

Accompanying volunteers in crises

A guide for mentors and tutors



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The guide is the result of exchanges between mentors from different countries and a series of workshops held for mentors and tutors as part of an accompanying measure in the various countries.

World House Bielefeld is solely responsible for the content of the guide. The positions presented here do not reflect the position of Engagement Global or the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development.

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Nieves Capote (Trauma, Sexualised Violence, Mental Disorders)
Maximilian Engel from Kubekom (Intercultural Communication)

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As well as to all mentors and tutors who were involved in the project.

Bielefeld, June 2023



Julia Weidner

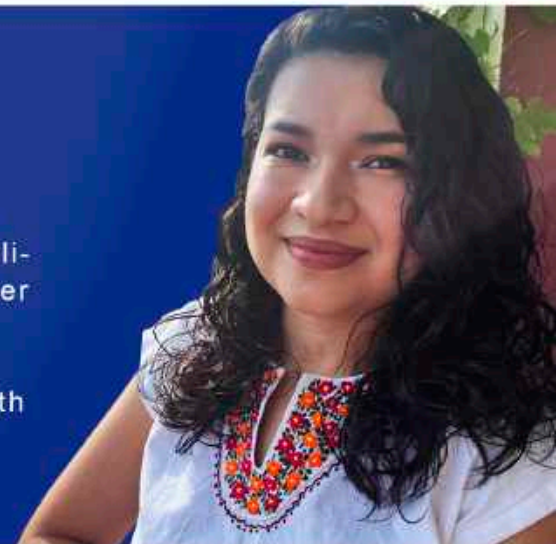
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Since the age of eight, she has been active in children's and youth groups and produces radio programmes and videos.



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INTRODUCTION

This guide aims to systematise the experiences that mentors and tutors have gathered in different countries since the inception of the *weltwärts* programme. These experiences were recorded to develop a practical guideline for the support of volunteers, especially in difficult situations.

The reason for this was an accompanying measure, which was carried out by Welthaus Bielefeld e.V. in the context of the *weltwärts* programme which took place between February 2022 and April 2023. Within the framework of this measure, virtual seminars for the exchange between mentors of the individual countries and the partner organisations took place, in which experiences and challenges in the support of volunteers were shared and analysed.

In relation to the identified challenging situations, further training offers were carried out with different focuses in the different countries. It became apparent that not only was there a high demand for qualification and collegial exchange, but also a need for guidance that addresses the various aspects of the topic and can be used for internal organisational qualification and further application.

The results of the further training are therefore to be systematised within the framework of this guide and recorded in writing for further reading. They have also been supplemented by existing texts relating to the topics.

In addition to the accompanying measure, this guide is oriented towards the implementation of the *weltwärts* programme by World House Bielefeld and its premises and values. However, we hope that it can also serve as a stimulus for mentors and tutors from other organisations.

THE SUPPORT OF VOLUNTEERS

After the selection and preparation by World House Bielefeld, it is mainly the mentors and tutors in the country of assignment who are responsible for accompanying the volunteers. Therefore, in the following, the respective tasks and roles will be briefly discussed.

ROLE AND TASKS OF TUTORS

The term tutor here refers to a staff member of the partner organisations in the countries of assignment who is responsible for the volunteer. Usually these are local staff members who do not speak German and whose actual task, apart from supporting the volunteer, is to work in an area of the partner organisation.

TUTORS HAVE VERY DIVERSE TASKS.

She/He:

is involved in the selection process of the volunteer and is available in advance as a contact person in case of questions.

welcomes the volunteer on the first working day, introduces her/him to the organisational structures and procedures of the organisation, perhaps organises a welcome ritual.

assists with visa matters.

helps to integrate the volunteer into the organisation.

develops the work plan and agrees on the tasks with the volunteer.

evaluates the completion of the tasks and gives feedback.

is available to the volunteer for questions, explains safety protocols and provides insights into the context.

Organises vacation scheduling with the volunteer.

writes the final testimonial.

The tutor is one of the most important reference persons for the volunteer. He/she supports the volunteer throughout the entire stay and supports him/her in using his/her own strengths and interests in the best possible way for the organisation. He/she is significantly involved in accompanying young people in one of the most formative phases of their lives, which is often associated with beautiful and satisfying experiences. Working as a tutor also offers the opportunity to deepen intercultural skills and learn about different perspectives.

At the same time, the work as a tutor is associated with challenges that require creative solutions. Tutors must deal with initial language and communication difficulties, recognise, and overcome intercultural misunderstandings, explain difficult contexts and support the volunteer in all situations. Through daily contact, they are often the first to recognise difficulties or crises of volunteers and support them.

THE ROLE AND TASKS OF MENTORS

The tasks of mentors are also complex and can vary greatly from country to country and region to region. Likewise, the tasks are divided up differently in different organisations.

Before departure

Together with World House Bielefeld, the mentor organises the arrival of the volunteers in the country of assignment. This includes establishing contact between the new volunteers and the host organisations in the selection process, assistance with translation in the selection interview, and the search for and provision of rooms in a shared flat or host families, if this is not done by the partner organisations.

Arrival

The mentor:

- picks up the volunteers from the airport and arranges transportation to their accommodations.



- provides assistance with visa matters and dealing with the authorities.



- assists the volunteers with their arrival and gives a first overview of the local conditions, important places and contact points.



- helps the volunteers to find their way in everyday life and is available to answer any questions they may have, especially in the beginning.

During the service

The Mentor:

Maintains constant communication

- Maintains contact with volunteers, host organisations, and World House Bielefeld.
- is always available to the volunteers by phone and e-mail or for a personal conversation.
- organises regular meetings with volunteers.
- inquires with the partner organisations about the development of the volunteer.

Stands by and supports in case of problems, difficulties and in special situations

- Provides support with everyday problems, for example health, transport, culture, security.
- is the contact person in case of personal crises, offers close support and initiates necessary measures if required. This may be done in consultation with World House Bielefeld.
- supports the volunteer in case of difficulties in the host organisation, for example by jointly developing strategies on how to address the problem in the organisation. He/she mediates between the volunteer and the host organisation and consults with World House Bielefeld on how to proceed.
- Supports the host organisation in resolving conflicts between the host organisation and the volunteer, if needed.
- supports and accompanies changes of placement.
- Is always available as a contact person in case of emergency, both for the volunteers, for the host organisations and for World House Bielefeld (in urgent cases also for the parents of the volunteers) and supports finding solutions.

