

Impact Report

Online Bereavement Counselling during COVID-19

December 2020 to March 2021

Background

On 18 August 2020, Sharon Townsend, a Psychodynamic Counsellor and NHS Mental Health Chaplain, and Dorothy Dwyer, a teacher, trainer, and Grief Coach (both co-founders and Directors of Living Loss CIC) presented the work of Living Loss to Directors of the ABALON Trust. They gave a brief overview of how they have been supporting people through loss and bereavement for the past 9 years using the various programmes and support services they had developed. The main support that they offer is a 10-session group work programme. It was explained that the main purpose of the programme is threefold:

- I. to provide emotional support following a loss
- II. to give an understanding of the bereavement journey following a loss, and
- III. to work with individuals towards grief recovery.

Working in Partnership

Following the presentation, the ABALON Trust confirmed that they would like to work in partnership with Living Loss to run the group work programme. Dorothy and Charlene Wilson, ABALON Finance Director, remained in communication to discuss the details of how this would be delivered. Charlene also clarified the funding criteria as this would affect who would be able to access the support. Recruitment, Delivery Dates, Cost and Monitoring and Evaluation were further discussed and agreed.

Funding

In October 2020, ABALON Trust secured funding from the M&S charitable foundation to support those who have lost loved ones due to COVID-19 and also have sight loss and illnesses that can lead to problems with sight such as diabetes, as part of the “Behind the Eyes” campaign.

Sessions

It was agreed that the number of sessions would be reduced from 10 to 8 for an online delivery. They would run fortnightly, therefore, covering a 4 month-period. The dates agreed were:

8th & 22nd December 2020, 5th & 19th January 2021, 2nd & 16th February and 2nd & 16th March.

The Benefactors

There were certain funding stipulations and criteria that applied. The main conditions were that access to the bereavement support group would apply to those who had experienced a bereavement relating to the Covid-19 pandemic. Certain health conditions also factored, mainly, health issues affecting eye health, and diabetes. This information was collected within the registration form.

In terms of numbers, Living Loss, felt that 10 should be the maximum number for a group to run and 6 would be the minimum. Although 10 was the aim, 7 people eventually formed the group.

Marketing & Recruitment Strategy

A joint marketing and recruitment strategy was agreed. The ABALON Trust had links and contacts which they reached out to and so did Living Loss. In the first few weeks, take up was slow. Charlene and Dorothy reviewed the strategy, and it was decided that the recruitment drive would be extended. The ABALON Trust advertised using a marketing and PR company. This was successful and attracted more interest. There were two successful recruits from this drive. Living Loss were able to contact people directly, especially those who they had recently engaged and supported on a 1-2-1 basis throughout the pandemic. These candidates met the funding criteria and welcomed the opportunity to have ongoing bereavement support within a group setting.

Delivery

In the preparatory discussions, the framework and general running of the group sessions was outlined to Charlene, and it was acknowledged and agreed that the details of each session could not be reported back to ABALON Trust for confidentiality of clients. However, Dorothy was able to give an overview of how the group programme would run:

- Psychodynamic Counsellor Sharon Townsend and Grief Coach Dorothy Dwyer would be the weekly Facilitators
- Confidentiality is of paramount importance as attendees will share their deepest experiences and vulnerabilities. A group agreement is discussed and agreed within the first session;
- The main concerns of a Living Loss Group is emotional safety which the facilitators will manage;
- Re. the above, to reduce risk of emotional stress, the sessions start 'lighter', eg, in Session one, no one mentions the loss they have experienced. The first session is introductory and the aim is to build trust and rapport.

It can be reported that the 8 sessions took place as planned on the dates agreed. Each week had a theme around which the group could safely share their losses and experiences. It was interesting to note that 5 of the 7 attendees lost close family members in April or May 2020 to Covid. This in itself, enhanced bonding and built rapport within the group and further developed as the sessions progressed.

The Living Loss group support programme uses a mix of the attendees sharing, and the Facilitators using therapeutic tools to help with understanding the grief journey. Some of the tools the Facilitators used include the 5 Stages of Grief, the Circle of Grief, Understanding Triggers, Poetry, Letter Writing and Self-care. These were successfully utilised to explore grief and to build confidence in facing the impact and effects of a personal loss.

Regarding Attendance, this was around 83%. Apologies were mainly due to some people not being able to finish work on time. However, one person's non-attendance was due to contracting Covid-19. She had been unwell for a while then developed breathing difficulties and needed to be hospitalised. Thankfully, after spending 7 days on the ward, she was released. She was a faithful member of the group, only missing the one session when she was in hospital. Everyone, Facilitators and group members, were grateful that she was able to recover from this virus. Another attendee lost a close family member partway through the sessions and needed additional support. Another attendee never missed a session, and she joined from Jamaica, as, following her bereavement, she had decided to stay there for a few months with family.

Outcome and Conclusion

The Facilitators believe this was a successful support group and the outcome has been achieved. Individuals were supported in their grief journey. The attendees have left with a clear understanding of bereavement in general and a deeper understanding of their own personal grief journey. Together they shared the tools which will help them to navigate grief and bereavement going forward. For example, they were able to plan for their upcoming 1 Year Anniversaries, the pandemic notwithstanding, as people currently cannot travel and gather en masse. But the relevance and importance of marking significant dates and milestones was emphasised. The final session also included the importance of self-care as we all continue to navigate the pandemic.

Data

Below is an anonymised of group members' profile and attendance:

Profile:

ID	Ethnicity	Location	Age	Sex	Reason	COVID	Health Criteria
1	Caribbean	London	60	F	Death of spouse	Y	Spouse had diabetes
2	Caribbean	London	54	F	Death of brother	Y	Client has diabetes
3	Caribbean	London	60	M	Death of spouse	Y	Client has diabetes
4	Caribbean	London	51	F	Death of brother	Y	Brother had diabetes
5	Caribbean	London	82	F	Death of son	Y	Client and son diabetes
6	Caribbean	London	55	F	Death of mother	N	Client diabetes bereaved 3 yrs ago
7	Caribbean	London	51	M	Death of brother	N	Client diabetes brother murdered

Attendance:

ID	8-Dec-20	22-Dec-20	5-Jan-21	19-Jan-21	2-Feb-21	16-Feb-21	2-Mar-21	16-Mar-21
1	✓	✓	X	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	✓	✓	✓	X	✓	✓	✓	X
3	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	✓	✓	X	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7	✓	✓	X	✓	✓	✓	X	✓

Testimonials:

"I attended the online support group because I knew I needed help as I was suffering with grief after losing first my wife. When it was suggested to me, I knew I had to attend. I attended all the sessions. I found it to be very helpful. What was helpful was being with other people who were going through grief. It's good to share with like-minded people as they can understand what you're going through.

What was particularly helpful to me was that I was able to say things in the group that I couldn't say otherwise as people didn't understand"

"During our 8 weeks sessions I got the opportunity to meet others via zoom, who just understood what I was feeling because they were feeling and going through similar pain, of losing a love-one during lockdown. The group session allowed me to connect. I was able to hear, really hear what others had to say. Surprisingly this helped my healing journey. I felt heard! I felt that the two facilitators were always present during all the sessions. Sharon and Dorothy gave me the space I needed, which was at times just to breathe. At no time did I feel pressure to talk. Each week I was given tools to help me get through my day to day. This was invaluable. Each session I felt lighter"