**NHS Education for Scotland**

**Talking about Bereavement Podcast Series – Transcript of ‘A person-centred approach to bereavement care: A line manager’s perspective’ Podcast**

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**LI**: Hello, I'm Lynn Innes and welcome to the Talking About Bereavement podcast, which is brought to you by the Bereavement Education Programme from NHS Education for Scotland. I'm one of the educators in the team and in these podcasts, I'm going to talk about bereavement with our guests who will be sharing and reflecting some of the work and the learning they're involved in as they talk about bereavement.

**LI:** Hi and welcome to this episode of the podcast. I'm delighted to introduce my guest today, Anna Alexander. Anna tells me that she is an Ayrshire lass who was born and bred in the village of Mauchline in Ayrshire, which is true burn, Robert Burns Land and is now living in the big smoke of Kilmarnock with her husband and dog Ringo. Anna has worked in the NHS for 22 years in an administrative capacity and has been a line manager for much of that time. She started her career in NHS Ayrshire and Arran and moved to NHS Education for Scotland nine years ago and has worked in a couple of different roles within the Professional Development workstream of the Medical Directorate. Anna has come along today to talk about her experience as a manager and responding to bereavement within that role, and we will explore how that feels to support others and how that impacts upon us as people in our roles.

**LI:** Welcome Anna, and thanks for joining me today.

**AA:** Good morning Lynne, thank you so much for inviting me along to, to speak on the podcast today. It's a, it's a real pleasure and, and a privilege to, to be asked and to share my experiences.

**LI:** Thank you so much. I'm delighted that you, you agreed. Before we explore your reflections on bereavement though, I wondered if you would like to expand a wee bit on the introduction that I've just given and tell us a bit more about yourself and how you've got to where you are in terms of your life and work.

**AA:** Yes, of course, of course. So, as you said, I, I started my career in the NHS back in, in Ayrshire and Arran in the dental service and really kind of built a foundation, I think I would say of kind of skills, knowledge, experience, and have gone on to develop that quite considerably during my time at NES over the last nine years. My role when, when I joined NES was as the manager for a service called CPD Connect within the Medical Directorate and we primarily deliver continuing professional development for those working in general practice, mostly for, for directly for GPs, general practice nurses, practice managers and, and pharmacists on occasion. So, but my role in all of that is sort of very much team based. So, I line manage ultimately the, all of the administrative support structure that covers those professional groups, but I'm also, work really closely with all of my clinical and practice manager colleagues across the, the teams. So, you know, whilst not in a line management capacity, very much in a sort of leadership support capacity and that's where I guess my, my, probably my passion lies is in that sort of team and bringing that together and just kind of the culture making, you know, making that a really good place for, for everyone to, to work. So, I guess that's what I probably try and bring of myself to the, to the, to the teams that I, I work with.

**LI:** Yeah, thanks, Anna. And, and having worked in the team that you're talking about, not, not currently, but in the past, I really identify with some of the things you're saying there around almost, there's an element of you holding that team together in a very positive way. And, and it's the culture within the team is certainly one that is compassionate and kind and, and very generous around how, how, how everyone interacts with each other and, and feels like a very good place to be part of and certainly have very lovely memories of being part of that team. So, I'm, I'm really, you know, what you're saying is, you know, rings true in terms of, from my, from my own experience, which is, which is lovely to hear when you hear of a team where the culture is, is such that everyone has a sense of belonging within that team. They feel autonomous and that their contribution is really valued and that we matter. So, it's, it's, it's, it's great to hear that. So, in terms of this podcast, we're kind of really interested in, in how, in how you support people who are bereaved in the workplace. And, and, and I know that, you know, we haven't talked about numbers of staff, but I know with all the different people within those teams that you've been talking about, there are quite, a quite a number of people there and, and people are bereaved you know, quite, quite often in, in the periods of their life as they go through work. So, what is it, what do you think we can do to support people who are bereaved or, or anticipating loss or bereavement?