Plans, organises and carries out the accompanying pedagogical programme

- is jointly responsible with World House Bielefeld for the planning, organisation, and implementation of the pedagogical accompanying programme.
(Introductory seminar, intermediate seminar, final seminar, and additional seminar day)

Assists in the consolidation of structures in the country of assignment

- assists with visits to the host organisations by representatives of World House Bielefeld or other *weltwärts* actors.
- assists in the search for new, conceptually meaningful placements in coordination with World House Bielefeld.
- participates, if possible, in seminars on partner dialogue in the country of assignment.

Conclusion and departure

The mentor organises the departure, for example transport to the airport.

PHASES OF INTERCULTURAL ADAPTATION

For many volunteers, close contact with another culture is a great opportunity for personal growth, including the development of intercultural skills. The anthropologist Kalervo Oberg introduced the idea of phases of cultural adaptation in 1954 and they have been much studied and further theorised since then.

We have seen similar developments in the support of volunteers. Although the phases do not always have to occur in the same way, they can be observed in some form in many volunteers (see also: *Welthaus Bielefeld (2014): Weltwärts Lernen*, chapter 5).

1. Honeymoon Phase

Enthusiasm, fascination, uplifted spirits

The new culture is wonderful, everything tastes good, is exciting and interesting. The duration of the phase depends on the person, the length of the stay, the environment and many other factors.

In our experience as mentors, we have seen that the phase of initial euphoria lasts between three weeks and two or three months, depending on the person.



2. Stress and crisis

Disappointment, frustration, uncertainty, doubt

Stress and the cognitive exhaustion of dealing with a new language, new foods and with new forms of interaction come into play. Specific things from Germany are missed, the previously experienced elation slowly fades and room for frustration and insecurity arises.



Language problems, difficulties in finding tasks in the organisation, feelings of loneliness, homesickness and inability to find one's way in the new situation can occur. Everyday life is perceived as stressful, feelings of powerlessness and helplessness can appear and it can lead to questioning one's own role and the entire stay abroad.

If the second phase is poorly managed, there are major difficulties and recovery and adjustment phases do not materialise, there may be serious problems that can lead to severe crises and, in extreme cases, may make it necessary to interrupt or terminate the voluntary service.

If they have not yet adjusted, then the first complaints and illnesses can be detected in this second phase at the latest: Abdominal pain because of the different diet, diarrhoea because of the unfamiliar bacteria, the climate is suddenly no longer tolerated so well, insect bites and colds are annoying and the like. Maybe someone is also lovesick or homesick because their loved ones are all far away and are now being missed or worried about. There are volunteers who suffer a lot from the poverty, injustice and violence they face in the host country. This phase can also be a potential risk for volunteers with a tendency to abuse drugs or alcohol.

3. Recovery through better understanding and acceptance of the other culture(s)

This phase involves different possible responses to the crisis phase. Depending on the volunteer's personality and resources, different strategies are developed to overcome the difficulties, usually involving accepting the challenge of the new situation. However, there may also be an inner withdrawal (see below: detachment and isolation).



Recovery can take place through better orientation, language comprehension increases, possibly through a language course. Coping with everyday life becomes easier and the other culture, which was previously experienced as foreign to one's own culture, slowly becomes more familiar and accepted in its otherness. Cultural differences in behaviour and values are recognised; one's own "culture" is perceived as only one possible construction of reality.

4. Adaptation

The volunteer has extensive knowledge about culturally different world views and is flexible enough to empathise with different perceptions, judgements, and ways of acting in order to act in a culturally adapted and effective way. To reach this stage, a lot of self-reflection, empathy and other people's feedback is necessary. Seminar units and regular meetings can contribute to this. The experiences gained during the voluntary service are integrated into the personality and world view and are valued. Saying goodbye may be sad, but it is coped with well.



Depending on the volunteer's personality, there are different strategies for dealing with a foreign culture. Some of them should be mentioned here: "(Notes from the seminar Interculturality in the volunteer service, 4.10.2022 with Max from Kubekom)"

Separation and isolation

In this phase, there is no acceptance or adaptation to the new culture. Instead, safe spaces are sought in which one has to confront as little as possible the difficulties of dealing with the new culture. Interaction with the new culture is avoided if possible. Instead, contacts with other German volunteers are sought, and communication with friends and family in Germany is activated. One lives in a small German enclave in the host country, whereby life in Germany is highly praised and idealised.

The problem is often the return to Germany and the associated disappointment that not everything is perfect there, as was assumed from afar.

This can lead to a feeling of always having to go to a "different" place, but then not really fitting into any of them.

Way out: Raising awareness

Adventure "foreign culture"

In this phase, a lot of work is invested in discovering the beauty of the host country. The new culture is experienced as exciting, beautiful, exotic, but foreign and completely different from one's own. Adaptation and the associated understanding of different cultural perceptions and perspectives do not take place.

The meaning of the term home is experienced through the demarcation from the other culture that is perceived as foreign.

Migratory bird

Here, complete identification with the new culture takes place.

This can be a challenge for family and friends in Germany, as the volunteer hardly maintains any contact with Germany and instead becomes completely absorbed in the new life. The volunteer's own culture, in our case German, is temporarily put on hold.

Visits from Germany can lead to conflicts.



CRISES IN VOLUNTARY SERVICE

Volunteers usually do well during their voluntary service and have many positive experiences. For most volunteers, the year abroad is a life-changing experience in which personal growth and important learning experiences play a significant role.

As mentioned above, volunteers often have to deal with frustrations, especially in the beginning. Sometimes they are also confronted with very difficult experiences that need to be overcome and integrated.

The accompanying of crises is often associated with uncertainties. Recognising and assessing a crisis, finding the right words, and supporting the volunteer through the crisis appropriately are among the greatest challenges in the work of mentors and tutors.

Crises are complex and can have different causes. For many volunteers, it is the first time that they leave their parents' home and familiar environment and are immersed in a completely new cultural, social and political context. This can lead to adjustment difficulties. These difficulties can either be managed and integrated very well and contribute to personal growth and maturity or lead to a deeper crisis.

