

# Coping with the intensity of child bereavement work

## A qualitative study exploring volunteers' support needs



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**THE MAJORITY OF CHILD BEREAVEMENT** organisations rely heavily on volunteers to help to deliver their services. However, having to deal with the strong emotions of people who have experienced grief and trauma can be extremely demanding. In addition, it has been suggested that adults react more strongly to a child's bereavement than that of an adult, perhaps because a child's grief can touch their own vulnerabilities (Dyregov 1990). It is therefore essential to consider what support networks and self-care mechanisms should be available to volunteers working in this area.

**B**ereavement is 'not only painful to experience but also painful to witness' (Bowlby 1980), yet little research has examined how volunteers cope with the inevitable intensity of child bereavement work. Rolls and Payne (2003) concluded that 87% of UK child bereavement services had unpaid staff working directly with children and their families.

Volunteer turnover is an issue in many organisations and Kinzel and Nanson (2000) found that those who choose to leave are more likely to have had negative experiences and been adversely affected by the work. If organisations can identify strategies that minimise the more negative effects of the work, this may promote longevity of volunteers and ensure they receive the support they need to continue effectively in their role.

### Coping strategies

Coping is an active process in which the individual is continuously appraising their relationship with the environment, in a situation that they perceive as stressful. The individual may attempt to change the environment or direct the coping internally. The choice of coping style employed in a given situation can play an important role in an individual's physical and psycho-

### ABSTRACT

*This study explored how six volunteers working at a residential weekend intervention for bereaved children cope with the demands of their role. Data was collected through individual semi-structured interviews and analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. The analyses confirmed that supporting bereaved people, especially children, can be intense and emotionally draining, so it is essential that there are solid support networks and good self-care mechanisms available to volunteers. The study identified the need for organisations to take these findings into account during recruitment and training of volunteers and to better support them in their role to ensure longevity.*

logical well-being (Lazarus, Folkman 1984). Professionals in the field of caregiving recommend a holistic approach, consisting of mental, physical, emotional and spiritual factors (Becvar 2003). They identify a number of coping strategies such as peer consultation, formal supervision, humour, objective self-assessment and attending to health (Hertzog, Lecic-Tosevski 1997; Carmen 2002; Gladys-Catkins 2002).

### Motivations of volunteers

Garfield and Jenkins (1981) found that a large number of volunteers joined a

bereavement counselling organisation after a significant personal bereavement. These volunteers also had a professional interest in the area, but as Worden (2003) suggests, it is important to bear in mind all the possible reasons for deciding to volunteer to ensure people are not attempting to seek training in grief counselling in an attempt to resolve their own grief. Worden believed that volunteers can be very effective bereavement supporters but there is a need for them to recognise their personal limitations and work through their own grief to ensure it does not obstruct a helpful relationship. On the other hand, if the volunteer has been able to adjust to their bereavement, their experience may well be beneficial to clients who have experienced similar events.

Altruism is often seen as the main factor motivating individuals to volunteer. Nonetheless, research looking at hospice volunteers suggested that they gain in terms of personal growth, self-esteem, sense of worth, social interaction and economic factors, such as gaining work experience (Field *et al* 1997; Gidron 1978) and these gains can act as a protective factor to prevent the adverse effects of working with distressed people (Stamm 2002; Collins and Long 2003).

## THE STUDY

In this study six volunteers who regularly work on residential weekend camps for bereaved children and young people were interviewed. The camps are run by a UK national charity, Winston's Wish, which supports bereaved children, young people and their families by providing both direct and indirect support to encourage families to communicate openly about the death, to remember the person who has died and explore difficult feelings as well as ways of coping in the future. During the weekends young people can meet others in a similar situation and explore the death of their parent or sibling in a safe and supportive environment. The organisation also runs simultaneous weekend groups for the parents and carers.

Throughout the weekend camps the volunteers accompany a group of children, joining in activities, supporting them in whole group sessions, facilitating small group work and caring for them at mealtimes and bedtimes. They are also invited to join the children in remembering someone in their own life who has died, as this provides opportunities to model behaviour and facilitate discussion. The volunteers are carefully selected using thorough recruitment processes and receive extensive and on-going training to develop their skills (see table below).

The interviews were semi-structured and explored the volunteers' experiences of the camps and their methods of coping with this challenging work. The data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. The aim of this qualitative analysis is to capture the meanings of the participants and to learn about their psychological world. It is concerned with an individual's personal perception or account of an event and how meaning is constructed (Smith and Osborn 2003). This approach involves reading a transcript thoroughly, and noting anything interesting or significant. The researcher then returns to the beginning of the script, pulling out key words and/or emerging themes and looking for connections and contradictions. This process is then applied to the subsequent transcripts, looking for similarities and differences between participants. The researcher then

identifies links between themes and orders them in a more theoretical way, trying to make sense of the connections and re-reading the transcripts to ensure that the themes still apply to the original data (Smith *et al* 1999).

