

you cannot be serious

a guide to involving volunteers with mental health problems

by Sherry Clark

chapter one

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foreword

This publication is the result of a Department of Health project to identify whether people with mental health problems benefit from being volunteers, and, if so, what barriers they encounter.

The answer to the first question turns out to be a resounding “yes” – many people who have had experience of mental ill health feel that volunteering has been a part of their recovery, and has often been one of the most important routes back into ‘normal’ life.

The obstacles that they encounter are often those that also prevent their access to employment, housing, and other forms of social participation: problems caused by a lack of confidence and self-esteem, and by a sense of being excluded. Many feel that concerns about the possible impact of their illness often obscure an understanding of their personal potential as individual citizens.

You Cannot Be Serious! sets out to do two things. Firstly, its intention is to highlight this potential, to show that people with mental health problems can make the same contribution to volunteering as any other volunteer. Secondly, to provide some practical information about aspects of mental ill health, to better enable volunteer managers to support a volunteer should they become less well, without risk to the volunteering activity. It does so at a moment of unprecedented concern within, across and beyond government to address the exclusion of people with mental health problems from accessing mainstream opportunities.

By showing that the skills and expertise of people with mental health problems as volunteers can be accessed with a level of support that is not substantially different from that required by any other volunteer, this publication makes a fresh and important contribution to our thinking on social inclusion in an area of civic life which has received little attention to date.

Its real value, though, is as a guide to action: providing a practical key to enabling citizens with mental health problems to engage in an area of life which itself is vital to the well-being of communities. Volunteering may be no substitute for employment, but it is an equally valuable and serious means by which the right to participate can be fulfilled. This publication offers a contribution to our understanding of the issue by affirming the personal value of volunteering in relation to mental health and by identifying the barriers to be tackled in widening access to its mutual opportunities.

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