If the stresses, which often occur in the second phase, are not managed satisfactorily, everyday life, instead of becoming easier, becomes increasingly difficult and arduous. These problems require immediate attention and support.

The following signs can be an indication of continuing difficulties:

GENERAL ALARM SIGNALS FOR CRISES



- The volunteer does not come to work or is constantly late.
- Constant fatigue.
- Successive illnesses.
- Social withdrawal, separation from the rest of the group, no desire to participate in activities.
- Anxiety or panic attacks.
- Extremely high expectations of him/herself from the beginning and related frustration.
- The volunteer expresses feelings of guilt or self-doubt.
- Lots of parties, lots of travelling, increased drug and/or alcohol use.



- Failure to adhere to safety arrangements.
- Constant need to talk to mentor or tutor, but the conversations do not result in change.
- Constant contact with home, the body is in the host country, but the head and heart are elsewhere.
- Complaints or expressions of concern about the volunteer from the host organisation, other volunteers, host families or roommates.

It is important to note that these alarms can be perceived by different people: other volunteers, someone from the host organisation, mentor, parents in Germany, host family, etc. It is important that the volunteer is aware of these alarms. It is important that the volunteer can turn to a person he/she trusts, and that information is passed on that is necessary to ensure good care in the host country; this information should be passed on to the mentor or, if applicable, to the sending or host organisation. Of course, confidentiality must be ensured and the volunteer must be asked for consent. The aim is to help the volunteer.

Some volunteers tend to want to solve their problems themselves and not depend on anyone; they don't report when they feel bad, they don't ask for help, so the only thing to do is to be attentive and watch out for alarm signs.

GENERAL MEASURES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION IN THE EVENT OF A CRISIS



- Suggest that the volunteer have a confidential conversation and choose a quiet place to do so (see also: Solution-focused conversations).
- Identify the problem behind the alarm signals, above all ask a lot of questions and listen carefully. Sometimes the symptom prevents you from identifying the real problem. This can range from unsatisfactory work to discomfort in the living situation to experiences of violence that are not shared because of feelings of shame.
- If possible, address the problem. Develop a strategy together with the volunteer in relation to his/her own needs. If possible, set concrete steps and goals and make an appointment for the next meeting to evaluate the agreed measures. Always be concrete, clear, and transparent.
- Give the volunteer safety and confidence and stay in touch. Follow up with messages, keep communicating, go for coffee, help with practical things.

- If necessary, contact specialists (psychotherapy, crisis intervention, etc.).
- If the volunteer does not want to deal with the underlying problem, this should also be respected if there is no acute danger to his/her well-being.
- It is important to point out that crises help people to grow; it is often the volunteer who has pulled through a crisis who is seen to have the greatest positive change and impact.
- When it comes to "behavioural problems" of the volunteer(s), it is important

to establish agreements regarding behaviour in a clarification talk. If these are not adhered to, also draw the consequences, which can go as far as exclusion from the programme. Clearly state the desired changes in behaviour, agree on a time frame and set a new meeting date for review. The same procedure is recommended in case of difficulties with the partner organisation.

- Always be transparent and communicate clearly, do not decide or do anything behind the volunteer's back.
- Maintain confidentiality.



Photo: How volunteers may sometimes feel: The signs say „This way“ and then „No passage“, seen in a community in Mexico.

The general alarm signals mentioned above can also provide a first indication of the specific issues that will be dealt with below. The general measures and recommendations for action can be applied in the same way to all other crises.

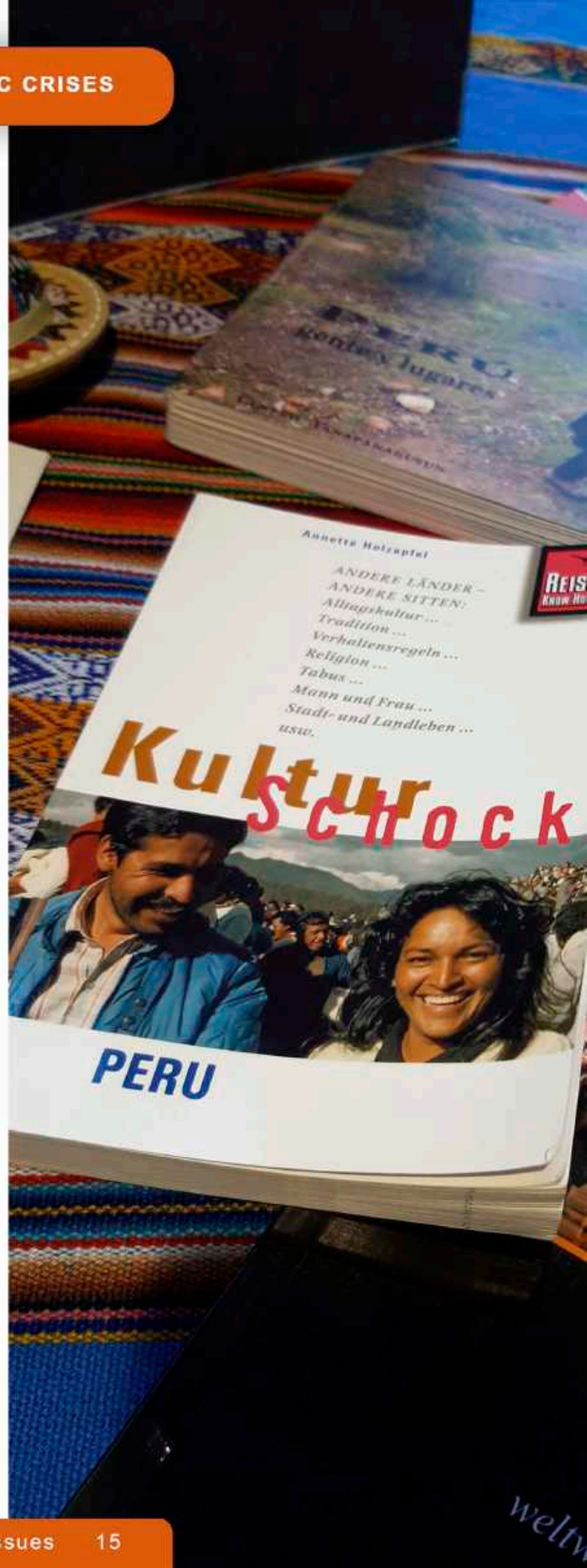
However, the recommendations for dealing with specific crises will be supplemented, deepened, and specifically tailored to the respective topic in this section.

