**NHS Education for Scotland**

**Talking about Bereavement Podcast Series – Transcript of ‘Light in the darkness: Bereavement at times of celebration’Podcast**

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**Speaker**: Mark Evans, Head of Spiritual Care & Bereavement Lead, NHS Fife / National Adviser for Spiritual Care, Scottish Government (ME)

**LI:** Hello and welcome to the Talking About Bereavement podcast, which is brought to you by the NHS Education for Scotland Bereavement Education Programme. I'm Lynne Innes, I'm one of the educators in the team and in these podcasts, I'm going to talk about bereavement with, with our guests who will be sharing and reflecting some of the work and 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, Mark Evans. Mark currently works in NHS Fife and is also National Advisor for Spiritual Care at the Scottish Government. Mark, really pleased to be talking to you today, obviously we know each other. So, I, I know a bit about your background, but I'm aware I don't know kind of lots about your background and I wondered if you want to kind of share a wee bit about yourself, how you've come to be in the position that you're currently in. So just a bit more about, about you would be good to hear.

**ME:** Morning Lynne. So, I suppose I started my journey almost 35 years ago. I, my first job really when leaving school was with young male homeless men in Edinburgh and it was in the 80s just when HIV, AIDS were starting to kick off and then become something known and that whole new area of work led me to train as a nurse. I then worked in critical care and over the years of working as a nurse realised actually there was more to people's health than just their physical comfort and their physical well-being and that led me into spiritual care and particularly palliative care. And in turn, that led me to bereavement and, and a real fascination and interest and, and how do we support people who have went through such a significant loss? And then about 20 years ago, I came to NHS Fife as a chaplain at the Queen Margaret Hospital. About 10 years ago I was appointed head of department and, bereavement lead for the board. And it's a job that I've really loved, and I've been passionate about. And actually, when we talk about loss, I suppose in some ways I'm going through a loss myself because after 20 years, I'm just about to leave NHS Fife to move to NHS Lothian to be head of service for the bereavement team there and the spiritual care team there.

**LI:** Yeah, I hadn't really thought about that before we started chatting actually, Mark that, that you're, you're just, you're going through this period of time, aren't you?

**ME:** Yeah.

**LI:** Because you, you wait, you, you start your new post in January, and this is beginning of December.

**ME:** Yeah.

**LI:** So, so you are actually kind of, you know, grieving that last 20 years…

**ME:** Yeah.

**LI:** …really of working here…

**ME:** It’s a really interesting role.

**LI:** …although you're yeah, looking forward to moving, I'm sure you are and it's a great opportunity for you in this new role. But, but actually that, that process of leaving behind just now can be quite hard as well. So, yeah…

**ME:** Yeah.

**LI:** …so it's kind of opportune time to, to think about this…

**ME:** It is yeah.

**LI:** …in this podcast. And I think we came about this podcast thinking about we're approaching the festive season. We can see lights up and trees up and, and people are starting to get into that kind of festive spirit. But actually, for a lot of people, this time is not an easy time as the they reflect on their, their grief and their bereavement. And so, I wondered what your kind of thoughts, having all that, all that experience you have in terms of working in bereavement over the years as we come up to anniversaries and celebrations, what, what kind of things, how do we support people who are bereaved at this time?

**ME:** I, I think it's interesting Lynne that regardless of, of, of your background or, or your beliefs that the festive season is something where we all have traditions and rituals that, that we have gone through, you know, be that as kids hanging up the stocking or, or, or who puts the star on the Christmas tree. And there is also that whole, I suppose, social pressure about, you know, and Christmas is a time, particularly or, or, or, or new year, Hogmanay here in Scotland is a time to spend with loved ones and therefore when, when you know, TV commercials and, and friends and work and, and society as a whole is, is all pushing this big message of Christmas is a time or the festive period is a time to be with loved ones. For those who have had a bereavement, it almost intensifies that because it reminds us what we don't have. So, we don't have the person we make up the shopping list, we don't have the person that we would sit at the Christmas dinner table with, we don't have the person we'd kiss at midnight on the bells. So, so in many ways, it intensifies our loss and regardless of your religious or philosophical belief that the whole festive period is, is all about that the underlying messages about, you know, new beginnings, light come into the darkness. But actually, if you’re bereaved, if it's a significant particularly, you know, if it's the first or the second Christmas or new year after a death, many people are thinking actually, well, there's no light in my life. There is no new beginnings because I've lost everything. And therefore, what happens is people concentrate on the death of a loved one as opposed to the life of a loved one, and I think that's, or the absence of a loved one as opposed to the presence of a loved one. And I think that's for many of us is what makes this time of year if you are bereaved so difficult.

