

# Volunteering in bereavement: motivations and meaning



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**Abstract:** Bereaved people often say that friends, family and colleagues avoid talking to them about their loss. Indeed, sometimes people will cross the road to avoid engaging with them. This project sought to understand why ordinary people come forward to volunteer to help those who have been bereaved and what this experience means to them. Stories gathered from eighteen volunteers at Cruse Scotland suggested that their own experience of bereavement was the main motivating factor and that volunteers found significant meaning and growth through involvement in this work.

**Keywords:** volunteering, bereavement, motivations, meaning

## Introduction

It is estimated that there were 57,573 deaths in Scotland during 2015 (National Records of Scotland 2015). Stephen *et al* (2015) estimated that up to four people may be affected by each death. They also identified that bereavement can have a significant impact on health and wellbeing and that the socioeconomic costs are high when increased GP visits, mortality and hospital stays are considered.

Osterfield (2009) has reviewed data that suggested that 80% of bereavement support was provided by the voluntary sector, 90% of which was provided by volunteers. However, volunteers are a vital, but often overlooked part of the support offered to bereaved people. Bereavement volunteering remains a much under researched area.

We live in a society that often finds it difficult to engage with and talk about death, dying and bereavement. Bereaved people tell us that neighbours and friends often avoid contact, sometimes even crossing the road to do so. What is it then that motivates people in communities to volunteer to work with people who have been bereaved at what is one of the most traumatic times in their lives?

In order to gain a deeper insight into bereavement volunteering, Cruse Scotland undertook a small story project. This involved gathering narratives from volunteers about their motivations and the meaning of their work. The stories gave a rich insight into why volunteers do what they do and what it means to walk alongside people on their journey through bereavement.

## The role of volunteers in Cruse Scotland

Cruse Scotland provides support to anyone who has been bereaved and support is offered from the point of bereavement onwards. The organisation supports people of all ages, children and adults, regardless of the nature of the death and it is the only organisation providing this range of support throughout Scotland.

With 10 staff and 300 volunteers, the organisation is entirely dependent on volunteers for the delivery of their services to bereaved people wherever they live in Scotland. Volunteers also provide vital support to the organisation in terms of administration and fundraising.

Before volunteers are in a position to support clients, they are required to be trained to an accredited standard depending on their role. Volunteers are matched with clients based on their skill level and assessed client need. All volunteers have supervision from a supervisor trained to standards set by Counselling & Psychotherapy in Scotland (COSCA), Scotland's professional body for counselling and psychotherapy.

## Approach to the project

Twenty five volunteers were invited to submit a short story of approximately 500 words. In order to help structure and focus the narrative participants were offered three questions:

- What motivated you to volunteer with Cruse Scotland?
- What does your role involve?
- What does volunteering with bereaved people mean to you?

Volunteers were purposively selected to give a range of roles and mix of genders. The response was overwhelmingly positive with 18 (15 female and 3 male) volunteers submitting stories. The range of volunteer roles included administration, helpline, skilled and advanced skilled listeners, counsellors, support group volunteers and included those who worked with adults and with children.

## Emerging themes

The stories gave very open and honest accounts of the reasons which had motivated people to volunteer in bereavement support and what volunteering meant to them. Most volunteers cited more than one motivation.

## Motivation

In terms of motivation there were three key areas which emerged:

- Volunteers' own experience of loss (personal or through supporting others)
- To gain personal or professional development
- Looking to do something worthwhile or to give back

## Experience of loss

By far the most frequently cited motivation was the experience of bereavement. It was clear from the stories that a majority of volunteers were motivated by their own personal experiences of the death of someone close to them whether parents, a spouse, a child, a relative or friend.

'Unfortunately it took the tragedy of my 16 year old nephew dying in a road traffic accident to change things. I had never witnessed the level of grief my Sister was experiencing ... Within a year or so my Sister contacted Cruse and started working with a Counsellor – the relief

for everyone was incredible, but along with this relief came a curiosity and if I'm being honest, a slight resentment within me. I wanted to be that person who was able to help someone whilst they were in this amount of despair. This is where my counselling journey began.' **(Volunteer 5)**

Others were motivated by the experience of supporting others through loss in a professional or personal capacity. Professionals reflected on their feelings of inadequacy and helplessness in the face of loss and bereavement at the time which had later prompted them to volunteer with Cruse.

