

Give sorrow words



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**Give sorrow words,
The grief that does not speak up knits up the
o'erwrought heart and bids it break.¹**

Situation

I am writing this article from inside Her Majesty's Prison Eastwood Park (HMP EWP), a prison for women in Falfield, north of Bristol. We have a population of some 412 women, either on remand or sentenced.

I had been a Cruse volunteer for some years 'on the outside' when I read in a Prison Inspectorate Report (November 2013) that HMP EWP was failing in providing bereavement support to the women. I approached the then Governor 1 with the idea of setting up the service inside. It took quite a while, but we chose to set it up properly and I had my first 2 clients here early 2015. At the time of writing (September 2017), I have seen over 40 prisoners and 1 member of staff. Referrals were initially made through probation and chaplaincy; lately I get more and more through wing-officers. I work in a person-centred way and often include creativity. The waiting list is kept through the Safer Custody Department as are the evaluation forms. I have my own filing system which is separate from the one used by the Cruse Bereavement Care office.

All potential clients will go through security clearing as I see them on a 1:1 basis in a closed office room. This is a real improvement to the room I used the first year which included a photocopier and thus we were often interrupted and disturbed. Due to time restrictions, I see two clients 'back-to-back' on the Monday morning. If women are on the waiting list who are on the Open wing, I can see them during my break time from the other duties I have at EWP, thus taking on more clients.

In the beginning, transfers to other prisons during the bereavement support process happened from time to time. This was very frustrating, both for my client and myself. After approaching a Governor about this issue, I gained full support from the prison and women are now 'put-on-hold'

during my work with them. Unfortunately, I do have a long waiting list.

Of course, I adhere to the Cruse and Prison guidelines on threats of suicide, serious self-harm or harm to others. In my initial contract with the women, I also mention that I have to report disclosures about drug use inside the prison.

The work

I see on average three-four clients per week. Due to the complexity of issues, I tend to see women for more than the 'regular' 6 sessions. Building up of a trusting therapeutic relationship with a client can take longer as the women often have been through many disappointments in this.

There is a variety of cause of bereavement inside. We have a significantly high proportion of: suicides; overdoses; sudden and traumatic deaths, especially in childhood (and never addressed); manslaughter and stillbirths. Others include car accidents, cancers and other illnesses.

The majority of women I have worked with here have very complex and often traumatic life stories. Often their offending arose from personal histories of neglect and abuse in childhood which made them vulnerable to further exploitation and abuse in adulthood. Domestic violence, rape, abuse, abandonment, desolation, complexities such as mental health issues, alcohol or drug use and childhood traumas nearly always come up during the bereavement sessions as, during the process, other losses and traumas are triggered.

As a Cruse Bereavement Care support volunteer, new to me were:

- working with women who were responsible for a death
- how to grieve for someone you have very mixed feelings about (e.g. a father who abused the client in the past)
- the loss of one or more children to the Care system

We all know that family support can be vital during bereavement. This, and family rituals, are not really available to my clients. Neither is a real involvement in funeral arrangements, now or in the past (due to chaotic lifestyles).

¹ Shakespeare W, *Macbeth*, Act 4, Scene 3

Viewing of the body and the sinking in of the reality of the death is usually not an option either. Keepsakes might be divided before my client is released and accurate information might be lacking. This often makes disbelief and denial a real possible reaction.

Somatisation and disturbed behaviour can occur; nearly all of my clients express sleeping difficulties and considerable social problems. Heightened anxiety about losing someone else whilst in prison or even fear of dying in prison also often comes up. Loss of self-esteem, self-worth and loss of identity are also often expressed. Many of the women have endured many losses during life such as divorced parents, loss of innocence during childhood, loss of home, possessions, home or children. One of my clients, expressing her deep question: 'Who am I now?' wrote answers to her question on a piece of paper that she then showed me in the next session. Interestingly enough, all answers were written in the third person!

Self-punishment, self-harm/self-injury are, unfortunately, things one meets here on a daily basis. One of the women wrote the following:

Self-harm

Blood trapped in my veins
 And me, trapped behind bars
 One of us has to escape the boiling rage
 Rage with myselfand him
 Abusing me, year after year
 Cutting myself gives relief.
 At least I have the choice of how deep I let it go
 At least my boiling blood has freedom to go and flow
By a 58-year old.

