

## Volunteering: Mountain Rescue, the Forestry Commission (Forest Research) and Mental Health

We know that volunteering is generally good for us – it is one of the five ways to wellbeing. I would like to highlight an example of how this can equally have significant benefits for employers of volunteers.

Supporting community and helping others has always been important to me. Over thirty years ago, when I was working for the Forestry Commission (FC) in Dumfries and Galloway, I started to volunteer with the local mountain rescue team. At that time, the positive support I received from my local FC managers was key, especially since being a volunteer responder is generally very different to many other types of volunteering commitment.

As a responder, we may be called out to assist those in distress at any time and this places additional demands on volunteers and their families – and of course work colleagues. On top of that, we often deal with potentially traumatic incidents and then return to the workplace – and a little bit (sometimes a big bit) of that incident will have seeped into us.

I have always had an interest in the impacts that being a volunteer responder can have on us and those around us, and I have certainly experienced the impacts on many occasions. Over the years I have learned some of the ways that we can use to keep ourselves safe and well, and have experienced the benefits of raising awareness, knowledge and understanding of these potential impacts, and of being prepared to speak out to those I trust. This has led me to undertake training and also to involve myself in national working groups and projects which support emergency responders. I am privileged to volunteer as Wellbeing Officer for Scottish Mountain Rescue and to sit on a working group for a project led by the Duke of Cambridge.

I feel this is one area in particular where I was able to bring back the experiences to benefit the Forestry Commission – initially that was sharing work on dealing with potentially traumatic incidents when I worked in Forest Enterprise Scotland, but more recently in helping my colleagues in Forest Research to establish a Wellbeing Commitment, a Wellbeing Framework, a Wellbeing Hub (online support), and a network of Mental Health First Aiders. Perhaps more than any of that, I believe that the experience I brought into the Forestry Commission from my years of volunteering helped me to be more open about the challenges I have faced and to help others to find strength and to be more comfortable with sharing their stories as well as their concerns. Stigma, and self-stigma particularly, is a barrier to many of us and there will always be work to do to challenge this and support colleagues.

Volunteering is generally good for us – and if it's good for us then it spins off to be good for the organisation. It's a win-win situation.

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