A) Intercultural issues

Recommendations:



- Provide the volunteer with information on the topic of culture, for example at regular meetings, preparation seminars or personal conversations. The knowledge can help to appreciate the phases of cultural adaptation and to understand them as "normal".
- In the case of intercultural misunderstandings, get to the bottom of the underlying issue (see also: Conducting solution-oriented conversations).
- In the event of difficulties at work, within the partner organisation or in the host family, suggest a joint discussion, listen to both sides, and possibly mediate.



B)

Health and illness

Volunteers often live in very different climates during their service. The change of climate, heat, altitude differences, different eating habits, previously unknown food and different hygiene standards can lead to illnesses, especially at the beginning. Common illnesses include stomach and intestinal diseases, flu, and colds. However, these can usually be overcome quickly with a visit to the doctor and appropriate treatment.

However, concerns about the volunteer's health can also become an ongoing issue. This can have various causes:

- Constant fatigue and absence from work due to overburdening or due to the "psychomatisation" of stressful factors.
- Constant new illnesses due to not adhering to health protocols.
- Not acknowledging illness, breaking off healing process, medical malpractice.

A vicious circle based on the above-mentioned causes could be observed time and again, especially in Mexico, regarding stomach and intestinal diseases. Due to the different germ spectrums, stomach and intestinal diseases are nothing unusual, especially at the beginning of a stay abroad. If the symptoms do not improve after two days, a doctor should be visited, a diagnosis made, and a therapy determined.

Unfortunately, there are doctors who do not carry out a diagnosis but simply prescribe an antibiotic based on the symptoms. Often, they are correct in their assessment, but it can also lead to incorrect treatment if the

pathogen causing the illness is different from what was suspected. If the prescribed antibiotic is not adequate, a new treatment must be given. The increased intake of medication can damage the intestinal flora. Further illnesses can follow and make the overall situation worse and worse.

Sometimes volunteers come to the host country with "German" ideas and do not want to take antibiotics, even if the infection is severe. Alternative healing methods sometimes work well, but not always.

Recommendations:



- In case of frequent sickness or increased absenteeism at work, have a conversation with the volunteer and find out what the real problem is (see also: Solution-oriented talks).
- A good overview of health and hygiene should already be given during the preparation and introduction. Volunteers should be informed in detail about the health system in the country as well as about health risks and common diseases.
- Provide hygiene protocol and recommendations.
- Provide an emergency list with all important telephone numbers and addresses of doctors of all specialities and hospitals, which should be updated regularly by the mentors and tutors.

- Explain the procedure for visiting a doctor and how the costs are reimbursed by the international health insurance.
- In case of feeling ill and first symptoms, consult a trustworthy doctor as soon as possible.
- Insist on a solid diagnosis before taking antibiotics. Possibly ask for an antibiogram if stomach and intestinal illnesses are involved.
- If you are unsure whether local doctors are assessing the illness correctly, consult the insurance company's doctor or, if necessary, the family doctor in Germany.
- Ensure adequate rest, good nutrition, and sufficient fluid intake.
- Make sure that the volunteer informs his/her tutors and mentors. After the second consecutive day of absence from work, a medical certificate must be submitted to the partner organisation.
- Complicated illnesses and hospital stays must be clarified immediately with the international health insurance. In these cases, a hotline is available where the procedure can be discussed with the insurance company.
- If no appropriate treatment is possible in the host country for serious health problems, organise return transport and coordinate this together with the sending organisation, insurance company, mentor, and tutor.



Photo: Peruvian mentor David Rolfes receives the first volunteers who came during the COVID pandemic.



Risky relationships

During the mentors' exchange, the topic of risky relationships of volunteers was mentioned again and again. This refers to relationships that pose a risk to the volunteer.

These risks can be of many kinds:

- Relationships based on a mismatch of privileges.
- Relationships in which the volunteer is deliberately exploited or involved in criminal activities.
- Relationships involving drug use or violence.
- Unwanted pregnancies.
- etc.

Toxic relationships are complex and can lead to emotional dependency through manipulation, so that the situation is not recognised by the person concerned him/herself. Because of the emotional dependency, the problems in the relationship are often glossed over, justified and outwardly hidden or denied. This is why these situations are so difficult for mentors and tutors to see.



Recommendations:

- Discuss with the group beforehand that it is important to look out for each other. If someone in the group suspects that something is wrong with another volunteer, it should be clear that the mentor must be taken into confidence. And it should be clear that this is in no way a betrayal, but an expression of concern and support.
- If there is a suspicion, the mentor should talk to the tutor, host family and other people around the person concerned and ask how he or she is doing. Maintain confidentiality.
- If there is a legitimate suspicion and concern, a sensitive discussion should be held with the volunteer, expressing the concern, and offering help:
"I heard that ... and I wanted to ask you how you are doing?"
"I want you to know that I am always there for you."
- No insinuations, no advice and above all no pressure.
- Accept if the volunteer does not want to talk about it.
- Provide information on institutions, counselling centres, contacts to psychotherapists and background information on the topic.
- If there are signs of rule-breaking, self-endangerment or health risks, the sending organisation must be contacted and a joint approach discussed. Conduct a clarification talk to determine and evaluate agreements.

D)

Recognising and assessing mental illnesses

The decision to go abroad and leave one's familiar surroundings can trigger uncertainties in some volunteers that can lead to mental stress. The boundaries between momentary mental stress, mental crises and mental illness are fluid. Depression and anxiety, for example, come in many gradual levels. People know anxiety as something normal and healthy, and many also know depressive moods.

For example, a state of despair, anxiety, or homesickness at the beginning of volunteering can cause similar symptoms to an anxiety disorder or depression. However, it can also be just an overwhelming reaction to "too much newness", which may weaken over time as the volunteer becomes more settled.

The main mental health disorders that have been identified in volunteer supervision are anxiety disorders, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, eating disorders and addictive behaviour (alcohol and drug abuse).

