

Why volunteers stop coming

Most people who leave never tell you they are leaving. **They stop deciding to come.** Six domains where the change shows up first, and what each one usually means. Print this page and keep it where you plan the roster.

20% of lapsed volunteers gave “no reason in particular” for stopping. No complaint, no exit conversation, nothing for a survey to catch. They simply drifted out, which is why the signals below have to be watched for rather than waited for.

NCVO, *Time Well Spent* 2023, 7,006 UK adults.

DOMAIN	WHAT YOU MIGHT NOTICE	WHAT IT USUALLY MEANS
Attendance	Later arrivals, earlier departures, cancellations clustering, the shift swapped and then swapped again.	Capacity has changed and they have not found a way to tell you.
Language	“Them” instead of names. “The clients.” Sardonic humor about the people served.	Depersonalization and reduced accomplishment — the two most serious burnout dimensions.
Scope	Taking on more, not less. Answering messages at midnight. Doing things that are clearly staff work.	Over-commitment, which precedes exhaustion. The most committed people burn out first.
Boundaries	Giving out personal numbers, meeting beneficiaries outside the program, “I am the only one who really understands them.”	A safeguarding risk and a burnout risk at once. Address it as both.
Social	Stopped coming to the informal parts. Leaves as soon as the task ends.	Relatedness has broken down. Often the earliest observable sign.
Conflict	Friction with one specific person. Complaints that are unlike them.	Frequently displacement. The real load is somewhere else.

Watch pattern, not state

The question is never “does this person seem tired today”. It is “is this different from three months ago?” A tired volunteer is normal. A volunteer who is different from themselves is the signal.

The seven-day rule

Anyone who misses two consecutive expected sessions without contact gets a message from a person within seven days. Not an automated scheduling reminder. A human, asking how they are.

WHAT NONE OF THIS IS

None of these are grounds for a conversation about performance. Every one of them is grounds for a conversation about **capacity** — what has changed, what would help, and what the person would drop if they could. The difference decides whether they answer honestly.

Six reasons they came in the first place

You cannot keep someone whose reason for being there you have guessed wrong. Thirty years of validation behind one inventory, and the words you will actually hear people use.

FUNCTION	WHAT IT DOES FOR THEM	YOU WILL HEAR IT AS
Values	Expresses altruistic and humanitarian concern for others.	"I care about this cause."
Understanding	New learning, and a chance to use skills that are otherwise unused.	"I never get to use this at work."
Social	Fitting in with, and being valued by, a group that matters to them.	"My friends do it." "I came with someone."
Career	Experience, contacts, credentials — a way in.	"It will look good on my résumé."
Protective	Reduces negative feeling: guilt, loneliness, one's own troubles.	"It gets me out of the house."
Enhancement	Increases positive feeling: self-esteem, growth, mattering.	"It makes me feel useful."

THE DISTINCTION MOST PEOPLE GET WRONG

Protective is not Enhancement. Both concern the self, but Protective is defensive: it reduces bad feeling. Enhancement is promotive: it increases good feeling. A volunteer running from loneliness and a volunteer running toward growth need different roles, different pacing and different recognition. Most people run two or three functions at once, so ask rather than guess.

Lower burnout

Volunteers high in Understanding and Values whose experience actually satisfied those motives reported significantly lower burnout symptoms. Matching is not only a recruitment tool, it is burnout prevention. The effect did not hold for Protective or Career, so do not over-generalize it.

Morse et al. (2022), n=512. Six functions: Clary, Snyder, Ridge, Copeland, Stukas, Haugen & Miene (1998), *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 74(6). Burnout dimensions: Maslach & Jackson (1981).

Where this came from

These two pages are cards 1 and 10 of twelve in **The Quick Reference Cards**, which also cover the motivation conversation, the role design canvas, screening in ten steps, the first shift, the 90-day runway, recognition that works, five hard conversations, the twelve KPIs and the twelve-month plan.

The cards ship inside **The Volunteer Engagement Masterclass** with a 69-page handbook, a training deck, a participant workbook, a live toolkit and a role description pack.

This sheet is free. Print it, copy it, hand it round your team, put it in your own training pack. No attribution needed, though we will not stop you.