Three years of ‘Living with Grief’

Reviewing a series of meetings for people who have been bereaved

Highland Hospice, Ness House, Bishops Road, Inverness, IV3 5SB, Scotland.

Una Smale (u.smale@highlandhospice.org.uk ) Simon Spence (s.spence@highlandhospice.org.uk)

Background
Highland Hospice is the only specialist palliative care service in the Scottish Highlands, covering the city of Inverness, and a rural area approximately the size of Belgium. The Bereavement Support Service is an integral part of the Hospice’s holistic philosophy which, in addition to the best possible patient care, seeks to offer support to family and friends.

Bereavement Support at Highland Hospice
A range of support is offered flexibly in response to differing individual needs and preferences. Ongoing support is offered primarily through individual counselling. Additionally ‘Living with Grief’ is offered regularly as an opportunity to explore the experiences of grieving, in a time-limited therapeutic group setting.

Current format of ‘Living with Grief’ meetings
1. Weekly sessions of two hours duration (followed by an optional, informal opportunity for refreshments), offered over eight weeks.
2. ‘Living with Grief’ offered twice each year.
3. Group co-facilitated by (minimum) two staff members; both accredited counsellors, with extensive group work experience.
4. Maximum of 9/10 participants, mixed in nature of bereavement, age, gender, social and cultural background.
5. Closed group; all members committing to attend all meetings as far as possible.

Our aims for the review
Three years after a review of the initial group work provision (Smale, U., Spence, S. 2009*) we wished to assess the subsequent changes and developments, particularly with regard to active ongoing evaluation.

(*)Living with Grief. Poster Presentation, Help The Hospices Conference, Harrogate, 2009)

Evaluation Methods
Evaluation of the group is an integral part of the group process. It involves:
1. Continual, informal, formative evaluation of participant experiences, leading to adaption in group process and practicalities pertaining to participants’ needs and preferences.
2. Formal summative evaluation in the final session involving varied approaches (see below) and an anonymised questionnaire returned later.

The group format evolves in response to evaluation.

The programme is now less prescriptive.

Whilst actively involved, it is shaped primarily around issues and concerns identified by participants as being of specific relevance and importance to their own situations.

We have been continually challenged to remain open to the unknown, and to support an open, dynamic, and dialectical process.

Key Points

- For people who are bereaved, Individual counselling and groupwork can both be highly valued sources of support, but meet different needs. Ideally both opportunities should be made available and chosen according to individual preference.
- Direct participant involvement in planning, process, and evaluation of such a group appears to be highly valued when supported and facilitated.

Acknowledgement
We would like to express our thanks and appreciation to all participants over the three years, for their presence, involvement, and willingness to contribute to ongoing evaluation.