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Survivor story-telling in road trauma education and support programs

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About this research

In 2019, an online survey was distributed to all current volunteers at the Road Trauma Support Service Victoria. Forty-seven surveys were submitted online, of which 42 were completed and useable.

Who participated?

Two thirds (66.7%) of the 42 participants were female. They ranged in age from 24 to 77 years, with an average age of 54.36 years.

Their involvement as a volunteer at RTSSV ranged from 3 to 6 years, with an average length of time of 4.5 years (n=40).

Why volunteer?

The most common reason for starting to volunteer at RTSSV was to educate others about the impact of road trauma, and to make a positive change in the community. Table 1 shows the ratings of the reasons for volunteering from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

Table 1: Reasons for volunteering (n=42)

Reason for volunteering	Mean score	Standard deviation
To educate others about the impact of road trauma	4.71	0.891
To make a positive change in the community	4.69	0.811
To give my experience a sense of meaning	4.10	1.031
To give me a sense of purpose	3.64	1.246
To help myself cope - for therapeutic benefit	2.98	1.179
To connect with others - for the social aspects	2.81	1.018

Volunteers expressed these reasons in their own words too, such as:

'I basically didn't want anyone else to have to live through what we did'

'I think it's not about a sense of my purpose, but perhaps give meaning and significance to the person that died ... it ensures they are remembered as significant. Even in death they continue to have purpose and meaning'

'If I can stop at least 1 person from making the same mistake I did, for them to avoid an accident I would be happy'.

What are the benefits?

Different benefits were identified by the 42 participants. The most commonly endorsed ones were the feeling of making a difference in the community, and finding the experience well-supported and rewarding, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: The benefits of volunteering

Perceived benefit	Mean score	Standard deviation
I feel I am making a difference in the community	4.55	0.550
I feel well supported by RTSSV	4.45	0.889
I have found the experience rewarding	4.45	0.739
I feel supported by other volunteers	3.95	1.081
It gives me a sense of purpose	3.81	1.153
I feel it is helpful for my healing process	3.55	1.310

Again, the key motivation for volunteering seemed consistent with the desire to educate others and make a positive change in the community. Some of the personal benefits of volunteering were also identified in the participants' own words in the box below.

Participants speak in their own words about the benefits of being a volunteer

'The education program itself is fabulous! I think there is a lot of work to be done in the processes and systems undertaken to engage with and connect RTSSV as an organisation with volunteers'

'The other volunteers had their own crosses to bare and I appreciated that. It was good to meet with others who understood though and "got it."'

'There are no benefits - unless one of the participants changes their behaviour'

On a scale from 1-5, most people reported feeling safe and comfortable as a volunteer (mean = 4.67, SD = 0.754, range 2-5). Most people also felt well prepared for telling their story in a meaningful way (mean = 4.02, SD = 1.093).

Most people reported feeling very supported, included and cared for as a volunteer. For example, they said:

'Road Trauma group are a wonderful group of people'.

'The Team I work with are very supportive and understanding'.

'I don't suppose anything prepares use for opening your heart to complete strangers, but my sense of purpose made it possible. I was supported totally by the facilitators, and knew that I could rely on them and not be afraid to conclude my session if necessary.'

What are the challenges?

Participants spoke of some of the challenges in their volunteering role, most of which were able their own ability to present well and manage the traumatic aspects of sharing their stories:

'I read my story to the participants and that was the only way I could cope with telling it. I had to have some kind of structure to it as it was in three parts. My daughter's life before the crash, the crash, and what transpired afterwards ... her funeral etc. Without that structure I would be stumbling and breaking down'.

'When I first commenced sharing my family's road trauma story, I did feel very vulnerable and not confident but as time (meanings many months) went by this changed and now feel confident. At times though can feel vulnerable if triggered by something.'

For others, there were challenges in having to manage the responses of the audiences they were addressing, such as:

'Listening to the arrogance of some of the participants in not owning their behaviour'

'Probably the most frustrating part is when a participant is either disruptive or they just show contempt for the forum'.

What are some areas for improvement within RTSSV's training program?

Participants identified some areas for improvement in the training, including for many, ensuring that training was formally delivered in the first place. There was mixed reporting of what training people had undergone. The section below highlights in volunteers' own words the key themes to consider for improvements in the training program.

Participants' views on improvements in training

'It would be helpful to have experienced speakers take part in the training apart from RTSSV staff. Also, I believe some people who have been accepted as volunteer speakers are far too early in their healing journey to be speakers. There should be more care and assessment taken with these people before they are admitted to the training programme'.

'local level courses at times that are flexible'

'Meeting with other speakers more local to where I live'

'More opportunity to view other volunteers at seminars'

'More time on story - showing how to present your story incorporating body language and voice tone'

'I strongly suggest that perhaps a counselling session be included to determine if a volunteer is possibly ready to commence'

Next steps

In addition to the survey capturing the views of 42 volunteers, individual interviews were conducted by University of Melbourne Master of Social Work students, Alicia Omoigui and Ulrike Pfisterer, with 24 of these volunteers. These interview transcripts are currently under analysis and the thematic findings will also be made available in 2020.

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