In the case of known previous mental illnesses

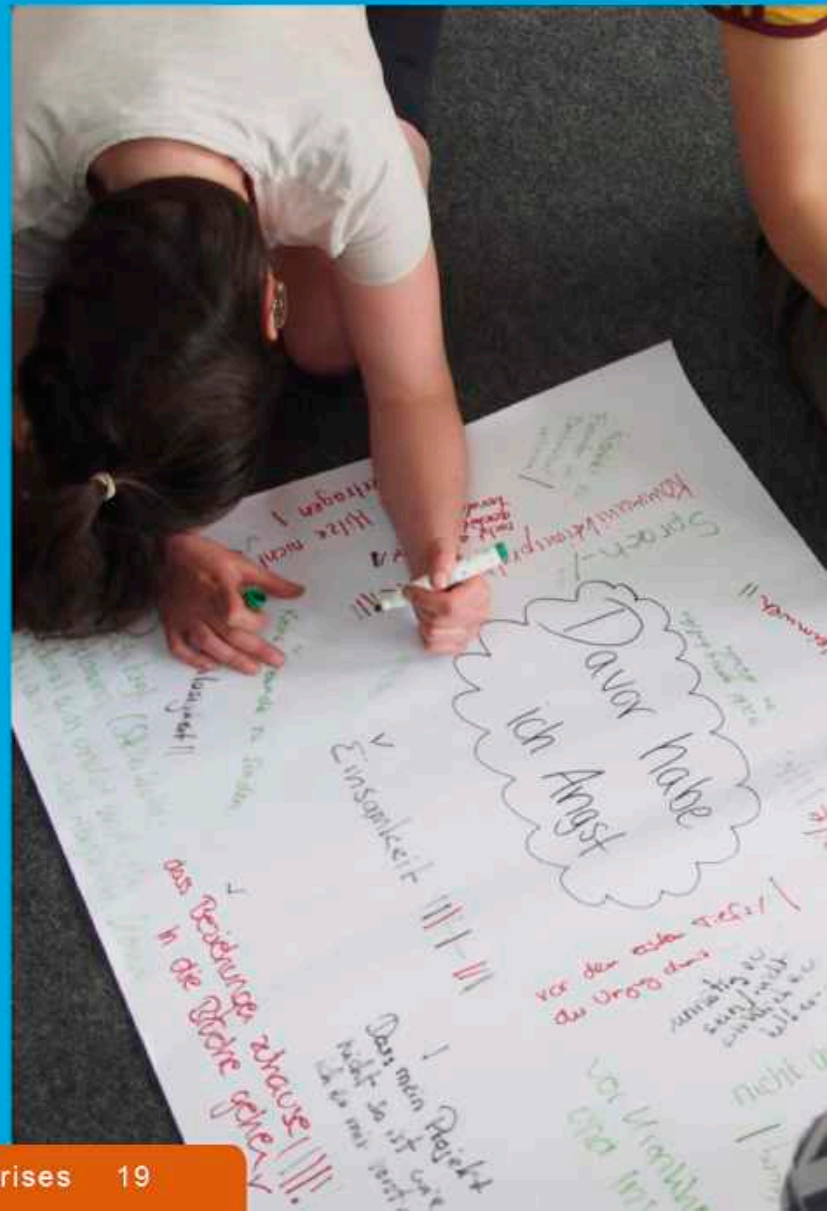
It is helpful if the volunteer already addresses a previous history of mental illness during the selection process and informs about whether a therapeutic process has already taken place.

Mentally ill people need to know their early warning signs and coping strategies well. This is worked out in a psychotherapeutic treatment. The result of this is an individual crisis plan in which personal early warning signs, self-help options and support options are worked out. In this way, the mentor or tutor is sensitised and can have an open conversation with the volunteer and offer to get in touch at any time in case of difficulties.

The sending organisation will not report all mental illnesses to the partner organisation and not necessarily to the mentors either, in order not to contribute to stereotyping and possible discrimination, but also to maintain confidentiality. However, if the sending organisation assumes that the previous illness could play a role in the year, this information should be shared - after consultation with the volunteer.

If mentors or tutors have doubts about whether a pre-existing condition might exist, they should ask the volunteer about it or ask for permission to obtain the information from the sending organisation.

Photo: Becoming aware of your own fears and reflecting on your own resources and strategies for dealing with problems is part of the preparation.



Recommendations:



- Seek close dialogue with the volunteer (see also: Solution-oriented talks).
- Resource-oriented attitude in conversations.
- Talk about concrete things: Agree on goals and activities to cope with everyday life; what support is needed, etc.
- Avoid admonitions like *"pull yourself together"* or *"... don't always see everything so negatively"*. This only increases the pressure and the feelings of guilt that the affected person already has.
- Never trivialise feelings *"Don't take it so hard ..."*.
- Have patience: lack of drive and willpower are part of the disease. Suggest small steps, focus on what is possible now instead of discussing why something is not possible.
- Sometimes it helps to let the volunteer moan and complain. This can have a relieving effect: just allow it and don't try to work against it with suggestions. Limit the time of conversations and refer to resources.
- Do not take rejections personally. They are usually due to the illness. However, a crisis does not justify all behaviour. So do not accept every behaviour that violates social manners!
- Understand aggressiveness as part of the problem, do not take it personally, do not react in an offended or aggressive way, volunteers need support.
- If strong urges are expressed to do nonsensical actions: Ask to wait until the next day, then talk about it again.
- If anxiety is strong: offer the opportunity to calm down so that the anxiety can subside a little.
- Holidays or travel tend to be counterproductive when a crisis occurs. The crisis travels with you and can even intensify in a foreign environment without the usual daily structure.
- A contact person at the partner organisation should be informed about the situation. However, the consent of the person concerned must be obtained before a discussion takes place.
- Often it is not necessary to give up work. A structured daily routine with a few hours of not too strenuous activity is rather helpful if this remains acceptable to the partner organisation.
- Refer to the crisis plan and self-help options, and work together to find relief and reassurance in relation to the volunteer's current needs.
- Offer help. For example, talk to the partner organisation's tutor about the agreed support strategies.
- Provide the volunteer with information about local professional help.
- It may be sufficient to contact a professional at home by video conference or telephone.
- The volunteer's international health insurance usually pays for up to five appointments with psychotherapists in the host country. Payment for video conferences with "Psychologists Online" is also possible. More appointments are possible for people whose insurances cover pre-existing conditions.