**LI:** Yeah, that's quite profound actually, Mark, as you say that. And you know, it's hard not to reflect on my own loss, my own losses when…

**ME:** Yeah.

**LI:** …you're, when you're talking and thinking about my aunt who died last year. But also one of the things I talk about a lot in VBRP is around my, my value of hospitality and that value comes from my granny who came from Leith, was one of 13 who, who lived in Methil, moved to Methil when she got married and everybody would come from Edinburgh to visit because it was a day out at the weekend to go to, to go to Methil. There was no phone, so she never knew how many people were coming. But it didn't matter if we turned up, she fed everybody. I used to be amazed at how she was feeding everybody. She fed everybody and, and it was a great social occasion. You know, that all these folk coming from Edinburgh. I used to love it because I love being part of the kind of social aspect of it as well. But every time, every time I tell that story, and I do tell it at VBRP, because we focus on it's very much about its values based, she comes alive again…

**ME:** Yeah.

**LI:** …and I feel that I almost feel like it's not 30 years since she died, you know, and it's, it's a really lovely way of remembering her and honouring her and, and it feels really special to be able to do that. So, focusing on that, you know, the, the life of the person makes so much more sense in lots of ways for me, for me, and that may not be for everybody than, than focusing on that that person is no longer at the table. But actually, if they were at the table, what would they be doing and she’d be running about getting extra potatoes for everybody and that kind of thing, you know, so, so it's a really nice way, it's a really profound way of thinking about that time that, that person in that way. Thank you for you know, that's been, that's lovely to, to kind of, that you shared that because actually I hadn't really thought about it like that.

**ME:** And it's interesting Lynne because just for the exact same reasons you've just said, because the, the whole festive period is, is so full of traditions and, and rituals that, that as families we develop and grow. Actually, if we're able to just take that little mind change, there's things that we can do which allows us to honour and remember the person's life as opposed to remembering or focusing on their absence and, and, and, and these rituals, particularly around this time of year, can actually give us that excuse and, and, and, and help us achieve that or, or do that.

**LI:** Yeah, and I wonder then, you know, when we're, we're talking about, I mean, our, our podcast is focused on education of health and social care staff. How do we support and particularly as chaplains and, and, and spiritual care givers, how do we support people to, to do that?

**ME:** So often the bereaved will give us a lead. So, they will often say, you know, I'm dreading Hogmanay. I'm just going to go to my bed or I'm dreading the office party, I'm dreading Christmas Day, you know, so, so they will often give us a lead into what, what they're concerned about. And then what I would normally do is say, so what is it about that you're struggling with? What is it about that that you're scared? And people might say, well, you know, we, we always host Christmas dinner, so, everyone will be coming to me. So, what I would often sit and say, ok, so let's think about this. Do you want to host it? You know, what is it time to start a new tradition? What about going to a hotel or a restaurant or, or going to your son or your daughters for Christmas Day? And it's not about this is the way you should be doing it because of course, you know, it's, it's, it's very different depending on each, each person. But it's about allowing them to actually say, ok, let's think about the options here just because that's how you've done, so, if there's a couple who have been married and ones died, just because that's the way you've done it for the last 20 years, do you still have to do it this way? And if they come back and say, well, yeah, I want to do it that way, you know, that that's what I do at Christmas. It's ok. So, so what can we do within that to help you celebrate the person you love? What, what can you do to bring that person alive? And over the years, you know, we've, we've had, I've, I've worked with people and came up with a whole pile of things that they have done that, that have helped them. So, so one of the most common ones we, we do is Christmas cards. So, people will write a Christmas card to their loved ones and then they will put it in an envelope, and they will address the envelope. And then they go out into the garden, and they have a glass of mulled wine, or a mince pie and they set the Christmas card on fire. And as they watch the smoke go up into the sky, you think about that love and that message going up to their loved one. If there's a grave or, you know, can you buy somebody that's dead a present? Well, you know, do you buy flowers and take to the grave, a Christmas wreath? Do you? And, and then there's something even more profound you can have. A, a very close friend of mine died in, in February this year, but a couple years ago he, he gave us the most beautiful Christmas ornament. And this year, putting that on the tree is going to have a whole pile of different meaning. But every time I look at the star, it was a star he gave us, every time I look at that star, I will think of him, you know, and, and, and…