The loss of one's child, especially when the child is a minor, is among life's most devastating losses. Many of my clients at EWP have suffered just such a loss, for example, a miscarriage or Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). I have also worked with a number of young sibling deaths.

In a women's prison one is, as bereavement support volunteer, often faced with mothers losing children to the Care system or adoption. I do include these women in my work. Often they have devastating guilt issues and continued worry and anxiety about the wellbeing of the child/ren.

One of my longstanding clients still struggled after some 30 years with a remark, made by her (grieving) mother, when a three year old sibling was run over by a car 'You should have died and not your sweet little sister'. The mother developed serious mental health issues and my client started using alcohol and drugs aged 12. The 'feeding' of her habit brought her to prison. Another young woman avoided her shock and grief after finding her baby dead in the cradle (SIDS) by also going on drugs, even before the funeral. Ten years later, after detoxing in prison, the death of her baby hit her hard and her grief was as raw as if it

had just happened. Yet another woman described the loss of her newborn and the situation surrounding it as follows:

In the waste land of my life
 There was happiness, once:
 Pregnant, a waiting to surrender myself with and to love
 YET
 "It was neither boy nor girl"
 The midwife did declare
 It left a deep cave, a hole
 Never filled by all the decades following it...
 I never held this child of mine
 "Nothingness" or "neither" as was declared its name
 By the medical know-it-all-s
 The aftermath: it's strangling me still

By R. aged 56.

Another very young woman was relieved, when through our sessions, she started to realise that she was not responsible for her mother who she had found hanging in the kitchen when she came back from school one day. Mum had not hanged herself because her little girl had 'been naughty', mum had serious mental health issues and when my client understood this, plus that it was ultimately mum's responsibility and choice, the heavy guilt feelings were replaced by a healthier sadness.

Another woman described her very mixed feelings about the death of an abusive partner as follows 'I am like a bowl of spaghetti, all tangled up!'

S., a 44-year old client, wrote me this note a few weeks ago:

'Bereavement counselling was very helpful. My own (7) bereavements were most definitely the root cause that led to my offending. Had I been able to access help in the community, I believe I'd not be here now. The bereavement support I received from you has been crucial to my new start in assuring I remain on the right path. The work with you was invaluable and helpful. I feel like I am more able to face the future'.

Concluding remarks

It is heart-warming and encouraging to see what careful, empathic listening, acknowledgement and validation of the individual's feelings can do for our clients. Often it is the very first time in their lives that the women experience true listening.

As Cruse volunteers are doing fantastic work and I wonder if you, reading this, realise that supporting people on the outside might keep many from offending behaviour and prison. I had not been fully aware that unresolved grief can ultimately lead to offending behaviour.

Although the re-offending rate of women offenders is some 46%, only two women who received bereavement support here have returned to EWP. Interestingly, one client wanted to stop before I thought she was ready; she,

however, felt the need of family support and therefore wanted to continue with Cruse after release. Both women had issues with drug use.

I want to end with thanking staff at HMP Eastwood Park who make it possible for me to do this work. I feel supported and respected in the work I do here. Although I have other functions in the prison, the bereavement support work is by far the most profound experience for me.

Lastly, a thank you to the women, my clients. I am often humbled by their courage, trust and openness. ■

My memories

I woke up this morning feeling pretty crap
 Its 6 years since you died and I still feel in a trap
 I miss you MAM more than words can say
 And I think about you every single day!
 As the years pass by.. I am still a mess...
 It don't get easier, it hurts no less
 I don't want to forget, don't want to let go
 Pain cuts so deep right through my core!
 I think of your smile and your loving embrace,
 When I have done something wrong that look on your
 face

Your words of wisdom, your wicked laugh
 No one understands...they don't know the half.
 The relationship we had I will always treasure,
 Us kids were your life, 3 stars in your eyes
 A mother like you was the ultimate prize.
 I can hear you saying: "You have to move on"
 "You can do this! You are so strong"
 I want to make you proud and face all my fears
 But my heart is bleeding, I can't stop the tears.
 This I promise this I declare
 From this day forward I will climb the stair,
 I will aim for the top; I will reach for the sky
 I will make you proud and that aint a lie!

I love you Mam, I miss you still!
 I can overcome this. All it takes is some WILL!

**By A. one of my first clients,
 released early 2015 and
 And still somewhere OUT there!**