A group of young people are sitting on a grassy lawn outdoors, engaged in a seminar. In the foreground, a young woman with long blonde hair is looking down at a piece of paper. Next to her, another young woman is also looking at a document. To the left, a young man in a checkered shirt is sitting cross-legged, looking towards the camera. There are several items on the grass, including a silver thermos, a carton of juice, and some papers. The background shows trees and a building, suggesting a park or campus setting.

Photo: Volunteers reflect during the preparation seminar – despite good preparation, crises can come unexpectedly.

- If there is an urgent suspicion of a mental illness, seek professional help in any case: Crisis intervention, possibly short-term medication by a doctor, further professional support by a specialist.
- Do not make decisions over the volunteer's head; involve the person concerned as much as possible. If this is not possible, inform the volunteer about decisions in time.
- If the volunteer refuses professional help despite a growing crisis, insist on it (*"We want you to..., otherwise we will have to take you back."*).
- Always clarify with all parties involved whether the voluntary service could continue

under these circumstances. It is not about securing the volunteer's continued stay in the country at any price. Even if the accompanying persons, the partner organisation, or mentors are overwhelmed or too many resources are tied up in resolving a crisis, the voluntary service can be terminated, and an immediate return trip arranged.

- In this case, arrangements must be made with the insurance company and doctors to determine whether the volunteer is fit to travel. If this is not the case, measures for stabilisation in the country must be sought. Sometimes it is not possible without coercive measures, which usually have to be ordered by a doctor or the police. Country-specific regulations and responsibilities must be clarified here.



Volunteers usually have many enriching experiences during their year abroad. However, in rare cases, they may also have experiences that are so drastic that they can trigger traumatisation.

First, one must make a clear distinction between a traumatic event and traumatisation. Not every traumatic event leads to traumatisation in all people.

Whether or not traumatisation occurs after an event depends primarily on the following factors:

- the intensity of the event
- the resilience of the individual
- the reaction of the environment

Events that lead to traumatisation for many people are experiences of violence, assaults, witnessing accidents, death, sexualised violence, political crises, natural disasters etc.

Signs of a traumatic reaction may include:

1. Avoidance: places or events related to the trauma are avoided.
2. Constant reliving of the situation, in thoughts and nightmares, flashbacks.
3. Irritability, anxiety, sleep disturbances, aggressiveness.
4. Concentration and attention difficulties.
5. Dissociation, amnesia, drug use.
6. Feelings of guilt and shame.
7. Depression.

8. Social withdrawal and isolation.

9. Self-harm.

TRAUMA-SENSITIVE SUPPORT

Trauma-sensitive support involves the application of specific guidelines for action. These should enable the needs of possibly traumatised people to be considered, in various contexts and levels of action, and to avoid further harm.

The goals of trauma-sensitive support are:

- To provide security, to avoid renewed fears.
- Enable calming down, avoid additional stress.
- Return control, avoid renewed feelings of being at the mercy of others.
- Avoid retraumatisation.

It is not about:

- Being able to diagnose trauma.
- Having to uncover or investigate something.
- Having to listen to the whole story.

ACTION GUIDELINES FOR TRAUMA-SENSITIVE SUPPORT

Provide safety and protection

A traumatic experience is experienced as an existential threat that completely shatters a person's sense of security. The first step is therefore to ensure that the person affected can feel safe again, in the sense that the threat experienced no longer exists. Calming the fear and stress response after a traumatic event is crucial to whether traumatisation develops.

Allowing control

A traumatic experience creates a feeling of complete helplessness and loss of control. Experiencing further situations of helplessness can lead to retraumatisation. It is important that the affected person regains the feeling of having control over his or her life and possibilities of action. Transparency (information and agreement on the next steps and measures), self-determination and the affected person's own will are in the foreground here.

Respecting boundaries

Traumatic experiences, especially when they involve violence, violate personal boundaries, which often causes a deep sense of shame. Affected persons should therefore never be forced or persuaded to do anything, for example to talk about what they have experienced, to file charges, etc.

Avoid stigmatisation

It should be made possible for those affected to slowly find their way back to normality. It is important to respect confidentiality. The person affected decides for him/herself to whom information is given and to whom it is not given.

Avoid triggers

Triggers are stimuli that can trigger the memory of the traumatic situation and corresponding reactions. Especially in the first period, confrontation with these stimuli should be avoided. Indications of what frightens the person concerned should therefore be taken seriously, even if this is not comprehensible to others.



Photo: "On the way home I want to be safe, not brave", poster for the general strike of women, seen in Mexico.



Support in cases of sexualised violence

Sexualised violence can generally affect men and women*, with 95% of those affected being women*. Homosexual men are usually more affected than heterosexual men, as homophobic violence is also involved.

Sexualised violence should be understood here as an umbrella term for different types of violent experiences, including sexual harassment (in person, via internet or via messages), sexual abuse, rape (attempted or accomplished) of any kind.

The consequences of sexualised violence for the victim are often long-lasting and deep and can produce traumatic reactions (see also: Trauma).

Trauma-sensitive and appropriate support of a person after experiencing sexualised violence can therefore be crucial for the further life of the person concerned.

Accompanying people who have experienced sexualised violence is complex. When dealing with sexualised violence in institutions, "mistakes" can often be observed that can put the mental health of the victim at risk. NGOs are no exception.

If the aggressor and the victim work in the same institution, the situation is often even more complicated for the parties involved and the support requires a particularly clear understanding and a defined procedure. It is beneficial if the institution has already developed a clear stance and a crisis plan on this issue in advance.

Recommendations:



- Always believe the person affected!
- When a person begins to talk about their experiences of violence, create a safe space, ensure confidentiality and, above all, listen.
- Accept feelings. It is normal for the person to experience many different feelings, such as guilt, anger, sadness etc. Educate that all feelings are normal and understandable.
- Persons with trauma tend to focus on their defects and failures and avoid acknowledging their strengths. Point out personal resources, skills, and achievements. Positive messages.
- Victims are never to blame or complicit in rape! Never question the affected person: *"Why did you go there in the first place?"* Instead: *"I listen to you, I believe you, I am with you."*
- Do not insist that the person concerned tell in detail what happened. Also avoid the person having to tell the same story over and over to different people.
- Inform in detail about the possibilities and time frame for medical care, about the legal possibilities as well as the requirements for reporting (forensic examination to preserve evidence).
- Support decision-making. The decision for medical examination and preservation of evidence lies solely with the person concerned. Never exert pressure! Once the person has decided, it must be accepted, even though we may disagree (see also: Trauma).

