

# **HOW PSYCHIATRY HAS AFFECTED MY EXPERIENCE OF VOLUNTARY WORK AND VICE VERSA – A REFLECTION**

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Voluntary work has always been important to me.

I believe it is because, growing up in Malta, I was inspired by my grandmother.

People say charity begins at home and this was certainly true for her. After having raised three children to adulthood, attempting to do the best for them, she then proceeded to help raise their own children (me and my cousins, her grandchildren) so that her own children could have the freedom of furthering their careers.

Apart from all this, however, she would also volunteer with various local charities such as Hospice Malta, Caritas Malta, and Agenzija Appogg. She would do this well into her 80s, only stopping to care for my grandad, who sadly passed away within a year of being diagnosed with cancer.

Hospice Malta is a non-governmental organisation with a primary role to provide and promote palliative care for persons suffering from end-of-life cancer and motor neuron disease. Services are all free of charge to patients in Malta. (1)



Caritas Malta is part of the Caritas international and global community. Its mission is to alleviate poverty and promote human development and social justice, witnessing to the Christian faith and Gospel values. (2)



Agenzija Appogg forms part of the Maltese Government's Foundation for Social Welfare Services. Its aim is to bring about a positive and healthy change in people's lives. It offers

various support lines in diverse settings, such as domestic and child abuse, suicide, homelessness, loneliness, human trafficking, and others. (3)



Foundation for Social  
Welfare Services  
Here for you

Growing up in Malta until I moved to the UK, I was privileged enough to be able to volunteer at the local general hospital speaking to and supporting patients who were on dialysis. I also had the opportunity of volunteering abroad with the Sisters of Mother Theresa, organising and running summer schools for children from poor backgrounds and broken homes in Armagh, Northern Ireland, Palermo, Sicily and London, England. I had the opportunity to do this during my 6<sup>th</sup> form and medical school years.



I truly mean the words 'privilege' and 'opportunity' when I use them, as that is what voluntary work is. In the words of my wise grandmother, "When you give to others, you receive tenfold in return".

Perhaps my experience of voluntary work is what led me down the route of psychiatry. That idea of looking at someone more holistically and trying to understand the way someone is thinking, feeling, and experiencing the world and what they have previously gone through. What I did not expect was how psychiatry would change my experience of voluntary work.

Now it might be the case that the voluntary work I decided to undertake was more emotionally draining and difficult; however, I feel that my experience working in psychiatry for two years, and experiencing a particular case, really did change the way I experienced certain types of voluntary work.

I had been interested in volunteering with the Samaritans as a listening volunteer for a while for multiple reasons. My grandmother had volunteered for Agenzija Appogg in Malta which offers the sort of support that the Samaritans do, and, working in psychiatry, I always felt I wanted to do more for someone who was in crisis and listen to them more, be there for them just as another human being, without my clinical cap on.



A part of me was always a bit worried about how I would handle the listening alone, not being able to keep that person safe or treat them in some way or other, so I was reluctant. Also, with work commitments, it was very easy to put off signing up ... as I was 'busy'.

During one of my psychiatry training posts, a patient who was under our team's care, and well known to most of us, unfortunately and very sadly, committed suicide. This was the first time in my training I had to deal with such a situation, and it was a highly upsetting and shocking experience.

And that was that .... a week later I was all signed up and rearing to go.

I must stress here - this might sound like I signed up on a whim; however, I had done my research with regards to the Samaritans. I knew how they worked and that they were just there to lend a listening ear. I was aware that they cannot give advice or talk someone out of a decision, or admit them to a hospital, or treat them, etc. However, that was not the point of what I wanted to do. As I said earlier, I just wanted to be there for someone when they were struggling or going through a difficult time or feeling like they were going to end things and just did not want to be alone.

I also felt I would be suited to it as, although I could not be clinical in my thinking and handling of situations. The Samaritans are there for anyone who's struggling to cope, who needs someone to listen without judgement or pressure (4) and I felt that psychiatry had equipped me with other skills that were necessary, such as being discreet, accepting, open-minded, supportive, empathic, and honest.

