

EVALUATION OF A 7-WEEK STRUCTURED BEREAVEMENT COURSE FOR THOSE WHOSE LOVED ONE HAS DIED FOLLOWING A CANCER DIAGNOSIS



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BACKGROUND

Maggie's supports everyone affected by cancer including those bereaved through cancer.

The facilitator (Clinical Psychologist) and members of our monthly bereavement support group felt their experience of the group and ability to move forward was being impacted by recurring themes which needed addressing when newly bereaved members joined. To better meet this need, a structured bereavement course was developed for everyone to attend as a pre-requisite to joining the ongoing monthly support group.

A 7-week course (90-minute sessions) was developed, covering the main themes from the group as well as bereavement research. The course includes elements of Psychoeducation, Acceptance Commitment Therapy, Compassion Focused Therapy, and Emotion Regulation techniques weaved into each weekly session with homework suggestions. The course aimed to increase understanding of grief and bereavement, as well as supporting the development of more effective coping strategies, social connectedness, increased confidence engaging in meaningful activities, ongoing connections with their loved one and preparing for the future.

Participants also received a workbook summarising the main information, as well as tools and strategies.



METHOD

Each potential participant identified by the team was assessed individually by the facilitating clinician to discuss readiness and appropriateness for the course and to screen for significant risk or trauma symptoms. The referral criteria included a minimum period since bereavement of 3-6 months depending on individual circumstances (e.g. if this was a 2nd bereavement) and that the bereavement was cancer related.

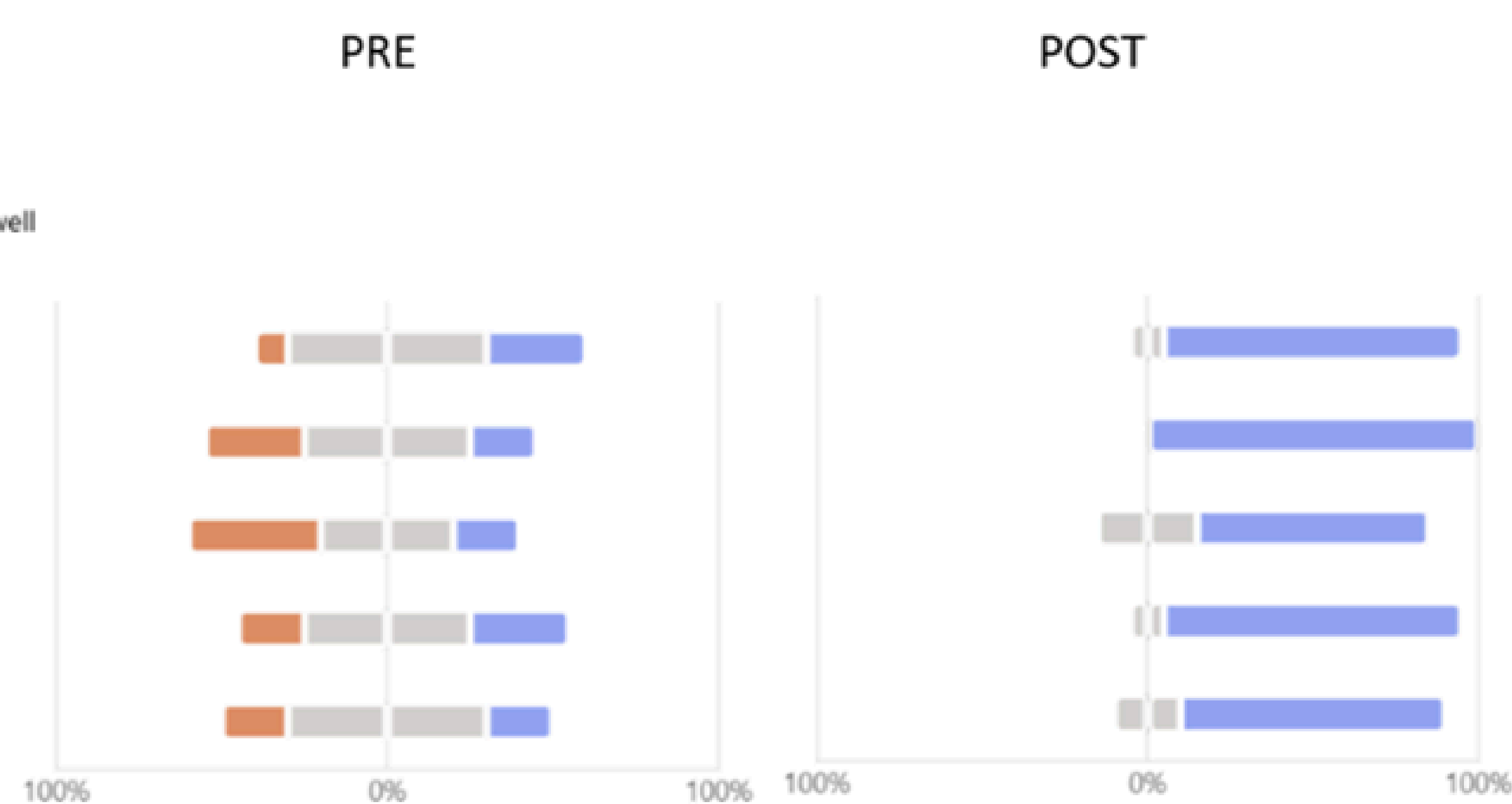
26 participants have completed the course to date. An initial course evaluation was completed by 6/10 participants following the pilot course which showed improvement in understanding, confidence and practical skills to navigate grief however no pre data was available for comparison (not included below). A further 10/16 subsequent participants completed a pre- and post-course survey, the results of which are below. The survey consists of 13 questions, covering satisfaction with course, comparing understanding, confidence and coping with before the course on a three-point scale ("more than", "the same as", "already knew this/confident in/managing this"). Two open-ended questions asked participants what they found helpful and what was missing or could be improved. The remaining questions covered demographics and whether participants would recommend the course to others and if they intend to come back to Maggie's for further support.

