

Helping participants and volunteers with problems

Occasionally RDA coaches and others say they are aware that one of their participants or volunteer colleagues appears to be struggling with a personal problem and, while they want to help, they are unsure how to respond.

Factors that influence the impact a stressful situation has on us include the way we perceive it, what else is happening in our lives and the amount and quality of personal support we have to help us face it. While we may be able to see the signs that a volunteer or participant is anxious, irritable, upset or depressed, we often don't know how they view their problem or anything about their support network. Their needs may be very practical in nature but sometimes a situation which might not be seen as serious, such as learning about the death of someone we don't know, has a huge effect because it reminds us of other losses or potential losses in our life. A person who is upset could be given the option to talk about their situation if you or someone else in the Group said something such as, 'You seem to be dealing with a lot and we wonder if there is anything we can do to help?'

Coaches and other volunteers often say they feel helpless to comfort the person with a problem. However, we should not underestimate the worth of what RDA provides to them: a diversion from their difficulties in a safe and caring environment; doing something as physical as riding or side walking can help distract you from stewing over a problem. Supporting someone with a problem usually has more to do with listening than advising and rushing in with solutions. It might sound harsh but it is usually better not to do for a troubled person what they can do for themselves unless their situation has worn them down to a point where, for instance, making several phone calls feels too much to deal with. Someone may want to hand over the reins of their life temporarily but otherwise keeping someone in the driving seat helps them feel more in control and able to deal with things.

Does your Group have a file of professionally run organisations specialising in helping those with housing, debt or drinking problems or a list of well qualified local counsellors or psychotherapists that you could signpost someone to? You could locate sources of free or subsidised help and counselling (such as Relate) as well as independent counsellors who charge fees on a sliding scale. You can find a local counsellor or therapist by visiting the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy website (BAC & P).

There is a lot of research that shows struggling with a personal or domestic problem is often accompanied by a dip in confidence, so it can be hard to ask for help when we need it most. Some people are prone to offer help when they need it themselves and we need to be alert to people over extending themselves when they don't really have the emotional resources to do so. Research also indicates that when we are with someone who is finding it hard to cope, we often end up mirroring their feelings. This is described as getting caught up in a parallel process. So when teams say, 'We all feel so helpless,' there is a fair chance that you are feeling what your participant or volunteer is feeling.

It can be a real challenge to support someone with a problem. We want to help but may not have the time to step outside our activities to give someone the attention they need. It can be more beneficial not to blur the boundaries of an existing relationship and suggest a therapist or counsellor or therapeutic organisation accountable to a professional body such as BAC & P or UKCP (UK Council for Psychotherapy). This avoids someone, for example, feeling too embarrassed to return to a Group because they judge they revealed too much about themselves in the midst of their difficulties. If your Group would like to compile some useful contacts and resources I would be pleased to help. It is better to be proactive and compile some resources you have confidence in rather than try to find them when someone is in crisis.

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