**AA:** Yeah, so absolutely. And I do work with quite, quite a, quite a large team really when you, when you put everyone together and over the years, you know some really quite different and quite challenging experiences of bereavement or anticipatory loss. And I myself was bereaved when I was 24, my, my dad died. And so, I have got kind of direct, quite close experience of, of losing someone. And, you know, so I think that, you know, from all of that experience of supporting people, being supported myself and sort of getting through it, I think the, the biggest thing is that it's just, it's not a one size fits all type scenario. You know, what, what I needed and experienced is not what necessarily, what the person that I'm speaking with or, or supporting at any given time needs. And that's probably one of the key things sort of, you know, to kind of remember that to listen to, to really explore what that, that individual person needs and is experiencing at that time. And probably not just to make kind of assumptions or I do sometimes have to reign my advice monster in, you know, a little bit as I'm sure a lot of people kind of do as well. So, yeah, you know, you know, finding out what that person needs. Some people need to be at work to take the distraction away. You know, home can be, you know, potentially quite challenging to be in when other people are, are around you and, and are also bereaved, but, but coping with things in a very different way. So work is often a bit of a kind of, you know, a bit of a safe haven for, for people to come away too. But equally, some people really feel that they can’t engage at, at work and, and need to be away. So really sort of getting to understand that for, for each individual is, is really important. But I think that probably that goes back to kind of having a good foundation of knowledge of your team and the people within it as individuals as well. So that, that kind of trust and ability to have those type of difficult conversations kind of comes a bit more naturally, you know if and when that time unfortunately happens for people.

**LI:** Yeah, I'm, I'm struck when you're talking there about, you know, it's not the same for everyone. It's, it's just, I made a kind of wee note there just so I didn't forget. But it, it really is bereavement care for people is really the ultimate in person-centred care. And that very individualised care, that very bespoke care because not, not as you say, one size doesn't fit all, it absolutely doesn't. And, and being really mindful of how we respond to people in that moment about how they, how they want to deal with it. And the advice monster bit, you know, identifying with as well, we're always trying to not give advice, but it's hard not to sometimes and we just want to tell people what we think they should do. So, reining that in is, is no mean feat. So yeah, I understand. And especially as a, as a manager, sometimes that kind of, I wonder if that advice is harder to, that advice monster is harder to reign in sometimes.

**AA:** I think so because I think sometimes it's, it's taken, taken me probably quite a while just to get to the point of like understanding that just kind of being a line manager or, or, or a manager doesn't mean you've got all the answers. And, and sometimes your team does look to you to, to have the answers, not about this specifically, but you know, generally. So, to actually be able to just sit and listen and see, you know, you know, this sounds incredibly difficult, and you know, I'm here, you know, I'm here any time that you need to, to talk and have someone to listen. And of course, there are, there are practical places that you can sign post people to as a line manager or as a colleague or as a friend. You know, there are occupational health, there's the employee assistance programme, there are, there are HR colleagues who are really experienced in being able to support. If, you know, it's maybe not quite clear what, what, what you can do within the policy or the procedure, but you know, they're, they're sort of, you know, they kind of operate very much in parallel on a practical sense…

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

**AA:** …I always feel that the, the, the sort of backbone of this is, this is what we can do and, and all of that. But, actually, it's the, the conversations that you have, the how you support people in a, in a softer way. I think that probably is almost more important because the organisation take care of a, of a lot of those sort of policy and procedural matters. And yes, how I apply them as a, as a line manager…

**LI:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**AA:** …is really important but it's really how we, how we make people feel at the end of the day. And I, I think one thing I'd, I'd be really keen to probably get across is that, you know, for me, it's, it's not about me, it's, it's about the team. So going back to what we were talking about at the beginning, Lynne, you know, we have a, quite a big team with sort of pockets of smaller teams within that. So, you know, I may line manage someone, but I actually might not be the person that they interact with day-to-day on the most part because they're operating within their kind of smaller individual teams. So often times people are getting that sort of day-to-day support from others across the team, and that's great you know…

**LI:** Yeah, yeah.

**AA:** …that's what we want. The more the more people that you feel safe, comfortable, supported by, the better, because it can't, it can't be a one-on-one thing to you know, that kind of it takes a village to raise a child well, I kind of that, as I was preparing for this, that, that kind of kept popping back into my head. It takes a whole team and an organisation and all of that to support a person.

**LI:** Absolutely. That's yeah, that, you're absolutely right. It, it absolutely does. I wonder how often we think about that, or I wonder how if we appreciate that or, or kind of or if that, that resonates with us around the everybody within the team has, has a role in supporting each other rather than it just the line, the, the kind of designated official line manager or, or, or whoever it happens to be. That it is about the support from the whole team, and that comes from to an extent from what you were talking about beginning as well as around the culture of that team. If people feel safe to, to have those conversations with other people. And I know that there are, there are things that you do, I mean, I know that you have your, your coffee catch ups every day at 10 o’clock and I know that people dip in and out of them as they can. But that's a, that's a really, a really wonderful place and space for connection and for people to build relationships in. And, and all of that is part of, of what you do as a team to enable that. And I know that, you know, it's maybe not you that drives that coffee catch up, it's actually Joyce that drives the coffee catch up to an extent and she and, and so, so it's other people within the team who are all working around each other to, for a common goal, I think…

