**NHS Education for Scotland**

**Talking about Bereavement Podcast Series – Transcript of ‘The Organisational Compassionate Space in Bereavement’ Podcast**

**Presenter**: Lynne Innes, Senior Educator, NHS Education for Scotland

**Speaker:** Dr Donald Macaskill, CEO, Scottish Care

**LI**: Hi, I'm Lynne Innes. I'm a Senior Educator at NHS Education for Scotland, otherwise known as NES, in the Bereavement workstream. In this podcast, I'm going to introduce you to the work that our team does, share what we do, and also share our learning. So what is NES Bereavement? When I ask this question, sometimes people aren't sure what we do. However, in essence, it's putting people at the heart of bereavement care and our aim is to support health and social care staff to do that for the people in their care. We know that evidence suggests that person-centred care and bereavement matters as it improves people's experience, and bereavement care and the communication around that with those who are bereaving is core business for many staff groups across health and social care. It's also known if it's poorly handled, there can be the risk of causing additional harm and that subsequently might have negative impact on staff wellbeing. This is a short introductory series of podcasts, which will look at the compassionate space in bereavement. I'll introduce three guests from different parts of Scotland who are all working in health and social care and ask them to share their thoughts and reflections on that space for us as individuals, teams, and organisations.

**LI**: In the third episode of this podcast series, I'm delighted to be joined by Dr Donald Macaskill. Dr Macaskill has worked for many years in the health and social care sectors across the United Kingdom. He has a particular professional focus on the issues related to dementia, bereavement, palliative care and individual human rights. Most recently, he has acted as a Commissioner on the UK Bereavement Commission. He is the CEO of Scottish Care, the representative body for care providers in the independent sector, namely private, charitable and employee-owned care organisations, which includes care homes and home care organisations. He serves in a number of Scottish, UK and international charities and boards related to health and social care, and he is currently on the organising panel of the Global Ageing Biennial Conference, which is coming to Glasgow in September 2023. I'm really pleased to be welcoming Donald to this podcast today.

**LI**: Hi Donald and thanks so much for being part of this podcast series for us. How are you today?

**DM**: I'm good, thanks, Lynne. Though I'm sitting in a, a room without heating at the top of a house, which is presently experiencing one of Scotland's many winter gales, so hopefully people won't hear the rattling of the windows. And I promise you, it's the windows and not my head.

**LI**: Yeah, that doesn't sound so pleasant. So hope it's not too, too chilly for you. Can't hear anything. Sounds peaceful, actually. So, thank you for agreeing to talk about the compassionate space in bereavement and, and I think we asked you to talk about it from a, the compassionate space from an organisational perspective. So, just wondering what your thoughts and reflections are on how we support compassion in bereavement?

**DM**: I suppose in, in in many ways, what I see is probably not going to be that very different from what colleagues have said about an individual or a, or a group environment. I think the first thing, as any organisation, we need to think about, are we creating, as you said, spaces and places for people to be able to express their emotions, their thoughts and their feelings. Because if we strip things away, one of the experiences which the bereaved often talk about is the sense that people change in the presence of their grief. And I mean by that, that people who used to be ebullient and full of jokes and full of banter, suddenly become silent and reticent and cautious. And whilst it's inevitable that as individuals we change in the way in which we respond to somebody who has gone through bereavement, I think we need to hold ourselves back from making too dramatic a change to the way we relate to people. I have often heard, it said by people, “do you know, I enjoyed being back at work because, yes, people acknowledged what I’d been through, but it didn't dominate the conversation. I was able to get on with things. I was able to just do what I was good at doing and that took my mind off it. That meant that I was able to, move on in an extent”. And so, for me, the first thing that an organisation can do is make itself a comfortable space and place for people to be themselves, to talk about their grief, if they want to talk, but not to talk about their loss, if that is what they are comfortable with. And I think at times, just as individuals worry about what it is I should say to you because you have gone through loss, I think as organisations we worry about what we should do in response to somebody who has been bereaved. Now at one level, I think it's really important that every organisation asks that question. What if we have a member of staff who's gone through grief and loss. What, what are we going to do? What are our policies? Are we an environment which is open, accepting and welcoming? Have we even thought about this issue? Because we wouldn't do that and we wouldn't get away with not, not thinking about how do we support somebody who is pregnant or who has had a baby and has gone through maternity or paternity. Well, somebody who's gone through the loss of a loved one or somebody close to them, requires us as an organisation to give equal focus and equal energy to their care and support when they return to work.

**LI**: And how, how do you think we can do that? And, how, how you know, some people, organisations I suppose might be doing it well and other organisations may still have a bit of catching up to do and I know you've been involved in the, the UK Bereavement Commission. So, what are the ways in which we can do that better?

