



## **Peer Support for People Bereaved/Impacted by Suicide - Information Sheet**

### **Introduction**

Peer support practitioners support people bereaved/impacted by suicide by utilising lived experience of this complex and sudden life experience to contribute to their care and ongoing healing and recovery in an accessible, non-stigmatising way.

As “experts by experience”, practitioners achieve this by delivering talking “therapy” support sessions to help bereaved/impacted people regain control over their lives and their own unique healing and recovery experience within a relationship of human connection, togetherness, mutuality and information sharing.

“Recovery” means the process through which people find ways to live meaningful lives, with or without the ongoing symptoms of trauma and grief associated with bereavement/impact by suicide.

There is no “cure” for bereavement/impact by suicide. It changes lives. Every person will have an idea of what recovery means for them and what they want to get out of the sessions and has it within themselves to find that path, with a lived experience peer support practitioner by their side.

### **Who we work with**

We work with people bereaved/impacted by suicide at any stage in their “journey”. Suicide can have life-lasting effects, is indiscriminate and can touch any of us.

The person they have lost may have been a family member, friend or colleague, or someone they didn’t know. The relationship they had with them may have been complex. Every experience of bereavement/impact by suicide is different, often with common, perplexing emotions and feelings such as bewilderment, anger, shame, stigma and guilt.

### **What is peer support and what are the benefits?**

Peer support means receiving support, practical guidance and understanding from a bereaved/impacted person’s equal, who has had similar - not necessarily the same - experiences, sensations and insights and is a system of receiving help founded on respect, shared responsibility and mutual agreement of what is helpful for the beneficiary, which the peer support practitioner helps to establish.

It is a simple but powerful approach to health and wellbeing, with empathy and kindness at its core. Its value and practical application has long been recognised by beneficiaries and clinicians and an increasing number of UK NHS Trusts and organisations (from many sectors) are utilising peer support practitioners to complement existing clinical and related support services and strategies.

A key benefit of peer support is its unique ability to encourage deep social interaction between people who share the feelings and emotions associated with a similar life experience, with the ability to gain hope from the peer support practitioner who is further along in their “journey” and functioning well despite it.

In 2020 Supportiv (The Peer Support Network, USA) released a white paper synthesising 120 existing research studies, citing that: “Peer support was as effective as group cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). The magnitude of improvement seen from peer support was similar to those of psychotherapy and antidepressant medications.”



Peer support can be used alongside other forms of formal support or medication but should be based on the personal choice of the beneficiary to participate and the building of effective working relationships with practitioners as a marker for success.

It is the hope that following peer support, beneficiaries may have noticed positive changes in the way they feel and act and be able to re-engage in areas of life they were unable to previously, becoming more active agents in their own life once more.

A lived experience peer support practitioner is not a clinical role. They don't diagnose or provide treatments. They are not lead carers for beneficiaries and do not offer counselling or advice, despite it being a valuable therapeutic experience. Peer support is based on lived experience and other skills developed as part of associated, ongoing learning and interaction with those bereaved/impacted by suicide.

### **The value and importance of our work as peer support practitioners**

Due to our own personal experience of bereavement by suicide and receiving peer support ourselves, as peer support practitioners, we can offer a unique form of empathy and compassion to beneficiaries, helping to normalise and validate what they are feeling and experiencing to help them understand they are not alone. It is through this trusting and empowering relationship that feelings of isolation and rejection can be replaced with hope, opportunity and personal agency.

### **Ellie Hatto's background (lead peer support practitioner)**

*"I have dedicated many years to working in the field of suicide reduction, postvention and bereavement support, following the loss of my 82-year-old dad to suicide in 2013.*

*This life-changing event prompted me to seek peer support myself, leading to several roles and learning opportunities enabling me to "give something back" and share my knowledge with others in a similar situation to the one I found myself in.*

*My own experience of receiving peer support was highly positive and inspiring, motivating me to become a peer support practitioner myself. At the time of my bereavement, I felt very isolated and ill-informed about suicide and the trauma and complex grief that accompanied it. By talking to peers about my experience, I felt like I had "come home" and would have had little opportunity to talk about my feelings in such an open, honest and non-judgemental way without having been given that opportunity."*

Ellie's skills, knowledge and training as a peer support practitioner include:

- Peer support training (Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide, The Cellar Trust and Samaritans)
- Current peer support facilitator for Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide monthly group, Hampshire



## **Our approach**

Our approach is based around NHS England's principles in effective peer support:

1. Driven by the shared experiences (of people living with bereavement by suicide).
2. Reciprocal, with opportunities for people to "give and get" as well as to learn from one another.
3. Safe and encouraging, allowing people to share their experiences free from any judgement.
4. Accessible and inclusive, available to people bereaved by suicide.
5. Person-centred, taking account of each person's strengths, values, needs and feelings.
6. Complementary to clinical practice where relevant.

## **How the sessions are delivered**

Sessions provide a safe space to talk about the beneficiary's personal experiences of bereavement/impact by suicide and any struggles and thoughts they may wish to raise, carefully and compassionately facilitated by the peer support practitioner.

The safety and wellbeing of beneficiaries is paramount, with effective working boundaries between parties by way of a mutual "contract" established and communicated from the outset.

Confidentiality and GDPR are key also considerations to protect both parties, with a comprehensive Safeguarding Policy in place and Enhanced DBS checks. The potential for emotional activation of the beneficiary is managed by discussing what the beneficiary is comfortable in disclosing only.

Capacity, consent and duty of care in respect of the beneficiary are important and a trauma-informed way of working is used, focusing on establishing what the beneficiary may want to get out of the sessions or if there is something in particular that they want to talk about.

People bereaved by suicide are known to have an increased risk of suicide thoughts and actions themselves (upwards of 60%), therefore practitioners are fully equipped with the skills to manage potentially high-risk situations with beneficiaries and have protective escalation measures in place in line with evidence based best practice.

SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely) objectives form the basis of the sessions and as the programme draws to a close, future support, signposting and succession planning is considered and discussed with the beneficiary to ensure a satisfactory ending.

Formal beneficiary feedback, evaluation and monitoring are an important element of the sessions delivered. Where appropriate and by mutual agreement, this information may also be shared with organisations who refer beneficiaries on their behalf, for their own monitoring purposes.

## **Personal qualities and maintaining personal wellbeing as practitioners**

Our peer support practitioners are fully equipped to share their own experiences positively and appropriately with beneficiaries to support them on their own healing and recovery journey.

They have learned to self-manage the ongoing personal impacts of bereavement by suicide and developed techniques and strategies to keep themselves well long-term. This includes supervision



and a close network of fellow peers who provide easily accessible and invaluable sources of mutual support.

Our practitioners possess a genuine interest in people and have good active listening and communication skills. They are resilient, non-judgemental, empathetic and compassionate, with a positive attitude, the skills to motivate and encourage others and the ability to work with a diverse range of individuals.

We are happy to answer any remaining questions you might have. Please email us at [hello@besideyourself.org](mailto:hello@besideyourself.org)