- Contact specialists (psychotherapist, psychiatrist, lawyer specialising in feminism or sexualised violence).
- Respect the victim's wish to report or not to report. Filing a complaint requires a solid.

system of support (psychotherapy, experienced legal counsel) to avoid retraumatisation

- No confrontation of victim and aggressor! If this is unavoidable, such as at a court hearing, therapeutic and legal preparation and support is important to avoid retraumatisation.



Collective crises during political unrest

Political crises are difficult to identify and assess, especially at the beginning. They can be localised or affect an entire region or country. Events are often volatile and situations change at breakneck speed.

One example experienced by World House Bielefeld and other sending organisations is the political crisis in Nicaragua, which began with a wave of repression in April 2018. The observations and experiences made have been included here.

Problems and risks

- Events and political situation are difficult to assess.
- Events and political situation are underestimated by volunteers.
- Volunteers do not follow safety rules and announcements.
- Volunteers take a political stand and put themselves in danger.
- In view of the possibility of having to leave the country, farewell parties are organised, often involving alcohol. Or, a quick trip is taken, putting volunteers in unpredictable danger.
- Volunteers witness events that can have traumatising effects.
- Partner organisations, host families or the social environment of the volunteers may hold different political opinions and conflicts and disputes may arise.

- Volunteers position themselves on the side of partner organisations and target groups or have conflicts not to get involved in the crisis.

- Transgressing rules of conduct may put host families or partner organisations at risk.

Recommendations:



During preparation and in-country induction

- Ensure that all volunteers have registered with ELEFAND. Likewise, if volunteers move or change projects, the new data should be updated.
- Point out the possibility of political crises, first potential signs, and important behavioural measures:
 - + Immediately contact the mentor by telephone.
 - + Stay at home or in the partner organisation or, if not possible, go to another safe place.
 - + Instructions of the mentor must ALWAYS be followed.
- Discuss "political crises" at partner meetings or seminars with the host families and agree on a joint procedure. Define communication channels, when and to whom to inform if a local crisis emerges.
- Know the safety protocol of the sending organisation and have it available.

In the acute event of a political crisis

- Monitor events and developments closely and agree with the sending organisation and the German embassy exactly when a crisis will be declared.

- Consult individual partner organisations and maintain constant communication to get a good overview of perspectives and events.

- As soon as the crisis is declared, IMMEDIATELY contact all volunteers by phone and give them instructions on how to behave:

- + Volunteers stay at home.

- + Immediate TRAVEL PROHIBITION.

- + Volunteers must stay away from political activities.

- Call a meeting of all volunteers:

- + Inform on the situation and give assessments on further developments.

- + Observe and register HOW the volunteers react to the crisis.

- + Register what they have experienced and observed.

- + Communicate rules of conduct.

- + Answer questions.

- + Give space to share how they reacted to the distressing situation.

- + Recognise trauma and provide trauma-sensitive support. Offer psychological support if necessary.

- + Offer the possibility of leaving the country if necessary.

- + Agree HOW the situation should be communicated EXTERNALLY.

In the further course of the crisis

- Form a crisis team (e.g. coordinator of the sending organisation, representative of the embassy, mentor and representatives of selected partner organisations). Regular meetings and constant communication.

- Constantly update development information with the sending organisation, partner organisations, embassy, and volunteers.

- If possible, gather the volunteers together for a seminar in a safe place to reflect on the experience, possibly providing psychological assessment and support to individual volunteers.

- Be aware of your own needs and limits (self-care), political crises put a lot of stress on everyone involved and can shake emotional stability, not only that of the volunteers!

Evacuation (voluntary or if determined)

- Always offer this option.

- Triggers pain of separation and many emotions. Provide good support, space to express emotions and to say goodbye.

- Offer options for continuing the voluntary service in Germany or in other countries.

- Accompany volunteers through what comes next, such as a return seminar, country group, etc.

After the crisis

- If the crisis ended peacefully, new rules of conduct must be drawn up afterwards that take the new situation into account.

- Processing the new situation and what has happened and the consequences for the work in the partner organisation.

- Summarise lessons learned from the crisis.

STRATEGIES AND TOOLS FOR IMPROVED SUPPORT

COMMUNICATION

The most important prerequisite for both good monitoring and the recognition of a crisis is a good relationship and communication between all the people involved in the volunteer service.

Relationship between mentor and volunteer

- It has proven to be beneficial for the development of the relationship if the volunteers get to know their mentor before they leave the country, for example in person at the preparation seminar in Germany or via Zoom.
- After arriving in the host country, constant contact by phone and WhatsApp, as well as regular get-togethers are a good way to stay in touch. The meetings can serve the personal exchange within the group. Joint excursions or activities can be planned, or content-related topics can be discussed.

Tutor-volunteer relationship

- It has also proven to be beneficial to establish contact before entering the host country, for example, through a Zoom conversation. Telephone numbers (WhatsApp) should already be exchanged at this stage to enable communication.
- Clear agreements for the first working day and a good integration of the volunteer into the partner organisation form the starting point for the cooperation. To integrate the volunteer, a welcome ritual or lunch can be organised. The volunteer should know or at least have seen all the staff members of the partner organisation and have a clear idea of the organisation's procedures, working context and safety protocols.
- A clear work plan for the first tasks, appointments, goals, and an overview of upcoming activities are very helpful for the new volunteer. It is also important to have regular discussions with the tutor about the context, safety, and evaluation of the volunteer's work.

Equally important is good communication between all actors

- Mentors and tutors should also communicate regularly and inform each other about the volunteer's progress or difficulties. Partner meetings are a good way to do this, but so are regular brief enquiries and exchanges of information via WhatsApp. This is not as time-consuming, but it shows interest and ensures a constant exchange.

- The mentor and the sending organisation are also in close contact.
- In the event of a challenging situation for the mentor, a collegial exchange with other mentors and the sending organisation is indispensable to jointly discuss and coordinate the further course of action.

Protocols on safety and crisis management as well as emergency plans should be known and accessible (see also: Read more).

