Mutual Aid Groups & COVID-19 Newsletter

Issue 2, October 2021

As part of the project 'Facilitating the public response to COVID-19 by harnessing group processes', funded by the ESRC (Ref ES/V005383/1), we have been researching mutual aid and community support groups in the UK

Based on our interviews with coordinators/organisers of mutual aid groups and previous research on disaster communities, we identified **emotional care and support** as one factor that works for sustaining participation over time

Participation in mutual aid and community support groups can be a mixed experience, both rewarding and challenging, and finding ways to support volunteers is essential for sustaining participation

Volunteers can experience positive emotions and a greater sense of wellbeing

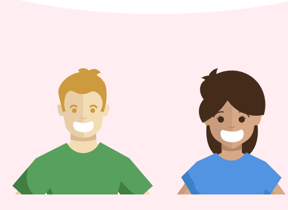
Pride

"so, I think quite a lot of the members who were quite involved in it did feel quite proud"
(Oscar, South East England).

Purpose

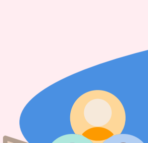
Q: So do you think that participating in community support has, over a long period of time, boosted your general day-to-day mood?

A: "Definitely. Yes. I'd like to feel like I have a purpose in life. And I think that's really important to people's happiness and wellbeing if they feel that there's a purpose to what they're doing every day. Your overall wellbeing will be better, I think."
(Jenny, Brighton)



and can gain awareness of and confidence in their ability to bring about social change

"I think just on a personal level, even if I'm not doing, you know, a huge amount of work, I just think it makes me feel less like I'm sort of passive - like, Oh God, I don't know what's going to happen...So I think doing small things like this it feels like, you know, I'm doing something to help those sorts of problems that can make me feel so worried. And I think that that's maybe sort of the biggest boost in a selfish way often from activism is just it gives you a bit more power and control, and lets you do some good things in the world"
(Josie, Brighton)

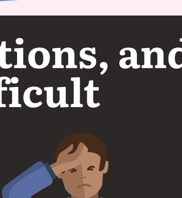


"They're [Silent Walks following Grenfell Tower fire] really powerful, and really meaningful. About the community coming together, it's our chance for us to sort of come together and show the authorities that, yeah, we are standing together. Whether the numbers are up, down, whether there's loads of us, whether there's ten of us or a hundred of us, it doesn't matter. I found them useful because I think it still puts it in their minds that, yeah, we're not resting."
(Lily, Silent Walks campaigner)

However, volunteers also experience negative emotions, and encounters with people's hardships can be difficult

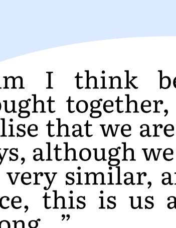
Witnessing difficulties

"Knowing that you know that someone who is, especially if they're old, like they're not, they're not going on Zoom, they've not probably got a tonne of people they can be chatting to. They're probably very isolated - to know that like, as soon as I, you know, I cycle off and I've dropped off their stuff they're back to just being totally on their own again."
(Peter, Brighton)



Stress

"You know, just the idea of having to put the mask on and arranging the payment and being really careful about wiping down the things you're touching. I mean, all of that is quite stressy. So, you know, it's not always been a stress reliever. Sometimes it's been, it's, sometimes it's added to this stress."
(Thomas, Brighton)

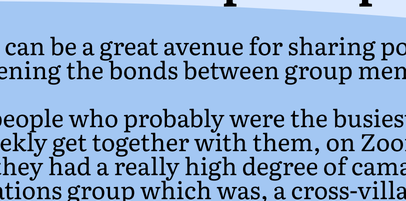


This means that it is important to acknowledge and support volunteers' emotional needs

Feeling like you belong to a group can make a meaningful difference to people's experience and is a great source of strength for volunteers

"ehm I think because we were all brought together, we were all made to realise that we are very similar in many ways, although we are very different, we are very similar, and so this is our little place, this is us and this is where we belong..."
(Ed, York, affected by 2015-16 floods)

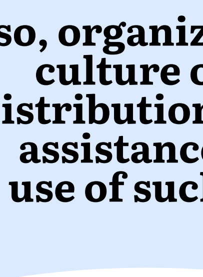
"most of my friends, they they're not interested in volunteering and that, they just don't know why I'm doing it. So I'm like going 'oh my god, am I the only person who actually wants to do something like this?' And then you meet all these other people who do as well, and it's just like, nice. Yeah."
(Julia, Brighton)



Groups successfully used different practices that increased a sense of group belonging and motivated volunteers to continue participation.