RESULTS

How well do you feel you understand...

● Not much understanding ● Some understanding ● I feel I understand this well

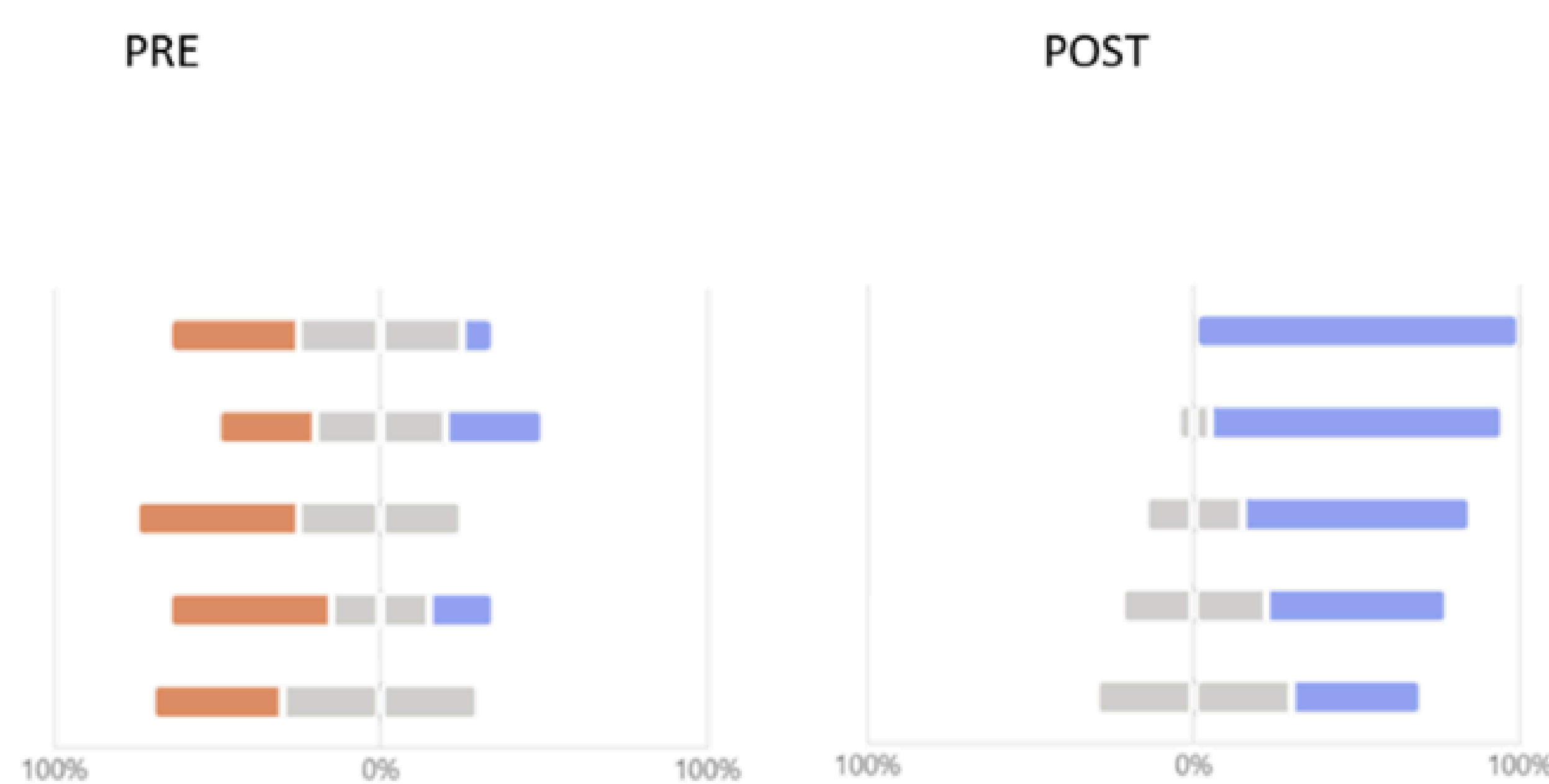
Grief and bereavement
Emotions in grief
Ways of coping with grief
Values
Boundaries



How confident do you feel...

