



**Be a Responsible Volunteer  
Volunteering in Sichuan Earthquake**

Since the 512 earthquake struck China, many people have volunteered to go to Sichuan. Enthusiasm and good intentions are highly appreciated. However, massive influx of unaffiliated and untrained volunteers may disrupt life-saving operations. Before facilities are set up to receive and assign volunteers, travelling to the disaster area can increase logistic burden, sap the limited resources, cause traffic jam which in turn delay transportation of essentials, or risk yourselves to become victims. Therefore, volunteering in an ad hoc and unorganized manner is not encouraged.

**PART A - General Considerations for Volunteering in a Disaster**

Please consider the following before you say “yes” to volunteer in the disaster area:

1. Register with the organizations that have experience in disaster relief efforts.
  - Organizations experienced in relief efforts usually have a comprehensive emergency response plan. This normally includes designated coordinators, clearly defined roles and responsibilities for volunteers, risk management policies and procedures, evacuation plan and provision of housing, meals, transportation and counselling to volunteers.
  
2. Consider whether the time and skills needed match yours.
  - If you do not match the volunteer profiles needed at this stage, please be patient. There may be alternative needs when the community enters the long-term recovery period. You may join relevant volunteer training to equip and prepare yourselves in the meantime.



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- Other than volunteering in the disaster area, there are many things that you can do in your own community that will directly help the people affected. The importance of fundraising and back-up support, for instance, is no less than front-line assignments.
3. Make a commitment to attend all the necessary pre-assignment and post-assignment meetings and trainings arranged by the organization.
    - Various studies have shown that untrained and poorly briefed members of the humanitarian organizations suffer most from stress-related illness.
  4. Talk to your family and friends about your intended plan.
    - Lack of support from your loved ones may leave you sense of isolation, guilt and cause you additional stress in your volunteering work.
    - Moreover, social support is essential for your reintegration to the community and your daily life when you return.
  5. Give honest replies to the screening and assessments conducted by the organization.



## **PART B - Psychological Considerations for Disaster Relief Volunteers**

Volunteers in the disaster area are facing changing situations and highly stressful environments, where the usual support mechanisms such as friends and family are absent. Though systematic studies on “psychological suitability” of volunteers appeared to be lacking, risk or protective factors of the development of psychological disorders after exposure to trauma based on trauma and grief literature may give us some hints on this issue.

People with the following characteristics have higher risk of developing stronger stress reactions in traumatic situations, or becoming secondary victims:

1. Present or past psychiatric history
2. Chronic medical illness or psychiatric/psychological disorders
3. Recent significant life event such as a relationship break up
4. High neuroticism
5. Avoidant coping style
6. Excessive use of tobacco, alcohol or substance



## **PART C - Personal Characteristics of Disaster Relief Volunteers**

Here is a list of personal characteristics regarded to be favorable or unfavorable for an individual working in disasters. They are neither exhaustive nor sufficient to be regarded as inclusion or exclusion criteria in volunteer selection.

### **Favorable Characteristics**

- Flexible
- Mature
- High adaptability (e.g. function well in chaotic and confused situations & environments; able to function in role ambiguity, unclear line of authority and minimum structure)
- High level of energy to remain active and resourceful in face of stress
- Past experience in emergency situations
- Ability to monitor own stress
- Sense of challenge
- Adequate social support
- Use of positive emotions and laughter
- Hardiness (including commitment to find meaningful purpose in life, belief that one can influence one's surroundings and the outcome of events, and belief that one can learn and grow from both positive and negative life experiences)
- Optimistic yet realistic
- Good social skills (such as being socially extroverted, sensitive, empathic, comfortable in initiating conversations in any community settings, willing to "be with" survivors instead of feeling compelled to fix it all at once)
- Openness (e.g. comfortable with diverse culture, aware of and comfortable with others' value system and life experiences)



- Good problem solving skills (e.g. practical, good common sense, able to think on their feet etc.)
- Good team player (e.g. can work cooperatively with others, accept instructions)
- Eager to reach out
- Able to set personal limits
- Open to seek professional support when needed
- Confident about oneself

**Unfavorable Personal Characteristics**

- Negative perception/ interpretation of events
- Unrealistic self expectations
- History of traumatization
- Grandiosity (e.g. the presence of rescue fantasies or wounded ideals)
- Cynicism
- Antisocial behaviors
- Inability to concentrate
- Presence of sleep difficulties
- Over involved or over identified with the victims
- Not practising good self-care and stress management
- Low awareness of potential harm and danger (e.g. think they are immune from traumatization)



## **PART D - Safeguarding the Psychological Well-being of Volunteers**

- Participate in initial screening for possible risk factors
- Prepare yourself as far as possible about the disaster, general demographics of the site, your roles, procedures, potential risks, culture and existing situations of the site etc.  
This can increase your sense of control
- Familiarize with all safety measures
- Receive education and training including stress management and mental health components
- Ensure social support before, during and after assignments from co-workers, friends and spouse etc.
- Take good care of your physical health such as keeping regular exercise , drinking enough water, having adequate sleep and eating properly
- Abide by work rotation
- Take a break when you find your stamina, efficiency and tolerance are diminishing
- Aware of “counter-disaster syndrome” - a counter-productive behavioral pattern when an individual is overactive, over-conscientious but of low efficiency
- Be open and honest to the team about your limitations, emotions and reactions
- Acknowledge your experiences in the assignment
- Recognize and value your and others’ contributions
- Attend post-assignment meetings
- Give yourself time to pace with normal routines and life when return
- Recognize and heed early warning signs of stress reactions
- Receive assessment, evidence-based treatment and rehabilitation by skilled mental health workers when needed

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