

"It's not counselling, it's conversations & that's usually all that's needed"

A Service Evaluation of a Hospital Based, Volunteer Led, Bereavement Comfort Call Service.

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Introduction

The death of a loved one can be a devastating experience and can lead to isolation and loneliness (UKBC, 2022). In Northern Ireland almost half (47%) of deaths in 2022 occurred in hospital (NISRA, 2023). The Bereavement Comfort Call (BCC) Service is unique in Northern Ireland, as it is the only hospital based, post-bereavement, telephone support service provided by a team of trained volunteers. The service is supported by the Hospital Trust Bereavement Team.

Aim To explore the BCC volunteers' experience, support needs and perceptions of best practice.

Methods In-depth semi-structured interviews were performed with a purposive sample and were thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Results A total of nine (36%) volunteers participated in the study, participant characteristics can be found in Table 1. Four themes were identified; Wonderful Service, Grief is Hard, Gift of Listening and Bridging the Gap.

Table 1: Participant Characteristics

Gender	7 Female	2 Male
Age	Mean 51 years (range 20-69)	
Marital Status	4 Single	1 Divorced
	3 Married/Co-hab	1 Widowed
Employment	4	1
	Full-time	Part-time
		Retired
Currently in Education	4 yes	5 no
Highest Level Education	A-Level 1	Professional 1
	HND 1	Masters 1
	Degree 5	
Duration Volunteering with BCC	Mean 2 years (range 0.5-3 years)	
Previous Experience of Volunteering	7 Yes	2 No

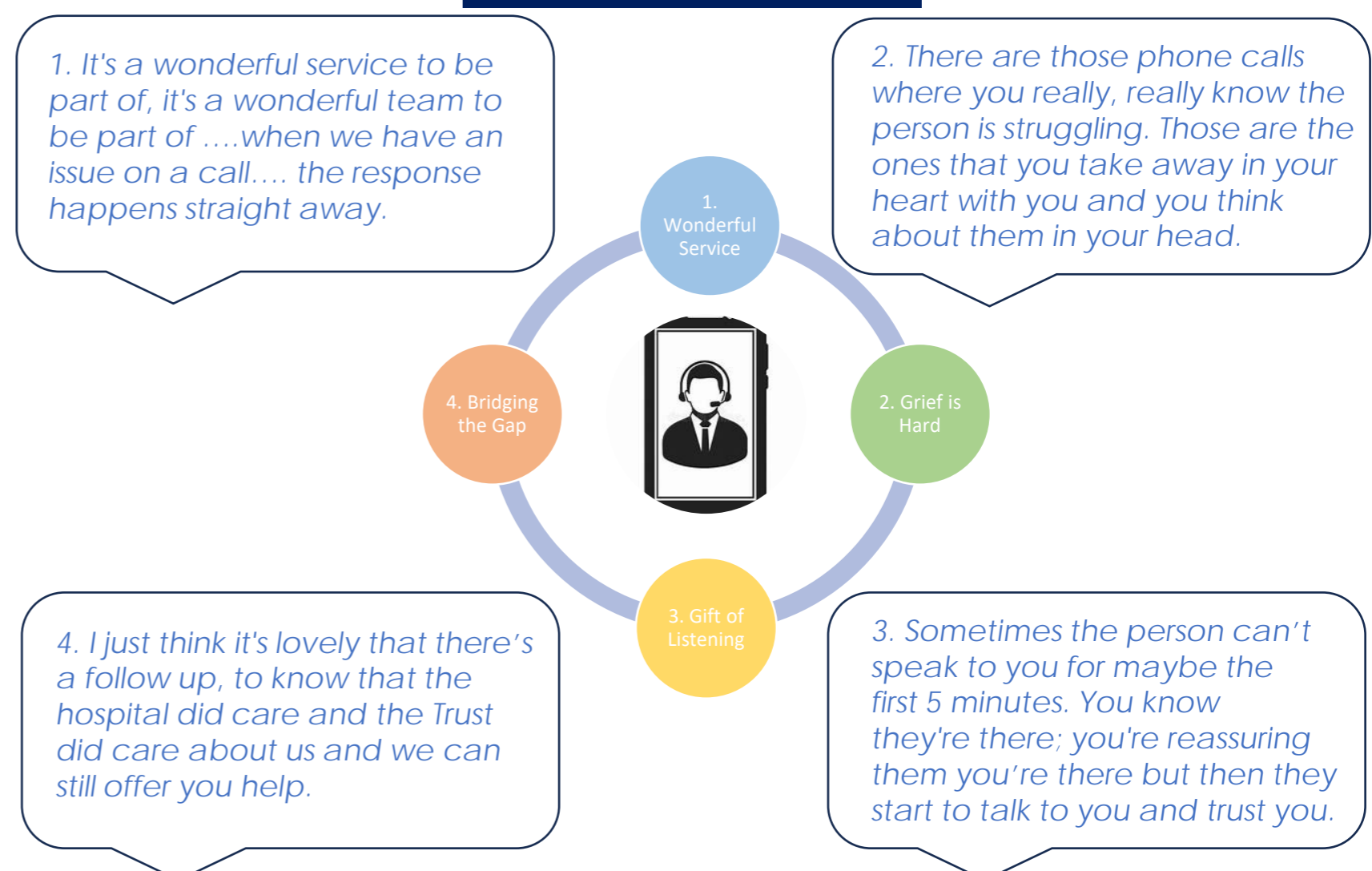
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References

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). Thematic analysis: A practical guide. Sage.
 NISRA (2023) [Registrar General Annual Report 2021 Deaths | Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency \(nisra.gov.uk\)](https://www.nisra.gov.uk)
 UK Commission on Bereavement (2022) [UKCB findings - UK Commission on Bereavement \(bereavementcommission.org.uk\)](https://www.bereavementcommission.org.uk)

Themes



Discussion

Wonderful Service	Volunteering was an important part of their lives. They believed they had received adequate training to make the calls. The volunteers appreciated that the support staff were accessible before & after a call.
Grief is Hard	Volunteers described how they prepared for each call & often initiated self-care following a difficult call.
Gift of Listening	All volunteers were aware of the boundaries of the service. They do not see themselves as counsellors; they listened & sign-posted to other sources of support. The volunteers were also able to feedback compliments & complaints to the Trust.
Bridging the Gap	The volunteers described the comfort call as a safety net, ensuring the bereaved person received support if required. They helped find practical solutions to issues & believed local & cultural knowledge was fundamental to the service. They were reassured that support staff would follow-up on any concerns.

Conclusion

The challenge for healthcare professionals is to determine appropriate measures to support those experiencing grief in the wake of a death in Hospital. The benefit of incorporating volunteers into bereavement support should not be underestimated. The volunteers provide an important safety net for the bereaved person. In order for a service such as this to flourish & expand, best practice would suggest the volunteers are dependent on the presence of a good support team to supervise and debrief. The Bereavement Comfort Call also creates opportunities for the Trust to understand the families experience of death & dying. Enabling the Hospital to make improvements to care & staff training.