'It is many years since I saw an article in the local newspaper advertising a training course about bereavement, being run by Cruse ... I was immediately interested as during my time as a nurse I had been with bereaved relatives, comforting them as best I could but feeling so inadequate and still holding the image of distressed relatives leaving the ward, having to find their own way home and often wondering how they would cope and if they would have any support in the days, weeks and months ahead.' **(Volunteer 2).**

## Personal or professional development

The second most frequently given reason for volunteering with the organisation was the desire to develop existing skills or to learn new ones. Some volunteers had already undertaken either diploma courses in counselling or the COSCA Certificate in Counselling Skills which led them to seek to use these skills in a voluntary capacity. For some in this group their motivation in choosing a bereavement organisation was influenced by their experience of loss.

## Looking for something worthwhile

For a small number of volunteers becoming part of Cruse was as a result of desire to do something worthwhile, to give something back or to make a difference.

## What volunteering means

All volunteers reported finding significant meaning from their volunteering role with bereaved people. Three key themes emerged:

- The privilege of being with clients on their bereavement journey
- Helping others: making a difference
- Feeling part of something worthwhile and the connection to others

## The privilege of being with clients on their bereavement journey

In writing about what volunteering meant to them, volunteers used words such as 'privilege', 'humbling', 'rewarding'

and ‘fulfilling’. Many described it to be both a privilege and humbling to be a part of the client’s bereavement journey, to be able to provide a safe space and to be trusted with innermost thoughts and feelings.

‘Each time someone speaks to me they entrust me with their inner most feelings, feelings that they may never have told anyone before and I feel privileged that they have been able to trust me enough to have done so. I am constantly amazed by the change that can happen simply by enabling someone to speak and say exactly what they feel, not having to worry about being judged or negatively affecting those around them.’ **(Volunteer 13)**

Many also spoke of the fulfilment of witnessing the client’s journey to acceptance and learning to live again accommodating their loss. Seeing clients grow and develop through bereavement gave both clients and volunteers a sense of achievement.

‘Learning to sit ‘in the moment’ with someone who opens their heart to you is work that can be so rewarding, especially as you ‘hold them’ and see them emerge and gain strength over the weeks, ready to face the world again, albeit in a different way.’ **(Volunteer 9)**

## Helping others: making a difference

Volunteers also described their experience as both challenging and rewarding. They found meaning in making a difference to others whether this was through directly supporting individuals through bereavement or more indirectly through contributing to the organisation and to the general support of clients.

‘I know from personal experience that time can be a great healer, and if you have a truly empathic, accepting and non-judgemental listener, talking can be a vital part of the healing process. Each bereaved person is different, and I offer a safe space to talk about how their loss is affecting them.’ **(Volunteer 12)**

‘Although I am not personally involved with clients, I like to think I am helping to ‘keep the wheels turning’ in the process of getting assistance to bereaved people once they have taken the giant step of asking for help.’ **(Volunteer 7)**

A number of volunteers highlighted the courage that it took for people to take the first step in making the initial call to the organisation to ask for help. Volunteers described the considerable impact of this, recognising the significant

responsibility that they carried to ensure the best possible experience for that person.

## Feeling part of something worthwhile and the connection to others

A smaller number of volunteers described volunteering as giving structure to their life, a sense of belonging and of being an integral part of a team. Some described volunteering as giving them a new purpose. Others highlighted the value and importance of staff and volunteer colleagues in sharing knowledge and offering a supportive network.

‘Cruse gives me a feeling of belonging to something of worth...It gives me the chance to meet new people. It gives me a purpose. It allows me to help people through something I’ve experienced myself and found impossibly difficult - losing someone you love, through bereavement.’ **(Volunteer 18)**

## Conclusion

This small project gave rich insights into the experiences of Cruse Scotland volunteers. It helped to understand their motivations and what volunteering means to them. Volunteers were mainly motivated by their own experience of loss to help others experiencing bereavement. Volunteering clearly has much meaning, bringing fulfilment, development and connection to others. What emerges is a rich picture of Cruse Scotland volunteers as a skilled, responsible and committed team, able and prepared to embrace loss in all its guises and dedicated to doing whatever it takes to support people to move forward on their bereavement journey.

## Acknowledgements

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