**AA:** Yep.

**LI:** …and that's, that's what yeah, that's what that looks like.

**AA:** Absolutely, and, and I think that's really important that it's not me driving all of the things all of the time, actually, because you know, what one person can sort of carry all, all of that for, for everyone, because then what if you, you leave or you're off for a prolonged period of time or something? Does that sort of all that fall by the wayside? So, your, the people within your team are just, they are what makes your team, you know thrive really. So, yeah, different people have got their different strengths and different things that they push some more kind of publicly like that, you know…

**LI:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**AA:** …the virtual coffee that you're describing, but some things just really much more quietly in the background and, and yeah, all sort of contributes to the kind of beaten heart of the team, I think.

**LI:** Yeah, absolutely. One of the things I was just I had written down as well was just when you were talking obviously since COVID there has been a, a move to online working more and teams having more online relationships in lots of ways than, than prior to that when people were in the office every day. And I wondered if that, you know, if that, if that was more difficult or easier or, or is it just adapting? And I know this wasn't one of the questions that I gave you. So now I'm springing it on you, but it was just, I was thinking about it as it how, how has that affected supporting people?

**AA:** Yeah, I know, and I could probably talk about all day Lynne, as you probably well know, kind of springing that one on me. But I think that, that the answer is probably it's all of those things. It’s probably easier, it's probably harder, it's probably you know. I think people are more accessible, you know, sort of, so you, you, you don't have to wait so long to perhaps schedule a catch up. You can catch people for 10 minutes or you know, ever quite quickly but equally, I think it is more difficult sort of reading sort of body language. It's, it can be more difficult to kind of really understand sort of what's maybe going on behind the filter on the Teams screen for people, especially during that really difficult time. You know, if we're talking about bereavement or you know, anticipatory grief, you know is the phone sort of ringing in the background and a partner’s picking that up. But there's one ear of the person that you're speaking to, to what that phone call was is about, you know, so you, you can pick up on some of these cues, but actually the person might not want to let you know that they're not 100% present in that moment. So, I think in a way you've got a little bit of a window into what's happening in the real life in a way that maybe wouldn't be the same if you were in the office, but it can be sort of harder as well. There can definitely be a bit more of a barrier with the screen, you know, just not being able to give somebody a hug or pass them a tissue or do you know, something just really, really practical that's very natural to, to me to do. Now, some people might like the barrier of the screen and not want the hug, but you know, I think to not be able to actually reach out when someone's upset and actually physically comfort them is, is incredibly difficult. But you, you do have that direct access and you can afford people to, to be at home and closer to where they need to be if they need to be there…

**LI:** Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

**AA:** …as well. So, I think it's, it's not one or the other thing, but I do think that you probably need to work really hard at it. Where I find it probably the most challenging is if it's someone that I didn't personally maybe meet and have a sort of one-to-one face to face relationship with prior to us working from home. Because I think the people who and I'll, and a lot of people are about to fall into that category that I know them personally from, from pre-COVID, then there's a bit more of a shorthand and that trust's already there and I can kind of know just looking at them on the screen, are they ok? Are they not ok. I can tell you, can often from a from a team's message if someone's ok or not ok, but someone that you've maybe known for a shorter period of time, it takes a bit more effort and really putting in that work to get to know someone virtually. I'll always try and meet people face to face if I can, but we've obviously gone through periods where for, for various reasons that that's not necessarily been possible all of the time.

**LI:** So, it's, it's a real, it's real flexibility, isn't it?

**AA:** Yeah.

**LI:** And, and adapting to whatever's required. I suppose, are there any ways that you, you know, if there's line managers listening to this looking for a bit of kind, of advice around how they support people? Are there any specific ways that you, that you have in your toolbox around how you support, how you offer support to people?

**AA**: Yeah, so I think the first thing I would say is it can feel really uncomfortable. You know, it can feel awkward. And, you know, you might not know the person terribly well when they've suffered a bereavement and you know, they've not, you know, you don't know them particularly well. And it can feel, I don't know what to say. Say something, reach out. You know, I think that, that would be my first piece of advice. Don’t, don’t sit if someone's going through it through a difficult time. You know, Teams can actually be quite a bit of an icebreaker because we've got that sort of a more informal way of just sort of reaching out, checking in, asking people if they want to catch up. You know, you, you don't need to be, you know, phoning them and sort of foisting yourself on them. You can kind of you know, make your, you know, make your, yourself available to them in in different ways. I think be receptive to the fact that someone might not be in a position to talk that particular day. You know, from personal experience having gone through loss you know, sometimes there are days where you kind of are trying to get yourself into a place, you’ve maybe get something coming up later than the day that you don't want to be an emotional wreck for. So, you're kind of you know, and you know, so if someone reaches out and asks if you want to talk that day and you say no, you know, it just probably means that day you don't, doesn't mean maybe the next day that you, that that you…

