they deal with them and I'm learning and I'm thinking, oh I can do that, 'cause I have done that in the past. But I wasn't confident...again, it's a confidence thing, being able to do it. (CVF01, Cumbria)

Volunteers noted also learning a great deal from those living with dementia, especially about the past. Therefore, there was a dynamic learning process involved in the area of volunteering in dementia. This exchange included people learning skills from volunteers, staff, those living with dementia and carers.



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