**NHS Education for Scotland**

**Talking about Bereavement Podcast Series – Transcript of ‘Giving children a voice in their grief: A bereavement coordinators perspective’ Podcast**

**Presenter:** Lynne Innes, Senior Educator, NHS Education for Scotland / Lead for Spiritual Care and Wellbeing, NHS Fife (LI)

**Speaker**: Sam Harrison, Bereavement Coordinator, Richmond’s Hope (SH)

**LI:** Hello and welcome to the Talking About Bereavement podcast, which is brought to you by the Bereavement Education Programme in NHS Education for Scotland. I'm Lynne Innes, 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 learning that they're involved in as they talk about bereavement.

Hi and welcome to this episode of the podcast. I'm delighted to introduce my guest today, Sam Harrison. Sam is from Richmond's Hope and after qualifying as an art therapist in 2005, Sam began working for Richmond's Hope as a bereavement practitioner, supporting children and young people who are grieving after the death of their person. She continued this role until 2011 when she spent a decade working in suicide prevention. Sam has now returned to Richmond's Hope in 2021 and is, is the Bereavement Coordinator and she overseas Edinburgh, Glasgow, Fife and the Lothians. Sam is particularly passionate about normalising talking about death, dying and affording children a voice in their grief. Hi Sam and welcome to this episode of the podcast and thanks so much for agreeing to be with us.

**SH:** Hi Lynne, thank you for inviting me.

**LI:** You're very welcome. I wonder if you'd like to obviously I've given a bit of an introduction about you, but I wonder if you would like to talk about yourself and, and tell us a bit more about yourself and how you've got to where you are now in terms of your own life and work.

**SH:** As you said in, in your introduction, I started my journey with Richmond's Hope 20 years ago now, so a really long time. It feels like I've been in bereavement for, for, well, I have for half my life now. It wasn't initially the topic that I wanted to be going into, it wasn't the area that I wanted to be, to be working in. But it fast became something that I feel incredibly passionate about. Giving children voice in their grief, being able to give them the opportunity to grieve in their way and be able to be seen within the bereavement world. It was definitely something that I noticed first off was families were still in that avenue of, of not really wanting to include their children after there'd been a death, not including them in funerals, not including them and, and it fast became apparent that that was, that was an issue for a lot of the children that we were working with that we were seeing was that they hadn't had a voice and they were really, they were really wanting to be able to express their need to be included with their family's grief.

**LI:** And, and what, what kind of sort of provoked your interest in that in, in children's grief and bereavement?

**SH:** So during my training as an art therapist, I'd done a placement with a Place2Be. I'd never worked with children and young people before and my lecturer, I was quite frightened about working with children. And my lecturer had said, well, even if you're going to be working with adults, you need to work with children because you'll always be working with the inner child. So on you go, go and do it. So absolutely terrified and just, I really loved it. I loved the honesty, I loved the I just, I just really enjoyed the playfulness of working with children and young people. And then having a young boy in my placement who had been bereaved. It really did highlight to me the need for, for support for children and young people in that area.

**LI:** I like, I like the idea that, yeah, we're all, we're, even those of us that work predominantly with adults are always working with inner children.

**SH:** Yeah.

**LI:** Maybe not quite thought about that before in that way, but actually it does make some sense. So tell us a bit about Richmond's Hope and what, what, what it actually offers and, and what do you do?

**SH:** So we provide support for children and young people between the ages of 4 and 18 who have been bereaved. Charity provides a safe space for them to work through their grief both verbally and creatively to preserve memories of the person who's died, to be able to explore their feelings and to develop coping strategies, as well as understanding the impact that bereavement has had on their lives. Because everybody's grief is different. We try and provide an individual programme for each child so that they are able to have that person centred approach delivered to them within their sessions. And they've got control over, over what's done within, within the themes of, of memories, coping strategies and, and emotions. And we also offer training for families, for foster care, for anybody who's interested really in being able to have the language to talk to children and young people about death and dying. We offer parent and carer coffee mornings and support for them to be able to have a little bit of peer support as well. Have, have that contact with one another and be able to share their experiences of caring for a bereaved child.

**LI:** And what, what is your kind of referral process or how do you go about getting people or children into your service?