**LI:** Yeah.

**AA:** …wouldn’t appreciate that. So, I think you know, not just taking one sort of you know one no as ok, they don't talk to me at all. Sort of you know, just gently making yourself available, checking in, asking maybe specific questions like, you know, how, how are you feeling today rather than how, how are you, you know, how are you? It's quite a, how do you, how do you answer that when you're, when you're going through a really, really tough time? So, you know maybe asking a specific question and then you may get a little bit of an in to, in an insight into how that person's feeling in that in that moment. Should they be at work today? Should they not? You know, you can kind of then explore that a little bit more deeply with them. If you are speaking to them one-on-one, you know, be present, turn off your screen. People know when you're reading an e-mail in the background, you know, I've done it. You know, I've, you know, you know, guilty of guilty of doing it. We're all really, really busy. But I think when you're having a really important conversation like that, you know, turn off your emails, put your phone on silent, put it away, you know, and just be really pleasant for the person and, and, and listen, listen to what they, they are saying. Kind of, as I said earlier as well it's not always just about you. So actually, if you know, you are really busy that day, you know, you’ve maybe got a day of interviews or a day of meetings or you're on annual leave or something, you know, getting others to just gently check in, you know, not just maybe assuming that others are, are, are going to do that. But actually, sometimes I'll say to, you know, a kind of key person, you know, would you just, just double check that they're ok? And if you don't think they are you know, please you know, you know, feel free to tell them just to, to log off their, log off their computer for, for the day or for an hour or, you know, or whatever and sort of kind of making that kind of preparation, you know, for a, as you, as a line manager when you're maybe not, not there. But I think kind of the line management part of it, line management's a role. It's a role that some of us have, but it, it doesn't give you the sort of, the right to know sort of everything about everyone. You know, that sort of deeper trust takes time to develop and, you know, some people are more open than others. So, you know, don't, maybe just don't assume that someone will tell you everything straight away, if you've not sort of had the time to kind of build that deeper relationship. It will hopefully come over time as people, you know, kind of get to know you and, and feel that you're, that you're being genuine, but you know, be real, be authentic, people can feel it.

**LI:** Yeah, yeah. Sounds as I listen to you, Anna, I'm thinking about, you know, compassionate leadership is springing to mind in terms of everything that you've described there about, about, and being very flexible and being very adaptable to how and responding to people in that moment. And I'm always struck when I do this podcast, as you know, I, I have a role in spiritual care and, and, and a lot of people don't really always know what spiritual care is and think they often get it muddled up with religious care. And it's not, it's about, it's about, but actually everything you've described there is about giving spiritual care to the people that you're, that you've, you've got, you know, not, I'm not going to just say a responsibility to because I think it's more than that for you. I think it's actually, there's, there's something really intrinsic in you in terms of, of looking after the people around you. Regardless, as you said, it's line management's a role it's not, it's not kind of, it's not why you do that. It's just because of the, the person that you are. And actually, in all of that, you're offering spiritual care to people, which is, and I'm struck by that and all the podcasts that I do where I hear people talking about how they, how they respond to others. And, and yeah, you, you may not be thinking about that on a daily basis when you're given that support that you're actually offering spiritual care.

**AA:** No, not at all actually…

**LI:** Yeah.

**AA:** …but I think, you know, but I, I can totally identify with what you're saying. And, but I think, you know it can be you know, so take, taken sort of me as the, It can be a lot, you know, the, my personality type as I want to kind of help and, you know, have to stop myself from wee bit from being the rescuer and just putting myself into that sort of just listen, support, guide, coach and you know, it can be, you can take on, you know, some of that emotion from, from other people. I, I definitely do. But I, I see it as a real privilege when people share, you know, really sort of difficult things that they're going through. It's, it’s a real privilege to…

**LI:** Yeah, absolutely.

**AA:** …to be trusted in that way with people's lives and stories…

**LI:** Yeah.

**AA:** …and…

**LI:** Yeah.

**AA:** …and difficulties.

**LI:** Yeah.But I, I suspect you're creating a safe space for them though. And, and that's why they, why they do share it…

**AA:** I hope so, hope so.

**LI:** …you know, and, and, and that's, and it is a privilege, but it also means you're doing this well. That's, that's what that kind of sounds like and as I say, because I've worked in the team, I know that you do it well, I'm not just guessing…

**AA:** Thank you.

**LI:** …that it's done well. So, if you were thinking about ways, you know, if other line managers, as I said, are listening to this and thinking about how do, how would I do this even better? Are there any ways that you've thought about that you can, is there any things that you think you could do better? And there may not be because it sounds like you're, you're doing pretty well.