**DM**: There is many as there are individual responses to grief and loss to be honest, Lynne. And I think the one of the things the UK Commission highlighted in its title indeed, was it's everybody's business and that's the first thing every organisation who works with people, employs people, supports volunteers, offers a service; this has got something to do with you, you need to think about, have we, and I hate starting with the word policy, but a policy can sometimes be a door that opens to discussion and to reflection. And getting a group of people around to prepare a policy, plan a policy, not getting it off the shelf and downloading something from Google, but making this an issue of concern for you as an organisation. It's a starting point. It can't be the end point. It can't be a policy that sits on a shelf and gathers dust. It's got to come alive. But it is basic stuff, creating a space and a place for people to be open. Thinking about what practical steps might help an individual, so in particular, in my experience, it's really important that in supervision, if that's the structure that you have in your organisation, that the supervisor is aware and conscious of particular events that have happened in your life and in your employment and in the organisational sense, but also in the support sense. That you're aware of the critical moments in somebody's story. So, the person who has died's birthday, the anniversary of the loss has often been, are, are often moments where people find it a real struggle to continue to turn up at work and to continue to do their, their, their job. So, the hardest thing for any organisation is to recruit good workers. And we lose far too many workers and employees because we don't support them through the task and the work of grieving. So, it's in everybody's interests, and is everybody's business to make sure that we attend to that and there's lots of hints and tips out, you know, Good Life, Good Death, Good Grief have on their website a really, really practical guide to employers, about how you can create a bereavement friendly workplace. At the end of the day, not a policy, not a guide, will help you, if you aren't open as an organisation to thinking, what does this experience mean for that worker and, and recognising that it's going to be different for everyone.

**LI**: And that sounds like, so, what I'm noticing is almost bringing back into that, that compassion back into that kind of, or, or not back in, but into the organisation to enable all of that?

**DM**: Absolutely. And you know compassion’s a doing word. It's not a passive activity. You know, there's a purposefulness about being compassionate, and that might mean starting a conversation, giving people a bit of space, being flexible in the way in which you allow somebody to take bereavement leave. I think even some really good organisations have introduced bereavement leave, but they do it at the wrong time. So, it's not just at the point of somebody's death or a, or a funeral or something like that, that bereavement leave is maybe most useful. It might be six weeks later, a month later, three months later, when somebody has arrived at their point of mourning and grief, where they need a break, where they need to have a breath and to change the pace of their living and relating to other people. So, it's thinking practically, but also thinking flexibly and individually, cause there's no one size fits all here.

**LI**: Yeah, yeah. So you know, although this is about organisational, it's actually back to, to a person-centred approach, isn't it?

**DM**: Absolutely. And, and, and more than that, Lynne, I think, I mean, I'm increasing, you know, I've, I've been uncomfortable for quite a while with the word person-centred. I much prefer the word person-led.

**LI**: Okay.

**DM**: That we should be creating health and social care systems and communities where the person is in control. The person is setting the dance and letting the organisation find the rhythm which best suits them rather than us thinking that we're doing something in a person-centred way, let's learn to be sufficiently confident in our organisation or in ourself, that we let the person lead us and take us where they need to go. But part of that leadership as an organisation is creating boundaries. You know if, if, if I get told that there's a meeting on and somebody says we're not sure when we might finish, it might be eight o'clock, it might be half eight, it might be nine o'clock, I can't stand that, because I need to know, especially with some groups more than others, I need to know the escape valve. But I need a sense of boundary. And I think what a lot of people who are bereaved look for in an organisation, particularly a workplace, is that there are those supportive and bound boundaries, not that imprison and close them in, but that are there to provide a, a, a safe space for them to get on with the mundanity of living, in the midst of the pain of grieving.

**LI**: That sounds, sounding really profound actually, and I, I hadn't really thought of person-led. So, you've, that's really interesting to think about that, and it makes complete sense actually, although I like, if I liked person-centred, I've never been comfortable with patient-centred. I really prefer person-centred, but now I'm thinking about person-led. How do we move bereavement and compassionate, compassion into, in a person-led way? And I think that you've just given us, some kind of, concepts to consider around that.

**DM**: Yeah, I, I mean, I think just to conclude on this Lynne, one of the reasons I like person-led is that it removes any temptation to think that we are the experts.

**LI**: Yes, yeah, yeah.

**DM**: Because we're all amateurs. We're all in that journey of love and compassion when we're supporting someone's bereavement. And their story and somebody else's story of grief and loss will impact on us. And we have to be, as employers, as colleagues, as friends, we have to be prepared to be touched and moved and changed by the loss of somebody else to somebody's life. Because death doesn't just touch and impact on an individual. It touches the whole community. And just to paraphrase as it used to be said, it takes a whole village to rear a child it. Takes a whole community to support the bereaved.

**LI**: I think that's a wonderful place to end, Donald. Thank you so much, that's been so inspiring listening to you talking about that, and certainly hopefully give our listeners something to reflect upon as they listen to this series. So, thank you so much.

**DM**: It's been a pleasure, Lynne. Thank you.

**LI**: Thanks to Donald for his considerations and sharing them with us. This is our final podcast in this series. However, we look forward to bringing you some new podcasts very soon. Thank you.

The podcast was recorded in February 2023 and can be found at <https://www.sad.scot.nhs.uk/events/podcast-series/> or <https://talkingaboutbereavement.podbean.com/>

For more information visit [www.sad.scot.nhs.uk](http://www.sad.scot.nhs.uk) or contact [supportarounddeath@nes.scot.nhs.uk](mailto:supportarounddeath@nes.scot.nhs.uk)

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