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## **Talking about Grief: How our Counselling Service is Helping Families Speak Up, and Break Down Taboos**

If death is a taboo, how can you encourage people to open up about grief and bereavement? Moreover, how do you break down those walls and stigmas that society has built up around the topic of loss, and help those who've experienced it come to terms with those feelings?

For Counselling Manager Catherine "Cat" Aird, these questions are something she tackles on a daily basis.

As a central tenet of **ellenor**'s philosophy is to administer *holistic* care. That means caring for all parts of a patient, including their emotional, psychological, religious, and spiritual needs, as well as their physical symptoms. It also means that we look after the patient's family, too.

Accordingly, our support doesn't stop when a patient has passed away. **We also look after those who are left behind, with a range of wellbeing services in place to help families cope with the loss of a loved one.**

In addition to personally providing counselling to **ellenor**'s families, Cat's role is to run the charity's counselling service. This includes managing volunteers and staff – a team of around 26-strong – booking in telephone assessments and allocating counsellors to sessions. Cat also goes through feedback in order to optimise the service and minimise waiting times.

“People who access our counselling service are provided with a safe and non-judgemental space where they can explore their thoughts and feelings within the relationship with their counsellor,” Cat says of the people that use **ellenor**'s counselling service. “Whether that's the struggles and stresses of everyday life, or whether it's a loss, it depends on what they want to bring.

“For us, it's about being with the person that's in front of us and understanding their needs – not us prescribing for them. You talk with us: we'll listen, we'll hear you, and we'll work together to try and provide you with the support you're telling us you need.”

So just how crucial is it for a hospice to provide grief and bereavement support?

“It's so important,” explains Cat. “There's no time limit on grief – it's an ongoing process. Within a hospice setting, the moment someone receives a diagnosis, that whole family will undoubtedly be experiencing some form of grief. Although at that point they may not yet have experienced the physical loss of a person or loved one, it's the notion that someday, they might.”

“You can grieve the loss of things you don't have. The loss of dreams, of a future – the loss of a part of your identity, of who you were. You can grieve the person, but also grieve the idea of having children with them; of growing alongside them.”

Yet grief, as Cat emphasises, still comes wrapped up in a shroud of stigma that can make it difficult to address.

“Because there’s a stigma around mental health and the idea of accessing counselling, people might skip over that, and think ‘no, that’s not relevant to me. I don’t need that.’ When you bring *grief* into it, that’s a whole other level of taboo, in the sense that grief is so often very individual and kept quite private.”

Though, as Cat notes, grieving collectively isn’t for everyone, it can help to break down the attached taboos, and empower bereaved individuals. For this reason, **the families of patients who have been supported by ellenor –in addition to a free, 12-session course of counselling –can also attend our ‘Bereavement Cuppas’.**

They’re a chance for grieving families to come together in a safe, supportive space for a coffee and a chat. “Just being able to talk to someone who understands and relates can help a person process loss, but also not feel so alone. To do that in a group that’s so compassionate, so understanding, and so non-judgmental can be a wonderful experience for many.”

Societal pressures can also exacerbate the impact of grief –something Cat and her counsellors try to dispel.

*When’s the appropriate time to return to work after a loss, for instance? When ‘should’ a bereaved person start feeling better? What’s the ‘right’ or the ‘wrong’ way to grieve?*

“The expectation in society following a loss is often that I *should* rush back to work and crack on with it –that it *must* get better in time. You’ve got all these societal expectations and pressures–these ‘shoulds’ and ‘musts’ –when, actually, you’re grieving.

“There’s no right or wrong way to grieve. Whatever you feel, you feel for a reason, and there’s no ‘should’ or ‘must’ about that.”

So, what does the future hold for our Counselling team? Cat’s currently working on a plan which would increase the amount of sessions a grieving person has access to –ensuring that **ellenor** meets the entirety of individual’s

needs – while managing the effect of this on waiting lists.

If anyone can do it though, it's Cat, whose love for the role – and for **ellenor** – is palpable.

“Being a counsellor is a love more than a job for me. Some counselling services can feel depersonalised. For us, it's a real personal, individual thing. It's not just 'this is our job; this is what we do' – and it's not just a tick box exercise.

“I want people to know that we actually care about you – that we're doing our absolute best to support you, because we care.”

*Against the backdrop of increasingly effective medical and end of life care – and an ageing population – the need for our services will only continue to grow. We rely on the generosity of the local Kent and Bexley communities to sustain our vital services for children and adults with life-limiting illnesses.*

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We are **ellenor**, a charity funded by the generosity of our local community, offering the best care and support to families facing terminal illness in Kent. We are the **only** charity in the county that provides hospice care for people of all ages – babies, children and adults - and their families. This includes pain and symptom relief, end of life care, respite, bereavement support and emotional and spiritual care.

Our Children's Hospice Care, formerly known as chYps, is provided in the comfort of the family home and spans across North and West Kent and the London Borough of Bexley. Adults living in Gravesham, Dartford and Swanley, receive care in their place of choice, including their own homes, at our Hospice in Gravesend and in local care homes.

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