**SH:** As long as the child is happy to be referred and as long as it's been a minimum of 12 weeks since the bereavement and as long as the parent and carer has got the knowledge that the referral has been made, anybody can make the referral. So parents and carers can make the referral, social work, GPs, we would always then contact the family if it had come through a third party to be able to just make sure that they were happy with that referral to go ahead, anybody can refer to our service.

**LI:** Okay. And, and I noticed I was saying that you, you're predominantly Glasgow, Edinburgh, Lothians and Fife.

**SH:** Yeah.

**LI:** Is that where your service is at the moment or is it wider, is it across Scotland more widely?

**SH:** I mean it's as wide as it needs to be. If somebody can get to us, we will support them…

**LI:** Right.

**SH:** …as best as we possibly can. We do have bases within those localities, within those areas where we can physically see children and young people, but we will see children from the Borders, we'll see from, from anywhere. As long as they are able to get to us, then we'll be able to, we'll be able to see them. Obviously, we want to be able to go into the communities and help children and young people feel as though we're part of their community, but that's not always possible. So the bases that we have are within those areas.

**LI:** And I know when we spoke before, I think you were, you're quite busy or it's, you've got kind of some waiting times, haven't you, for some of your, some of your centres or your bases?

**SH:** We do. Edinburgh has about a 10-month waiting list at the moment.

**LI:** Okay.

**SH:** Fife doesn't have a very long waiting list at the moment. So it really does vary from, from place to place. And that can, that can change as well. But we really try and keep in touch with the families and welcome them phoning up and checking where they are on the waiting list. But even if they want to come in, the carers come in to have a conversation with us about right okay, we know we're on this waiting list, we know it's going to be quite some time, but to be able to give them a little bit of support in supporting their children at home as well so…

**LI:** Yeah, yeah.

**SH:** …if they're, if they're worried about any specific issues, whether it be not being able to sleep at night or struggling to engage in school, we've, we've been able to contact schools, parents, carers and try and do that in the moment support while they are on the waiting list. So we wouldn't want anybody to feel as though they couldn't get in touch with us while they're sitting on the waiting list.

**LI:** So that's good to know. And I suppose if people get some kind of bits of advice and guidance themselves to, you know, while they're waiting to be seen, that that can be really helpful for people as well.

**SH:** Yeah, it can, and we found at a couple of the coffee mornings that, that have been done, that some of the parents have gone, oh, my child's grieving in a healthy way, okay so maybe they don't actually need to be on the waiting list. There's been that being able to talk about what it is that's going on for their child. You know, speaking to other carers about what's happening with their children and hearing, oh, right, that's griefs just horrible so that's, that's this is a healthy grief. And sometimes not really knowing what that might look like in children and that can give them a little bit more of reassurance that, that they are doing everything that they can and that, that their child is, is grieving in a healthy way.

**LI:** I suppose that leads nicely on to thinking about what can we do or what, what do, what do you do as an organisation to support children who are bereaved or anticipating loss or bereavement?

**SH:** I think having an open and honest and age-appropriate conversation with children and young people around, around death, it affords them that opportunity to ask any questions as they come up. It helps them to feel included and that their voice does matter. An anticipatory bereavement, preparing children and young people for what's coming, it can be a really helpful way for them to feel as though they're able to make final memories, say goodbye and they feel prepared for what's coming. As long as you know, there's no wonderful way to be prepared for, for a death of, of somebody that you love. But it gives them that opportunity to say goodbye and to be as prepared as is possible. And even in traumatic bereavements, deaths can be explained in an age-appropriate way so that children can feel as though they've been given the truth from the very beginning. And they, they know then that their people will give them honest answers when they're going to ask questions, no matter how difficult it is, they will be given honesty.

**LI:** Yeah. And, and, and you know, it feels an intuitive that that would be the right thing to do to make sure that, that children are, are given honest answers…

**SH:** Yeah.

**LI:** …but it's something I wonder if we find quite hard to do as a society.

**SH:** Oh, for sure. I think we really do struggle as a, as a society to talk about bereavement, to talk about death. As adults I think we are, if we really think about it, we're maybe protecting ourselves more than we're protecting children. When we, when we use certain language. As an example, when we say, I'm sorry that you lost somebody, children can find that quite confusing. We lose car keys, we lose, we lose things, we go and find them. Whereas if we stick to concrete language like died, dead and death, it gives them that little bit more ability to, to process it and understand it and explaining what that means as well. Because children may not know up until gosh, the ages and stages of development, you, they may not know what death actually means. So being able to explain to them that somebody's heart has stopped beating and they can't see, hear, feel or anything anymore and, and that means that they have died. So it's also checking in with the child what their understanding is as well, using concrete language and checking in that they understand what that means.