**AA:** Yeah, I think it's, it's just a, it's a case-by-case sort of thing. You know, there are things like I, I use clumsy words sometimes, you know, and I go away and I'm, you know, I get, you know, I'm a, I'm a bit of a reflector of like, why did I say, you know, why did I say that? And you can sort of beat yourself up a little bit. But I think that people are very forgiving generally, or probably never even noticed the clumsy language because the, the intention comes across as feeling genuine, then I think people are very, very forgiving. So, I think, you know, don't shirk away from, you know, difficult conversations because you feel like you may say the wrong thing. I think saying nothing is, is worse and I've definitely learned that over time. I think as well, you know, different people handle emotions differently. So, you know, when you work in a team, not everyone's, you know, clones of, of me and how I handle things you know, different people deal with things differently and some people might respond better to someone else's sort of style than, than mine. And, and that is absolutely fine. It's sort of not taking that personally and just being really thankful that someone else in the team is able to provide that support to someone in a way that maybe you, you can't at that time. Being aware of your own emotional state, I think’s really, really important, you know, all of our colleagues are going through these difficult things, then equally so are we at different times. So, you know, sometimes I'm not in a place to be able to maybe engage in a certain conversation on a certain day, but it's, you know, having that wider team there to sort of, you know, be able to, to, to pick up the, you know, pick up the conversation with someone at any given time. I don't want someone sitting when I'm off on two weeks leave thinking that they don't have someone else that they can go and speak to.

**LI:** Yeah.

**AA:** So, it's really important to have those relationships across the team so that, you know, there's always someone available for someone to, to speak to. But I guess trying, trying to avoid, it's like a set of tasks that you need to do. You know, there are official things that we need to do if someone's going to be off work. Of course there are. But for me, that almost comes secondary to, to making sure that the person's ok, we can sort out paperwork afterwards. You know, I'll speak to my HR colleague and say, look, I'm sorry, I've not been able to submit that form today because, you know, we, we just weren't in a place for me to get all of the information that I needed to complete that. But I'm working on it, and I'll gently try and get that from, from the next conversations that, that we have. So, you know, not being afraid to just say, ok, you know, we can, we can deal with that…

**LI:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**AA:** …another day. It's like, what's the, what's the priority? It's, it's the person…

**LI:** Yeah.

**AA:** …in the moment.

**LI:** Yeah, yeah. So, it's back to that, what that person needs now and, and, and, and going with that, isn't it?

**AA:** Yeah.

**LI:** I suppose as we come to the end of the podcast, are there any kind of final, kind of reflections or thoughts that you, that you have that we've maybe wanted to say that I've not, not quite brought out yet or?

**AA:** I think just that I mean, it all comes back to really what the core values of NES really are and that we're, we're all supposed to display and feel every day, and, and, you know, we're talking about bereavement or, or anticipatory grief or loss today specifically because, you know, that's the, the area of this podcast. But for me, I think that the principles of everything that we've said sort of go through any situation, sort of good or bad that you might be dealing with, with a, with a team or a person or a situation. So, you know, whether someone's getting married or getting divorced or having a loss or, you know, whatever that is, it's, it's about how you support that person through that particular thing in their, in their life for, for the good or the bad and hopefully more, you know, more good. But you've got to kind of have the, the culture sort of underpinning what, how your team works every day so that you can kind of catch people when they need you.

**LI:** Yeah, yeah. Well, thank you so much Anna for, for taking the time to share your thoughts with us, or with, with the podcast. I am totally inspired by what you've said and for a variety of reasons, not least because I'm so reassured that spiritual care is happening outwith spiritual care departments. It's actually happening across organisations and departments and people are actually, actually doing it without even knowing. But, but, but in terms of your leadership for your team and the compassionate leadership that you have and that you bring to that, that team is invaluable really. And so, thank you so much for, for sharing that with us here on the podcast.

**AA:** Thanks very much, it's been a pleasure working with you and your, you and your team Lynne.

**LI:** Thank you.

The podcast was recorded in July 2024 and can be found at <https://www.sad.scot.nhs.uk/events/podcast-series/> or <https://open.spotify.com/show/11AORpjHqbsYwgg1DJUtLk?si=687dba351d1f45d4>

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