After some initial paperwork and an interview, the training was due to begin. Despite my great desire to do this, I was still anxious about it all and how I would take to it. Luckily, before they let new volunteers loose on the public, the Samaritans arrange ten highly structured weeks of training sessions, which are rigorous, intensive, and highly well organised. Training sessions include homework, further reading, and exercises between sessions, and I found all this highly informative, interesting, and reassuring.

In the first session we had to introduce ourselves with our Samaritan names – I chose my grandfather's pet name since he had just passed away and I felt it was appropriate! We had to say what we do and why we were joining the Samaritans and so, naturally, I explained that I was in psychiatry training, and that I wanted to do more for people who were struggling and just be able to be there for them and listen to them. I was asked about how I would cope with and handle someone who may call who was possibly mentally unwell. The question was whether I may be tempted to advise them to attend hospital or do something more 'clinical' to help them. I explained that, while I might be tempted, I was sure I would be able to follow the Samaritans' guidelines and teachings. And so, training began ....

I feel the most useful part, actually the best part, of the training that prepares you for the real-life calls are the simulated ones that are carried out after the sessions where one of the trainers or another volunteer calls you on your phone and you simulate a conversation with a "caller". Given the question I had been asked on my first session, I was anxious about how I may respond and what my natural instincts would be. However, I was very much able to adapt and answer appropriately and received highly positive feedback. One of the trainers was highly honest with me and told me how she was sceptical initially, as she was concerned about my clinical background and the influence my day-to-day job may have on my ability to be a listening Samaritan. However, after carrying out a call with me, she was

pleased and comforted to see how I could respond to someone. I feel that working in psychiatry really helped with that. What it did not help with was removing that clinical hat, and while I could keep those thoughts and feelings to myself and could feel satisfied in the knowledge that I was there for someone who perhaps had no one else to talk to, there was a little voice in my head that would sometimes say/think “this service would be good for this person” or “if only they had called an ambulance” or “tried this medication” ... but I coped and was able to keep things separate.

I was at the end of the training. I had completed it successfully and was all prepared to start when, disaster struck. I have a somewhat complex first name and, due to some administration error, the team that carries out the final checks was unable to verify me. My Samaritans’ journey was, therefore, unfortunately, cut short.

The Samaritans did contact me again about joining the next cohort of volunteers and doing a reduced version of the training, as I had already done it all. However, I had found that, in the last few simulated calls, some of them were striking a bit too close to home, and by “home”, I mean “work”, and while I did not notice at the time, during the training, once it was completed and I was out of it, I realised that, while I would be able to stick to the Samaritans’ way of doing things, I was concerned it would eventually take its toll on me and, not being able to make use of other skills I used every day, become too much. So, with great sadness and after a great deal of consideration, I declined their offer for the next cohort but said I would reconsider in the future.

So, was it a case that, at the final hurdle, I was unable to put all that training to practice? I do not believe so in the slightest. I feel that, while I could use my work to help my volunteering, I found my volunteering training profoundly helped my clinical practice. It honed my skills as an active listener and made me more acutely aware of how I was communicating and reflecting back to my patients. I felt as though I had been given the ultimate course in communication, listening, and discussing difficult topics and felt revitalized for it.

I look back now, and regret not rejoining. That is easily solved, however, and I will likely sign up again in the near future. While realistically, I know that this type of volunteering is not

for everyone, and it may be too close to the work done day in day out for some, this is not a reflection to put people off volunteering for the Samaritans, or any other similar organisation .... far from it!!

I think the training received is good enough to prepare you and make you put down your clinical hat and use the other skills you have thanks to being a doctor and, specifically, being in psychiatry, makes us all highly well suited to volunteering with this wonderful organisation. Not only can we lend our skills to it, but it also gives us back and helps with our work so we can be better for our patients and for the people at the other end of the phone thus coming full circle.

Once again, my very insightful grandmother was proved right. So, I encourage you to strengthen the skills you need on a day-to-day basis in psychiatry by making use of said skills through volunteering! I certainly will be doing so!

- (1) Hospice Malta: <https://hospicemalta.org/about/>
- (2) Caritas Malta: <https://www.caritasmalta.org/about>
- (3) Agenzija Appogg: <https://fsws.gov.mt/en/appogg/Pages/overview.aspx>
- (4) Samaritans: <https://www.samaritans.org/about-samaritans/our-organisation/what-we-do/>