**LI:** Yeah. There was something came to me there and it's just gone. I was just going to say something about that, yeah it was about kind of using the words dead, dying, died. That's something certainly in the Bereavement Education Programme, we've been very always kind of saying, don't use euphemisms…

**SH:** Yeah.

**LI:** …and, you know, trying to make sure that we're saying dead, died rather than lost or, or passing.

**SH:** Yeah.

**LI:** I don't know what your thoughts are because passing seems to have become a word that, that is used increasingly.

**SH:** It is.And I've noticed as well on social media, there's a trend at the moment to use phrases like unalived. People are still avoiding this phrase of dead and died. There does…

**LI:** Unalived?

**SH:** seem to be…Unalived yeah…

**LI:** Oh right I’ve not heard that.

**SH:** …on social media.

**LI:** Right, okay, right.

**LI:** And again, I think it just, it takes away that it's, it's okay to use these phrases. It's okay to say that somebody has died, and it can sound quite harsh. And we and I think every, it all comes from a really good place. It all comes from a space of wanting to be supportive and caring and to not sound harsh. But when you are talking to small children, it can, it can feel more confusing.

**LI:** Yeah, that's interesting. I hadn't, hadn’t heard that. And so what are the specific ways that, that you offer to support children, their families, carers?

**SH:** So the work that’s done at Richmond's Hope’s, a lot of creativity, making memory jars, looking at exploring feelings that we hide from the world by looking at mask work and ways in which we showed the world socially digestible emotions, explaining why it's okay to tell people if we're struggling and it's okay to ask for help. So really, I suppose just confronting that stigma that we don't really tell people how we're feeling, and it is okay to, to share that. Ultimately, it's about holding space for people, listening and not shying away from talking about the person who's died if the person is experiencing initial stage of the grief. I think everybody sort of comes together just before the funeral and, and there does seem to be a lot more community around that…

**LI:** Yeah.

**SH:** …but then once the funeral has ended, people will just sort of dissipate, get back on with their lives. And you've still got this grieving family. And people don't tend to engage as much or ask about grief as much after, after the funeral has been. And some of the families that we've spoken about have said that there's so many people so frightened about saying the wrong thing that they just avoid the topic completely. So again, it's not shying away from this topic, not shying away from talking about the person who's died and taking the lead from the bereaved person. Again, it can help them, well, it can help them feel less isolated to, in their grief by just checking in and seeing if they do want to talk about their person.

**LI:** Yeah, yeah. That's that kind of all makes sense really, doesn't it? So how do we ensure that we continue to do that well or how do you ensure that Richmond's Hope continues to do that well?

**SH:** I think acknowledging we're all going to make mistakes in society. We're never, never any of us going to get it 100% right 100% of the time and what is right for one person isn't going to be right for somebody else. So I guess trying to take the lead from, from the children, from the young people that we work with, checking in with them and seeing what it is that they want to work on, whether they’re wanting to work on memories, whether they want it, but challenging them as well. So if you've got somebody that is, you can tell is avoiding looking at certain areas, just sort of challenging them gently to see if they will they will go down that, go down that route. But I think ensuring that we do this well as a society, I guess, is trying to normalise talking about…

**LI:** Yeah, yeah.

**SH:** …grief a bit more.

**LI:** Yeah.

**SH:** We’re just, we're so avoidant of talking about death and it's, it's our one truth. It's our one reality that, that we've all got in common.

**LI:** Yes.

**SH:** And if, if we're going to avoid talking about it, it doesn't mean that we're going to avoid it happening to us or we're going to avoid it happening to the people that we love who are around us. So I guess acknowledging we can get it wrong and that's okay.