SELF-CARE

Guiding volunteers through crises can be stressful for mentors and tutors. Worrying about the volunteer, uncertainty about what to do and an additional workload that can cost time and energy can lead to overload. If the care involves intensive or frequent exposure to danger, violence, or disasters, this can also shake the accompanying person's sense of personal security and emotional stability.

Signs that indicate excessive demands on the accompanying person are:

- Signs of stress such as inner restlessness, sleep disturbances, frequent infectious diseases.
- Social withdrawal and tiredness, no desire for social contacts and activities.
- Constantly thinking about the volunteer. No longer able to switch off.
- Emotional imbalance: crying or getting angry more easily.
- Becoming more anxious, feelings of diffuse danger, increased mistrust.
- Self-doubt and feelings of guilt.



Recommendations:

People who accompany crises also need relief and support in the long run. This can happen in the work context as well as on a personal level through effective self-care.

In the work context

- In crises and emergencies, always work as a team and agree on the procedure together with the sending organisation, mentor, and tutor.
- Organise relief from other tasks.
- In the case of prolonged acute crises, such as political unrest, an emergency mobile phone should be rotated to ensure a timeout from availability.
- Collegial consultation with other mentors.
- External supervision.
- Training in stress management and self-care.

On the personal level

- Ensure sufficient sleep, exercise, a healthy diet and stable social contacts and networks to maintain one's resilience.
- Know and respect your own stress limits.
- Provide the organism with regular rest periods. Performance and resilience cannot be maintained without regular rest.
- Occupy oneself with "pleasant things" to switch off the mind.
- Maintain regular recreational activities and consciously enjoy them to achieve a balance between work and leisure.
- Regular exercise and sporting activities.
- Relaxation exercises can serve to reduce physical overexcitement and the associated states of tension. They can compensate for the consequences of prolonged stress and have a positive effect on the nervous system. Recommended methods are progressive muscle relaxation according to Jacobson, autogenic training, Far Eastern methods such as yoga and meditation.

The following applies to all these recommendations: every person is different and not everything helps everyone. Self-care is a learning process that involves constant "being in touch with yourself and your needs". An important prerequisite for this is first of all to take yourself seriously and try out what works for you. Methods of self-care need to be trained and incorporated as a regular part of everyday life. Once practised, these techniques can also be helpful in the short term to alleviate acute stress.

Self-reflection and role analysis

As dedicated people, mentors and tutors find themselves in situations in which crisis intervention, psychological first aid, trauma-sensitive support, coaching, or conflict mediation are required in addition to pedagogical support. However, many are not trained for this, which can lead to role confusion, loss of professional distance and even feelings of helplessness and being overwhelmed.

Self-reflection by means of the following questions that the mentor or tutor asks him/herself can be helpful:

"What does the volunteer trigger in me?"

"What emotional reaction would be appropriate for me now?"

"What is my relationship with the volunteer?"

"What role does the facilitator play with the volunteer?"

"What protocols and guidelines are there?"

"Who can I talk to about how to proceed?"

"What support do I need to be able to accompany the volunteer appropriately?"

"What can I not do and what are my limits?"

CONDUCTING SOLUTION-ORIENTED TALKS

As already mentioned, in many of the situations discussed it is often not clear at the beginning what the actual problem is. It is hidden and manifests itself in the form of frustration, stress, somatic illness or similar. Solution-oriented talks are helpful to find out the real problem and to develop solutions and decision-making. The main point is to accompany the volunteer in formulating solutions, making decisions, and implementing solutions.

In addition to supportive conversations, help can also include clarifying the actual need for help, such as practical assistance, passing on information, involving other actors, etc.

An important prerequisite for having a solution-oriented conversation is to choose a quiet place where the volunteer feels comfortable and safe. Allow enough time and ensure confidentiality.

A solution-focused discussion can consist of the following steps:

1-Clarify the problem

- What is the problem?
- How did the problem come about, what triggered it?

- What factors are hindering a solution?
- Are there different ways of looking at the problem? What do others say about it?
- Is it possible to agree on a formulation of the problem? Is the problem too complex or are there ultimately several problems: Which aspect should be dealt with now?
- When leading the discussion, it is important to listen actively, ask questions and give the other person feedback on what has been understood. Finally, the volunteer and the facilitator can agree on a problem and summarise it:

"I have now understood that the problem for you is.... Do I understand it correctly?"

"I hear different problems, (list) ... Which one should we start with?"

2- Clarification of expectations and goals

- Normalise (if appropriate):

"The initial period is difficult, many people go through this, I have heard about problems like this before."



- Do not trivialise, but also acknowledge the difficulty:

"This is certainly not easy for you ..."

- Clarify what kind of help the volunteer is looking for: *"How can I help you right now?"*
- Sometimes no solution to a problem is expected, but someone just wants to have a good cry and needs a bit of encouragement.

If a solution is expected: What condition, what goal are you aiming for?

Often the problems are due to situations or circumstances that neither the volunteer nor the mentor can change. In this case, the goal would be to find out what someone needs or can do to cope better with the situation.

3-Collect possible solutions

- The aim is to create a list of as many different potential solutions as possible - without first judging what is viable and what is not. Allow for creative, "crazy" or unusual ideas! The counsellor may also contribute ideas.
- It is important to always focus on and question what the volunteer needs, wants and can do:

"What solution would you prefer?"

"Which solutions would also be fine, which solutions could you live with?"

"What else can you think of that could solve the problem?"

"How have you solved similar problems in the past?"

"What can you do to make yourself feel better?"

"What would do you good now?"

4-Select viable solutions

● Here the counsellor can help by asking questions like:

"What do you think will happen if you ..." to encourage a realistic evaluation of the ideas and support this with information such as feasibility or given framework conditions. In some circumstances, a clear "No, that won't work" may be appropriate.

● Deciding on a possibility:

"Which possible solutions do you like best?"

"What is realistic and feasible?"

"What needs to be considered?"

5- Implementing the selected solutions and determining a plan of action.

● What are the next steps, what needs to be done next?

● Who will do what by when?

● Set a date for a follow-up meeting, which will then question: "What worked, what didn't?" and if necessary, go back to the selection or collect new ideas.



Photo: Dialogue between all actors is important for prevention, but also for support during the crisis: Shown here: Volunteers and partner representatives at a partner seminar in Nicaragua.

FURTHER READING

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