



**your** story. **your** time. **your** wellbeing.

## Resource 6:

Some Tools For CCL Listeners



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## **Some Tools For CCL Listeners**

**CCL Scotland provides us with the opportunity to listen to patients in the community setting. As chaplains and trained listeners we have valuable resources of reflection and sustenance which we have had the privilege of learning - and from my experience of listening over the last two years I have come to think of some of these as 'tools' we might offer to patients to develop their resilience to cope with their own difficulties.**

### **TIME IS THE MOST IMPORTANT RESOURCE WE CAN GIVE TO OTHERS**

Time to tell their story and enable them to feel heard. A few patients I have listened to have only attended one session, and while there may be other reasons for this, it seems that some just needed to tell someone what they were carrying, and in the doing so were enabled to find the strength to continue. A 50 year old woman, sharing the story of how as a profoundly deaf teenager away at school, had been excluded from her father's illness by not being told until after his death and then not allowed to attend the funeral, said, "I'm the one who can't hear, but no one heard my pain or even recognised it." She had not felt heard for thirty years.

### **NARRATIVE IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THERAPEUTIC ACTIVITY**

Often in the telling of the story people feel healed, because they have been listened to without judgement or criticism, and feel heard and understood. Sometimes in the telling of the story things become clear for the individual - "I've just heard myself say what I need to do." is not an uncommon reaction. Sometimes in the reminiscing we can help the individual find a sense of value and meaning – "These are the things that have mattered to me." At the end of the listening I summarise what I have heard and replay it to the individual, to affirm them in a sense of being heard.

### **MEANING MAKING**

Following on closely from our listening to the story are the tools we offer by way of making meaning. Often patients come with their own 'why, what and how' questions: "Why is this happening to me?"; "Why does God allow this suffering when I have done nothing to deserve it?"; "How can I cope with this loss?"; "How do I carry on?" We do not have the answers but we can take seriously these questions, and offer an empathic presence as the questions are asked, and the individual struggles towards finding their own meaning in the situation. Listeners can ask useful questions too, to help the individual work out a sense of meaning: "What gives you a sense of purpose?"; "What inspires you?"; "What gives you energy and pleasure?"; "What makes you feel valued?"; "Do you have a belief which sustains you?"

By asking questions such as these we may be able to help the individual move towards finding meaning in the situation in which they find themselves. Often at the end of the listening I ask, "Out of all that we have talked about today what is the most important thing for you to remember?"

## TOOLS FOR THE BEREAVEMENT JOURNEY

Many share the stress of the bereavement journey.

Again listening to the story of the loss often helps the individual to make it part of their lives - they need to keep putting it into words to make it real for themselves. I find the most important tool here is '**normalising their experience**'. Reassuring the bereaved that what they are experiencing is normal, that they are not going mad, and that they should expect to feel sad. And that while what they are feeling is normal, everyone grieves at a different rate, so they should take their own time to deal with what needs to be done. We have so hidden death in our society that many have no concept of '**the bereavement journey**' and expect to feel better within weeks.

Thanks to Dodie Graves in her published work, 'Talking with Bereaved People'. I have found her suggestions of helping patients to '**relocate**' those who have died to a sense of presence with them in a new way, and to unwrap the lasting '**legacy**' of the deceased, very useful tools for the journey of bereavement.

The simple tool of the '**memory book**' has proved helpful for many.

This is a book which is not a scrap book or photograph album but a place where special photographs can be gathered and the memories they evoke be written about, where snippets of story can be recorded, where letters to the deceased can be written, where the legacy can be gathered and celebrated. The making of this book often helps the bereaved to grieve in a safe way, and helps with relocation as the story below shows.

A young woman brought up by her father and therefore very close to him, learned that he had tragically died in a carbon monoxide poisoning and lain undiscovered. She was filled with guilt and remorse that she had not been there to find him, or had the opportunity to say all that she would have wanted to say to him. I encouraged her to make a memory book of her special memories, expressing her feelings, and also to write letters to her father saying the things she would have liked to say to him both before he died and now. She returned saying, "It has been helpful to discover I don't have to carry this guilt forever, and to be able to relocate my dad back into the house from the cemetery. I can feel at peace again."

## A TOOL FOR LOOKING AT STRESS – THE PIE CHART

Another young woman came to see me, ashamed that she had been signed off work with stress and then told me how in the last year she had had a baby, moved house, started a new job - which involved shift work - and was missing the family support she had had before moving away. I suggested she draw a circle and divide it into different sized sections according to how much time she devoted to work, baby, five year old, husband etc. She looked at what she had drawn and burst into tears saying, "This is completely unsustainable isn't it?" She went home to ask her husband to do the same thing and then to talk to him about what changes they needed to make.

## UNTANGLING THE THREADS

Often people come with complex and multiple problems and it helps just to help them untangle the different threads - sometimes I use a piece of paper to do this and draw a sort of mind map with them of

the different strands. I then help them prioritise what they need to pay attention to and look to see what might be the options of any action they might take. Breaking down this huge 'weight of stress' into individual components is often helpful in allowing the individual to take the first steps towards change.

## SETTING GOALS

For those with low self esteem, a sense of hopelessness or mild depression it can be helpful to encourage them to set one or two goals for each day. This has varied from the basic bothering to put on clothes, to going out for a walk, to meeting a friend for coffee, to tackling one job that needs doing etc. I encourage the individual to keep a diary of targets met to increase their sense of self worth and sense of achievement.

## RELAXATION

Many of the people I see are anxious in some way - about family situations, unemployment, work and health. After listening to their concerns I have tried to teach them one or two techniques that they might find useful:

- **Simple watching of the breath** to allow the rhythm to calm and help relax. I ask them to think about life, energy, peace filling them with every in breath and letting go of anxieties, negative thoughts, tiredness etc. with every out breath.
- **This exercise could be turned into prayer** with a simple mantra in time with the breathing e.g. 'Holy Spirit bring me your peace, comfort, forgiveness for those with a meaningful faith.'
- **The use of visualisation** is also very helpful. I invite the individual to use their imagination to go to a peaceful place. I encourage them to use all their senses to create the scene, listening to the sounds, looking at the colours, smelling the smells, feeling the textures etc. and then I get them to sit down and be comfortable - enjoy the sun on their face and absorb the peace of that place, letting go of their anxieties. I ask them to return to the present bringing that sense of peace with them and knowing that they can return to that place in their imagination when they need to.

## MINDFULNESS

I've tried to encourage individuals to understand that happiness is not 'somewhere over there in a place which is out of their grasp' or that it is not found in some big way by for example winning the lottery - but that it is more to do with enjoying the little things of each day. To be in the present moment is an art that we have lost - so I have tried to teach individuals how to become present to the things around them by focussing on one thing at a time - using their senses to really enjoy and appreciate, and to experience the pleasure which doing this brings.

Some of this seems a long way from just listening, and of course listening is the most important tool - but out of active listening comes a sense of what might help, and if we offer the individuals tools which they can try and use, then they will be enabled to develop their coping strategies and inner resources.

**All have sometimes been helpful and convince me that the resources we know about as chaplains have an important contribution.**

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