**LI:** And I wonder if some people worry that if they talk about it, that somehow that brings it on sooner or, or the, I mean, I know when I said that out loud there, it doesn't sound logical in any way whatsoever but I do wonder sometimes if people, if we talk, if we talk about it makes people fearful, it makes people fearful…

**SH:** Oh I think so.

**LI:** …of their own mortality.

**SH:** Yeah.

**LI:** And so it's, it's, that's why we, that's why it's better. That's why it's easier not to talk about it.

**SH:** And we're so uncomfortable talking about death. We're so uncomfortable about, as you say, sort of, or maybe it'll be catching. It's, it's that real sort of fear of, of our own mortality. I think you're absolutely right that, that genuine fear that if you'll bring it on by talking about it when actually being open to talking about grief, death, dying, it just means that we are giving people who are grieving space to be able to talk about what they're going through and not avoiding it.

**LI:** Yeah, absolutely. I was reminded just at the weekend of a film that I used to watch with my children when they were little and they're now fully grown-up adults. So it's quite some time ago and it was called Fly Away Home. I don't know you've heard of it, but it was…

**SH:** I think I've heard of that.

**LI:** …yeah,it's about a little girl whose mum had died and she went to live with her father, but she hadn't, didn't really have a relationship with her father much before that 'cause they lived in different countries. And it was about her, about her grieving when she first arrived with her father. But she comes across some baby geese or goslings, I think, and she develops a bond with them. And it's really about her bond and connection developed with the geese as they grow up to be and, and how she, that helped her in her grief. And, and the end of the film is that the, the geese obviously want to, she's in Canada, so the, the geese are going to fly south in, in the winter as they do and it's, she helps them to fly south so it's about them fledgling, but also about her fledgling as well. It's beautiful film and, and I've watched it well, quite a lot of times with my children when they were little, but that's about 30 years ago, so it is some time ago and, but we were there was a song in it called Fly Away Home, which I've always said I'm going to have at my funeral. And I was, we were listening to it at the weekend, well I was listening to it, my poor husband had to listen to it because I was listening to it and we were talking about, about, you know, that, that the importance of being able to kind of make plans for…

**SH:** Yeah.

**LI:** …your own funeral, but also to think, but, but in terms of the film, going back to the film, that was a real kind of what I think I hadn't realised is when I watched that years ago, is the connection between the kind of recovery and the, the renewal or the regeneration or the restoration, whatever we want to call it…

**SH:** Yeah.

**LI:** …for, for that little girl came from the kind of nurturing of these geese. And it's, it's beautiful. I would kind of recommend it to everybody to watch it, it’s an amazing film.

**SH:** Definitely watch that out.

**LI:** Yeah.

**SH:** I think you're right as well as there's something about, you know, grief will always be with you, but you're building your life around your grief. It doesn't, doesn't get any less.

**LI:** Yes, yeah.

**SH:** It doesn't go away.

**LI:** Yeah.

**SH:** You're always going to grieve for your person, but you build your life around that grief so it can feel as though you're, you're filling, you're filling your cup with more experiences. You're filling your world with more and I think trying to explain that to children as well, that it's okay to build your life around your grief to be, you're not forgetting your person, you're not moving on in air quotes.

**LI:** Yeah.

**SH:** You're living your life and you can bring your person into every aspect of that if you choose to. You can remember them at any point and acknowledge that your grief is going to be with you for the rest of your life. And there are going to be certain points within your, within your life that you, you you're going to miss them just that little bit more, whether that be first partners, going to secondary school, maybe starting university, moving out, getting your own home, having a, having your first really important relationship, having your own children. You know, there's always going to be points in your life, little milestones that that grief will be revisited.

**LI:** And I suppose it's, it's encouraging as you were talking about people, children building their life round about their grief and maybe I always, you know, it's sometimes when someone's died, you always feel like you shouldn't enjoy things anymore…

**SH:** Yeah.

**LI:** …or you feel guilty if you do enjoy it. And so I suppose it's given them permission to, for that not to be the case, I imagine. And I'm very…

**SH:** Absolutely.

**LI:** …not an expert here at all so I'm aware that I'm amateur here. So, is that what you do?

**SH:** I mean it’s very, very different for every child. But yes, I think that that the guilt of having fun, the guilt of the first time you go out and you enjoy yourself can be really quite, quite challenging for, for children because they don't feel like they should, they should always be, always be grieving. I remember one, one child that I worked with a number of years ago now when we were doing the mask work, you know, I was talking about earlier, you’d put on the outside of the mask, things that you show the world and on the inside of the mask, the things that you hide away. And one of the…normally, it would be happy, fine, wonderful, everything's all sparkly on the outside and on the inside it would be the, the, the difficult emotions. Whereas one of the little boys that I worked with, it was all the sadness, all the grief, all the anxiety was on the outside of the mask and all the fun was on the inside and exploring that with him a little bit more he, he told me about, well, I can't show my mum that I've had a good day. I don't want her thinking I’ve forgotten my dad, and it was this, this real guilt of having, so it does definitely happen that, that really, you can still build your life around your grief and still miss your person.