● Not really confident ● Somewhat confident ● I feel confident with this

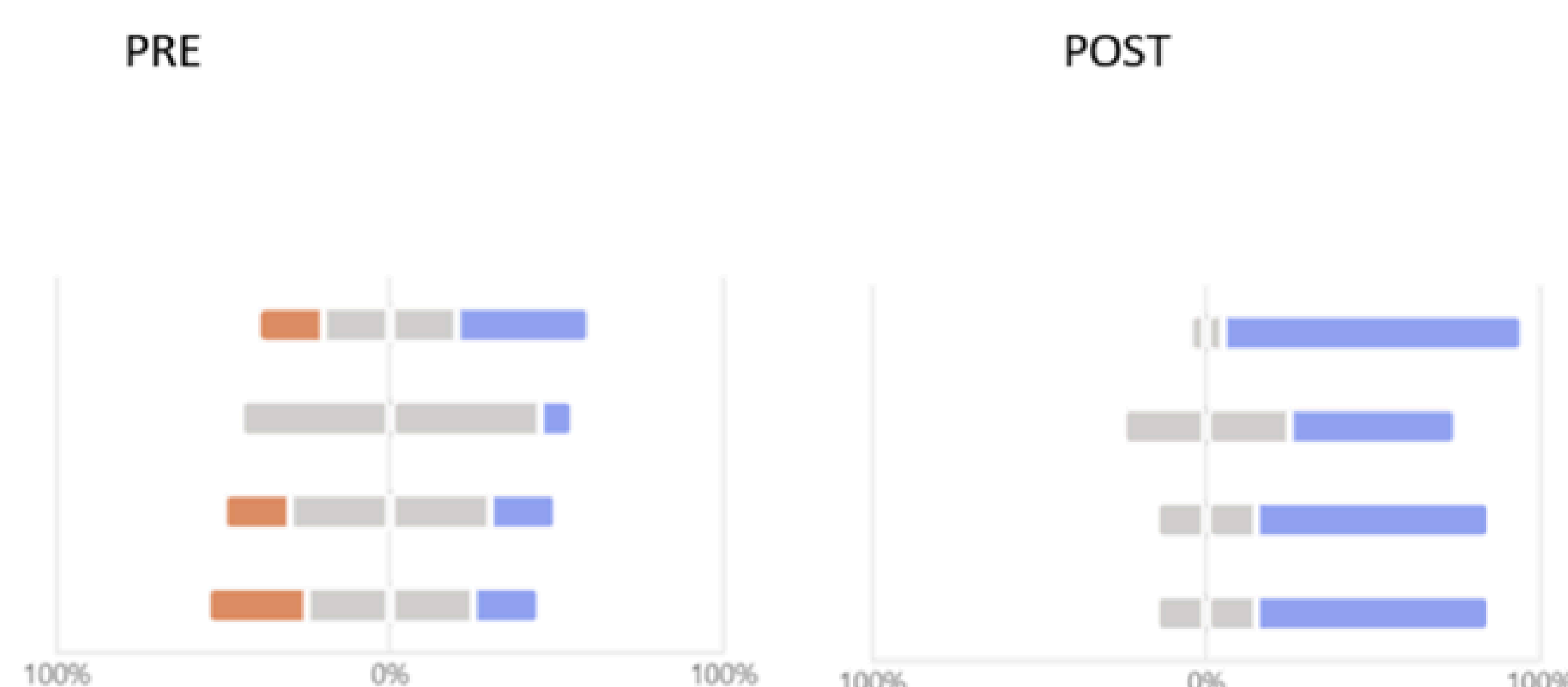
Understanding your experience of grief
Talking to others about your experience of grief e.g. friends
Preparing for some upcoming 'firsts' in your grief
Seeking support from others
Going forward into the future



How well do you feel you are managing...

● Not managing ● Somewhat managing ● I am managing this well

Day to day activities e.g. looking after yourself, shopping
Taking part in social activities
Being able to reminisce about your loved one or connect to them in some way
Life admin e.g. having to find ways to manage finances, household repairs



The age range was 25 - 84 for 3 male and 7 female participants.

Cancer types of loved ones included: lung, pancreatic, liver, breast, prostate, oesophageal and rare cancers. Relationships with the loved one included parent, child, spouse and sibling.

The majority reported increases in understanding across all themes covered by the course (grief and bereavement, emotions in grief, ways of coping with grief, values, and boundaries).

The majority of participants also reported increased confidence across areas (in understanding their experience of grief, talking to others about grief, preparing for upcoming "firsts", seeking support from others and going forward into the future).

The majority of participants also reported they felt more able to manage day to day activities, taking part in social activities, reminiscing about their loved one, and general life tasks.

The biggest changes were noted in feeling more prepared for the "firsts" (a change of 70% from pre to post), understanding emotions in grief (a change of 80% from pre to post) and understanding their experience of grief (90% change from pre to post).

Participants have fed back that this course has improved their overall wellbeing as well as supporting them to be active agents in managing their grief. Quotes from participants can be found on the following page.