Keeping open communication can be a great avenue for sharing positive and negative experiences whilst strengthening the bonds between group members.

"For example, the helpline people who probably were the busiest of the volunteers, we [the organisers] would have a weekly get together with them, on Zoom, not physically. And let them share experiences, so they had a really high degree of camaraderie. We also had a group called the communications group which was, a cross-village group, that we put together to try to get over this lack of communication problem that we have in the village. And that sort of became more a cross-village advisory group. And I think that level of communication, bringing people together and just letting them share the good and the bad, helped keep people together."
(Karen, South East, England)



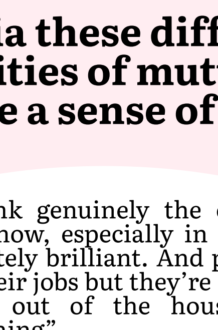
Celebrating wins
Social events, whether online or in-person, are a brilliant way to mark the group's successes, and keeping spirits high

"... yes, ok, and we all went to that piece of ground with a glass and a bottle of champagne and we had a chat and raised the glass, but it was blooming cold and I had a house full of family and friends anyway so we spent about half an hour also chatting and then we came back, but that was quite nice and I think it's still there, "alright we're all busy with our work, our hobbies and whatever, but we still have that underlying core of the community that we developed during the floods"

"We did actually want to close the road and have a street party, but the council weren't very keen on that"
(Dan, York, affected by 2015-16 floods)

Also, organizers and volunteers successfully established a culture of care, highlighting teamwork and equal distribution of work, emotional support provision, and assistance with the management of practical tasks. The use of such care strategies can help to avoid burnout and negative emotions

"a lot of the time it's just been giving people [volunteers] time and a listening ear, so I think that's been really important for folks"
(Logan, West Central, Scotland)



Q: Has involvement in the group meant a lot of time and effort for you, for the others?

A: "Yeah, I think, what we tried to do, is something I generally try to do, is make things very simple for people. So, we set up those processes and mechanisms to make sure that people had the least amount of work to do, so, when it came to somebody having to do a shopping task it was, "right, here's the shopping list, here's the phone number of the client, please phone them up and let them know when you are going to go, talk about any issues." All they had to do was that, do the shopping, send us a receipt, job done basically."
(Noah, East of England)

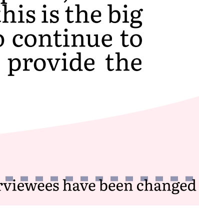
Via these different avenues for support and care, the activities of mutual aid and community support groups can create a sense of solidarity ("we are in this together") in the community

"I think genuinely the community spirit now, especially in [locality] is absolutely brilliant. And people have lost their jobs but they're still willing to go out of the house and do something"
(Mathew, West Midlands)

"...it's a really cheesy term but the kind of community-cohesion I think has really improved."
(Logan, West Central, Scotland)

and boost motivation to continue to help out

"I expect we'll continue to engage folks because I do think in terms of their values most of the volunteers really want to help people, they really wanted to, you know, make connections in their community, and this is a way for a lot of people to maybe not lived long to make new friends and maybe get involved in the life of the community, and I think that that will be a real legacy..."
(Logan, West Central, Scotland)



during the Covid-19 pandemic, and beyond

"This is no longer a COVID response, this a community response. So, if anybody at any point in next month, in a year or in two years, needs their shopping down, needs a prescription, needs taking to the doctors, the group will do it. Because we will now have the volunteers - this is the big thing that's come out of this, because we found all these volunteers, they all want to continue to help, a lot want to continue to help, they're able to sustain that, and continue to provide the service."
(Sophie, East of England)

Names of all interviewees have been changed

What's next?

We invite you to join our online event on November 3,2021, 12:30-2:30pm:

How can we sustain mutual aid and community support during the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond? Join us to hear different perspectives and engage in interactive discussions.

Sign up link: https://tinyurl.com/d6dshbf3

We invite you to inform our discussions by posting ideas on problems and solutions in volunteer retention and voluntary sector interactions: https://tinyurl.com/y69u97pa

Also, we have completed a 2-wave survey of people participating in COVID-19 mutual aid and community support groups. This study examines the psychological, organizational, practical factors that explain how to sustain involvement in community support and mutual aid groups over time. We will share the findings on our webpage.

Contact and updates

Check out our webpage for resources, outputs, and updates:
www.sussex.ac.uk/research/projects/groups-and-covid/community-support-and-mutual-aid

Follow us on @Groups_Covid19

or email us any query or suggestion: GroupsandCovid-19@sussex.ac.uk

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