**LI:** I suppose just in finishing off, one of the questions, not really in finishing off, but one of the things that I think is really important for people like yourself is how do you keep yourself well at work. What, how do you look after yourself? Because obviously you're listening to quite a lot of children who are, who are bereaved or grief or who are grieving and their, their families and carers. How do you, how do you keep yourself well?

**SH:** I would love to say that I go for a run, and I do yoga and I meditate. I do, do those things occasionally. It's, we have a really, really supportive staff team, which I think is, is incredibly important in this work as you need to be able to be surrounded by good people. This is actually something that's really close to home for me at the moment. My dad died just before Christmas, so it's been very important for me to check in with myself and what I need in order to be able to do the job that I do. And really, it's just being, being quiet when I need to be quiet, being reflective when I need to be reflective, actually acknowledging that it's okay to be quiet and being in my own space and doing what I need to do. And it's okay to say no to added pressures, added social pressures if, if that's it and, and ask for help and say I'm not having a great day…

**LI:** Yeah, yeah.

**SH:** …so, you know, today's not going to be a good day for me to do X, Y and Z and being able to be honest about that. I think it also models a really useful way in which to grieve and still and still engage in life.

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

**SH:** Yeah,it was also really useful actually preparing my children for their grandfather's death, using all the things…

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

**SH:** …that I've been speaking about, I guess…

**LI:** Yeah, yeah.

**SH:** …being honest and open with them about what was to come and, and how to, how to look after themselves. But also what did they need? What did they want…

**LI:** Yeah.

**SH:** …in to, to be able to say goodbye? And after he died, what, what did they need from, from the funeral and what do they need from me now in the weeks and months leading afterwards.

**LI:** And how, and how are they doing?

**SH:** They're doing fantastic actually. My youngest was, my youngest was really amazing. So the day before my dad died, he was sat next to my dad and just went so Papa, how's your day been? My dad went well, I mean, I've had better, to be fair. It was just a gorgeous exchange.

**LI:** Yeah, yeah.

**SH:** My dad, my dad was, had died less than 24 hours later. But there was just this really lovely…

**LI:** Yeah.

**SH:** …exchange between them.

**LI:** Yeah, yeah.

**SH:** So they're, they're doing really well and they've been able to have choices as far as the funeral was concerned, whether they wanted to hold the cord, what, whether they wanted any specific songs played at the funeral. So they had, they had choice.

**LI:** Okay.

**SH:** And I think that that's given them a sense of being able to, to say goodbye and, and be part of that.

**LI:** So this wasn’t something they were excluded from, it was something they were very much a part of.

**SH:** No, not at all. Yeah. And I suppose being honest with them as well so I'm going to cry and I'm going to be sad and, and that's okay and you don't have to worry about me, you don't have to stop me from crying or cheer me up. This is, this is okay.

**LI:** Yeah, yeah, lovely. I'm so sorry that, to hear about, that your dad died and…

**SH:** Thank you.

**LI:** …thank you for, for doing this today ‘cause it's not always easy to do things like this when, when you are recently bereaved. So thank you so much.

**SH:** No, it's I'm, I'm really, really happy that I was invited to come along to do this. So thank you so much for, for this opportunity.

**LI:** Thank you so much for joining me today. Keep well and keep doing what you're doing.

**SH:** Thank you, you too.

**LI:** If you'd like to listen to more episodes of this podcast, you can do so on Podbean or Spotify, just search Talking About Bereavement or if you'd like to find more out about the NES Bereavement Education Programme or have any questions, please get in touch or check out the Support Around Death website at [www.sad.scot.nhs.uk/podcast](http://www.sad.scot.nhs.uk/podcast). Thank you very much.

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