**LI:** Yeah.

**ME:** …all the stuff that goes, you know, that's bright, that's still my life, that, that the light he brought is still around. And, and, and we will no doubt when we put, you know, the star on, on the tree, raise a glass to him and toast him. Again, Christmas time is a, it's a time when many of us have candles. So, on Christmas Day, as a family, do we sit round and light a candle on the sideboard or on the mantelpiece or on the window to remind us of those who aren't with us. So, because of the, the, the whole vest of traditions, it's easier than other times of the year to find specific things we can do to mark and celebrate the life, And, and, and that's not to say it still won't be sad. You know, it's not to say it still won't be hard. I often say to people, not all tears are evil. You know, sometimes, yeah, it's good to have a wee cry…

**LI:** Yeah.

**ME:** …and to remember.

**LI:** Yeah.

**ME:** Yeah.

**LI:** Yeah.Yeah, we say, well I say to folks crying is ok. You know…

**ME:** Yeah.

**LI:** …it's, it is ok and, and it's not, you know, it is. But, but it's hard for folks to, to, to cry sometimes and to express their emotion in that way. I've heard, I've heard somebody talking recently, and I hadn't really heard this before about people setting places at the table for the, the person that had died. And I suppose it's about people finding their own thing, isn't it?

**ME:** Yeah, yeah.

**LI:** And finding what works for them.

**ME:** So, my granny and granddad brought me up and, and they were from Leith, you know, and, and, and like most people of their age, they all signed the pledge when they were young. But at Christmas, my granddad was allowed to have a whiskey and, and he usually, he usually stole the whiskey that we left out for, for Santa. So, in our house or in our family actually, many of us know when we go to bed on Christmas Eve, leave a whiskey out…

**LI:** Yeah, yeah.

**ME:** …but we don't leave it for Santa. We leave it for granddad.

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

**ME:** You know, so, so and, and, you know, again, we, I've spoken to families in the past about, you know, setting a place to the table. And some people thought that's too much for them because that space reminds them, some people set a whole place setting. And again, you know what I would often say to people as well, just before your meal, why don't you all stand and raise a glass to the, to the person you're remembering? But for some people that whole, whole having a whole place setting is just too much. So again, I would often suggest to people, well, have you thought about just putting a candle on the table? You know, so, so that candle burns throughout your meal and, and remember all the good and the light and the joy and the love that person brought into, to your celebrations and into your life.

**LI:** And it's about that memorialising and remembering, isn't it…

**ME:** Yes.

**LI:** …of, of that person and whatever way that, that kind of is right for them to do.

**ME:** And I think it's slightly more important that as well that just for exact reasons you've just said. It's about moving on from just remembering the person's died to remembering their life and what they meant. So often we get caught up in our grief around the actual death that, the loss and the death and the grief that brings fills so much of our lives that the good times, the memories that the happy times are almost pushed out.

**LI:** Yes, yeah, yeah, that's right. I've noticed that. Yeah.

**ME:** And, and these memory making things we do, these simple traditions, these little acts. I suppose again, the whole message of the festive season, isn't it? It allows us to bring some light into that darkness and it allows us to see beyond the death or to remember beyond the death actually, you know, to, to the good times and, and all that all the good Christmases, all the good New Year's we've celebrated. And actually, how much of the traditions that you do as a, as a family around this time of year, were instilled in you by the person that you're grieving.

**LI:** Yeah, absolutely, yeah, absolutely. Like I, I made a Christmas cake last weekend because my granny always made a Christmas cake…

**ME:** Yeah.

**LI:** …and I got her baking bowl when she died.

**ME:** Right.

**LI:** And so that's, I make the Christmas cake in her baking bowl, you know, and that's like that's part of that whole remembrance, but also making the Christmas cake, I'm the person that makes the Christmas cake now, the kind of, that kind of hospitality thing, missed my mum.