100% WERE VERY SATISFIED WITH THE COURSE AND WOULD RECOMMEND THE COURSE TO OTHERS BEREAVED THROUGH CANCER

QUOTES FROM PARTICIPANTS

Participant responses to the question “What did you find most helpful?”:

- EXPERT SUPPORT EARLY ON TO HELP ME GET THROUGH THE UNEXPECTED, AND LEARNING NEW WAYS TO COPE
- EVERYONE FELT THE SAME AND SO YOU WERE “NORMAL”
- THINKING ABOUT HOW TO APPROACH THE FUTURE
- BEING ABLE TO SPEAK TO PEOPLE WHO ARE ALSO DEALING WITH GRIEF AND FACING THE SAME CHALLENGES
- FINDING SOME HOPE THAT THINGS WILL FEEL DIFFERENT
- MANAGING CHALLENGES LIKE SLEEP, WORRY ABOUT THE FUTURE AND PRACTICAL TIPS
- I FEEL BETTER PREPARED FOR WHAT IS TO COME
- TALKING ABOUT HOW TO DEAL WITH THE ROLLERCOASTER OF EMOTIONS IN GRIEF
- FINDING WHERE I WANT MY LIFE TO GO NEXT NOW I AM ON MY OWN E.G. WHAT IS IMPORTANT TO ME, WHERE I WANT TO LIVE
- KNOWING HOW TO EXPLAIN TO OTHERS THAT GRIEVING NEVER ENDS BUT YOU ADJUST OVER TIME (WHY I STILL GET UPSET)
- FINDING NEW WORDS TO DESCRIBE HOW I FEEL AND HOW TO DEAL WITH IT. GRIEF IS EXHAUSTING!

CLINICIAN’S REFLECTIONS

Although the course was structured, we allowed time for discussions based on the group needs. We talked openly about challenges, thoughts and emotions, relationships, the future and times of despair (including suicidal ideation). There was real honesty and vulnerability within the group, and participants held space for each other’s emotions and also supported each other.

It was great to see participants form connections within the group. Many from the course meet informally at Maggie’s for peer support as well as continuing to attend monthly support groups. Each “cohort” of the course supports those who are new to the monthly group, and it’s helpful in giving others hope that they too can feel differently in time and find new meaning. Monthly follow on groups have an element of peer support along with some set themes e.g. sleep, managing stress, finances, Christmas/New Year.

Elements of psychoeducation, acceptance commitment therapy, compassion focused therapy and emotion regulation worked well in this course and were easily adapted for the needs of the group e.g. working on values based activities (in the context of values changing in grief).

Participants were also encouraged to attend other elements of support at Maggie’s including relaxation sessions, exercise sessions and individual support.

CONCLUSION

A further course with 8 participants is underway and will be evaluated in due course. Preliminary data from the bereavement course evaluation suggests that it is satisfactory and beneficial to participants and improves knowledge and confidence in navigating common themes around grief and bereavement. Of particular note is the improvements seen in feeling more prepared to cope with upcoming “firsts”, understanding and coping with emotions in grief, and understanding their experience of grief. Over time (although not measured empirically as yet) the clinician has seen improvements in participant’s ability and confidence dealing with emotions, planning for the future, and engaging in other supports e.g. exercise sessions. Planned 6-12 month follow ups will help establish any longer-term benefits of the course.

Those who have completed the course in January 2024 and continued attending monthly support groups have reported positive changes in their ability to navigate grief, feel more prepared for difficult moments, seeking support when needed and managing daily life with more ease. They described this as “more space between moments of overwhelm and grief” and “having better tools to cope”. They have continued to meet informally in the centre and build peer support connections which has had a huge benefit. They have also been able to access the team for individual support as needed.

The course supporting those bereaved due to cancer has been successful in allowing people attending the monthly bereavement support group to all have the same baseline knowledge, improving outcomes and satisfaction for those attending the group. Previous course attendees have been a support to those newly joining the group after the course, and this has allowed attendees to see progress in themselves and give hope to others that grief can become more manageable with support and time. This course can now be rolled out in Maggie’s centres across the UK and be adapted for local needs as required.



WITH THANKS TO THE TEAM AT MAGGIE’S ABERDEEN, PARTICIPANTS AND MY WIDER COLLEAGUES FOR YOUR SUPPORT WITH THIS NEW PROJECT.