Three salient themes emerged which illustrate how volunteers cope: reciprocity of gains; the unique environment; and social support.

### Reciprocity of gains

The research indicated that, while the weekends are for the benefit of the children, the volunteers also gained a lot of satisfaction from their role. They were conscious that they had something to contribute, either individually or collectively, to the children's progress, whether personal experience, insight or specific skills. Some felt the work put their own lives into perspective and gave them opportunities for personal growth. They also talked about having the chance to give something back to society, or the charity. These positives helped them to cope with the more negative aspects of their experiences, and are likely to be extremely important in decisions about whether to carry on volunteering.

Volunteers at Winston's Wish are expected, where appropriate, to model behaviour and share some of their experiences of bereavement. This adds to the therapeutic process for the children and parents, but is evidently another gain for the volunteers. At the time of this research, 62% of the volunteers at Winston's Wish had experienced a significant bereavement and five out of the six interviewees reported that the death of a close family member had motivated them to become involved. Throughout the interviews, participants commented positively on the space the weekend camps provide for them to talk about and remember people who had died in their lives. It was also seen as something that added to their experience as a volunteer.

It's helped me so much, the whole camp experience is like...it's kind of therapeutic for them, in a sense, and it's also kind of therapeutic for me as well.

For me this is very important in my life ... it's sort of helped me kind of, it has helped me move on and deal with my emotions.

Seeing benefits in this revisiting of earlier bereavements ties in with the concept of continuing bonds (Klass *et al* 1996), which suggests that people find it helpful to remain involved and connected to the deceased person rather than 'moving on' and severing connections with them.

The other side of the sharing of emotional experiences was, inevitably, that feelings of grief from past bereavements were brought to the surface.

Maybe I might feel a bit tearful, maybe the things to do with my sister will have been stirred up again.

As well as identifying this as a positive aspect, it was also seen as an emotional cost, and something they felt they had to control to protect professional boundaries. At times, the volunteers appeared to struggle with conflicting personal and professional boundaries, unsure how much to express their emotions.

I found that [candlelight ceremony] really hard because you know, some of the kids are dealing with it better than me.

Volunteers attempted to validate getting upset, referring to the Winston's Wish requirement to normalise emotions for the children by modelling bereavement behaviour. It is however, a difficult balance and one that is continually assessed by volunteers. This is reflected in the study by Folkman and Moskowitz (2004), who found

### Recruitment and training process of Winston's Wish volunteers (Stokes 2004)

**Stage 1** Everyone who has shown an interest in volunteering is written to and sent an application form and role description

**Stage 2** Volunteers are short-listed and invited to attend an induction day and interview

**Stage 3** Successful volunteers attend a training and selection weekend which mirrors the programme of the residential camp

**Stage 4** Selected volunteers then attend a full day of workshops to cover issues in more depth

**Stage 5** Volunteers are introduced to camp as a participant observer or practical helper

**Stage 6** Trained volunteers continue to attend camp and on-going training sessions and information days.

that coping was associated with the ability to regulate emotion.

...but then I think seeing you, you know, cry and being OK about it ... I actually think it's really quite good because it lets the children know that it is OK to cry.

On the other hand I don't feel that I want to push my experiences down their throat.

## The unique space

The feeling of being in a unique environment was reflected in the discourse with volunteers, who recognised that it both helped and hindered coping strategies, depending on the individual. The location and programme for the residential intervention is purposely chosen to create a safe, contained environment for the children to express emotions, but many of the interviewees found that it also supported them as volunteers. Working in a specific, clearly-defined role under the Winston's Wish ethos helped them to separate from their personal situation, take on a more professional role, and also allowed them to manage the separation at the end of the weekend.

I go with what I call my Winston's hat on, where everything else that's happened during the week or in my life or whatever is very much left behind.

For other volunteers, separation was more of a struggle and they found that after working with the children in such an intense way, it could be hard to stop thinking about them and to accept not knowing about their future progress. Returning and adjusting back to every day life could also be difficult.

You've sort of been, a big part in their life for this couple of days and you might never see them again.

These issues are likely to add to the costs of the work mentioned earlier.

## Social support

Social support, either from peers, professionals or external people such as family and friends, was the most talked about method of coping and recognised as important by all the volunteers interviewed.

Getting the occasional hug or just knowing that other people are there for you is important.

Each group seemed to offer the volun-

teer something different in terms of support. The timing of the need for support also varied, both during and after the camp weekend. Understandably, there was some difference of opinion on how much and what type of support was required to continue the role effectively. Ogden (2004) identified that it is the quality of social support rather than the quantity that is important, and that the perceived level of support is more significant than the actual level.

## DISCUSSION

The themes arising from the research indicate that:

- The volunteer role provides opportunities to gain from the work as well as to give, but in doing so emotional costs are involved. Volunteers weigh up these benefits and disadvantages, and this balance seems to be a major factor contributing to the decision of whether or not to continue the work.
- The past bereavements of volunteers allow them to bring experience and insight to the intervention and provide an opportunity to model behaviour, but also have the potential to affect their work and negatively influence aspects of their coping. This complex issue was one of the most salient and potentially influential themes explored.
- The unique environment created at a residential therapeutic weekend can both help and hinder volunteers' ability to cope.
- The quality of social support is vital factor. There needs to be a solid support network available to each volunteer to enable the work to continue being a positive experience.