**ME:** But as well as the hospitality, there's also an immortality there.

**LI:** Yeah, that's right, yeah.

**ME:** That the person lives on through, through these, these things we do. So, so my gran was a, a baker, a confectionery chef and my uncle, he's not particularly, well I don’t know he might kill me if he hears me saying this, I don't think he's particularly, you know, good cook. But the one thing he is amazing at is every year he makes black bun.

**LI:** Oh yeah, yeah, yeah.

**ME:** And he makes black bun for everyone in the family. But every time now we go out, Hogmanay and have a bit of black bun, we don't remember Uncle Derek ,we, we remember my, my gran.

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

**ME:** It's even silly things like saying, that would be having too much pepper in it for, for granny, you know, but…

**LI:** Yeah, yeah.

**ME:** …but by talking about and laughing about you, you're keeping that memory alive and fresh and vibrant and light…

**LI:** Yeah.

**ME:** …you know.

**LI:** And, and it's actually really just even talking, you know, us talking about this just now. And I'm thinking obviously about my granny quite a lot. I’m thinking how refreshing it is and how liberating it is to think of her in this way.

**ME:** Yeah.

**LI:** And that's the same as what happens when I talk about her in VBRP.

**ME:** Yeah.

**LI:** I suppose how do we do this, keep doing this really well? Are there reasons that we might find this difficult to do?

**ME:** So, I think it comes back to what, what I was saying previously. There, there's part of us that feels guilty. So, you know, you read your average Christmas card. So just, you know, the friend we lost in February, spent all weekend trying to find a Christmas card for his family, which didn’t say sympathy because of course, you know, he died in February, but trying to find a card that didn't say, you know, have a wonderful, joyful, exciting…

**LI:** Yeah.

**ME:** …happy time when, you know, the family is not going to do that. So, so it's finding that balance. But there's also, I think that we all carry a sense of guilt that when the world's telling us that Christmas in particular is a time about being happy and joyful, there's a sense of guilt that we're not. And of course, there's that whole thread of grief which subconsciously tells us we have no right to be happy when the person you loves died. And, and that is a really difficult part of grief. You know that, that when everybody else is, is up wrapping presents and writing Christmas cards and going to the Christmas parties and, and planning for Hogmanay and, and New Year's Day dinner and all the rest, all we want to do is go to bed and pull the downy up. And, and for some people that is an option. And, and, and it sounds very hard, but sometimes we have to sit and think it was the person that died, not me. And actually, my life and me as a person are better for having them in my life.

**LI:** Yeah.

**ME:** So how do I reconnect? How do I remember? How do I, I, I build a continuing bond which allows me to remember which is safe and, and joyful, not in a happy, exciting, hooters and balloon way. But you know, just even, you see, you know, when you talk about your auntie, when you talk about your gran, it, it brings that inner joy.

**LI:** Yeah.

**ME:** And it might be fleeting, and it might be a moment of light in the darkness of a really difficult time. But actually, it's those figments of light, those, those sparks of light that happen or we can create for ourselves, which gets us through what can be a really difficult period for people.

**LI:** Yeah, and that seems like a, a good place to finish actually thinking about the sparks of light or the glimmers of light and holding on to those glimmers often when the darkness feels overwhelming.

**ME:** Yeah.

**LI:** But holding on to those little glimmers of light are, are, I suppose, what, what gives us hope.

**ME:** It is and, and if nothing else, you know, I personally, my own values and beliefs, I would say the whole message of the festive period is there is hope.

**LI:** Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Thank you so much, Mark, for, for joining me today and, and doing this special episode of the podcast. I really appreciate it. And I absolutely wish you all the best in your, your new role at Lothian and hope still to kind of hear from you and connect with you…

**ME:** Thank you.

**LI:** …around what you're doing. Thank you so much.

**ME:** Thank you.

The podcast was recorded in December 2024 and can be found at <https://www.sad.scot.nhs.uk/podcast/> or [https://open.spotify.com/show/11AORpjHqbsYwgg1DJUtLk?si=687dba351d1f45d4](https://open.spotify.com/show/11AORpjHqbsYwgg1DJUtLk?si=687dba351d1f45d4 )

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