### Personal bereavement

In the study, previous bereavements were central to the work of the volunteers and how they experienced it. This is recognised at Winston's Wish where personal bereavement is an important consideration in the selection and training procedures. Part of the selection process involves applicants attending a weekend mirroring the intervention, where they are asked to remember someone in their life who has died. This gives the potential volunteer an opportunity to focus on their own grief while beginning to understand the therapeutic process and what it might be like for the children

attending. It often highlights how the work can impact on an individual, and contributes to recruitment decisions.

It would be interesting to investigate whether the motivations, satisfactions and stressors are different for volunteers who have been bereaved compared with those who have not, and how far this experience offers an advantage or leaves a vulnerability. This delicate balance needs to be carefully monitored within bereavement organisations and explored in more depth in volunteer support groups, debriefing sessions and supervision.

### Developing social support

To optimise the social support, it is helpful if volunteers know each other and the staff well, and have thought in advance about the support networks available to them and coping strategies they may use, as well as discussing the potential impact of the work on their friends and family. Winston's Wish currently offers volunteers support through regular newsletters, thank-you letters, social events and an annual update day, as well as an open door policy for volunteers to voice any worries or concerns. However, the factor of social support is central to the work and one which an organisation can further explore and develop to improve dramatically the experiences of volunteers and consequently allow them to continue working effectively. It would also be interesting to consider further any gender differences in coping and utilising social support.

It is essential that organisations like Winston's Wish consider the needs of volunteers and allow this to influence aspects of their service provision, including the design of the programme and the environment in which volunteers are to work. ●

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## Work-related bereavement

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**EVERY YEAR THOUSANDS** of people die in work-related incidents around the world. In the UK alone the Health and Safety Commission reported 241 such deaths in the year 2006-7\*. Here, as in many other countries, agricultural and construction workers have the highest rates of fatal injury, with the majority of the fatalities resulting from falls, impact with moving objects, or collisions with vehicles in transit.

The Australian non-profit organisation, **The Industrial Deaths Support and Advocacy**, provides support and information to anyone concerned with workplace deaths. Its website, [www.idsa.com.au](http://www.idsa.com.au), highlights the fact that a death at work can give rise to specific and unusual bereavement issues for both colleagues and families, for a number of reasons. The manner of death can be highly traumatic, with victims typically suffering horrendous injuries including crushing, burning and dismembering. Often there are prolonged investigations, sometimes extending for a number of years before a conclusion is reached. Such a death is usually sudden and unexpected and unfortunately many first hear of it via the media, adding to the overall shock. In addition, anger and feelings of blame are common, especially if the death was caused by an employer's negligence.

The organisation offers free emotional help in the form of **telephone support**, a quarterly **newsletter**, **home visits**, local monthly **forums** and **referrals to specialist health professionals and counsellors**. It also conducts **critical incident debriefing training** for volunteers, families and others who require it.

**Practical support** includes providing information about probable processes that will be encountered with likely time-frames, and referral to legal firms specialising in workplace death and injury. An **advocate** from the organisation can also accompany bereaved members to meetings involving lawyers, employers and government departments, as well as assisting with

correspondence and funeral arrangements. In addition, the organisation is involved with **community education** and will give presentations in the workplace.

There are some PDF downloads and information on publications available online including details of a **free DVD**, *The Impact of Workplace Deaths*, which features the experiences of several bereaved families. Although this organisation will perhaps be of greatest help to those living in and around the Victoria area of Australia, anyone with questions related to workplace death will gain valuable insight by contacting this site.

The **Centre for Corporate Accountability** at [www.corporateaccountability.org](http://www.corporateaccountability.org) is a UK charity, promoting worker and public safety. It claims to be the only non-governmental organisation monitoring workplace deaths in England and Wales, and offers **independent and confidential advice** and **assistance** to bereaved families and friends on investigation and prosecution issues. This includes helping them to deal with the police, health and safety executives, local authorities and the Crown Prosecution service, often for several years, from the time of death to the completion of the investigation and prosecution. The organisation presents **conferences** around Britain, with government ministers, employers, trade unions representatives, academics, bereaved families and lawyers as speakers.

On the website there is detailed information on coroners courts, inquests, and manslaughter (**Research and Briefings** section). The **International** section includes details of workplace deaths worldwide as well as international reforms in Canada and Australia. An **advice leaflet** can be downloaded in **English, Hindi, Gujarati, Bengali, Urdu and Punjabi**. The organisation's newsletter is only available by subscription but all other help and advice from this organisation is free of charge. ●

\* [www.hse.gov.uk](http://www.hse.gov.uk) (HSE Statistics)

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