

Joint working with Cruse in school

Linda Hafez has already forged links between her school and a wide variety of agencies to co-work with the children.¹ Here she explains the context for inviting a Cruse Bereavement Care counsellor to work with her in school to deliver a group for those Year 7 young people who had suffered loss

Early intervention through therapeutic groupwork is a vital tool in identifying need and integrating counselling at the very start of secondary school life. I have developed many such groups in the school where I work, and recently we branched out to involve charity Cruse Bereavement Care as a specialist contributor.

The transition year

But to backtrack for a moment, and set this in context, the time when we have especially intervened so far with our therapeutic groupwork is in the children's transition year from primary to secondary school. Transition is taken seriously. If a young person has a secure base within their first term, they will believe that there is always an adult in school who will help them. And the school believes that the counsellor's knowledge about human behaviour is key to identifying young people who may need early intervention.

We carry out the process and selection of children very carefully. I sit with the child protection officer and Head of Year and we think about the most vulnerable children

within the year group. These children will include the bereaved, carers, those recovering from illness, the bullied and many more. I then bear in mind their presenting issues and consider the dynamics of the group and who will work well with whom. No groups are set in stone until a face-to-face assessment has been done with each child on their own. A number of assessment tools are used, including a self-made one tailored for our school, plus the YP-CORE. This allows us to carefully put the groups together and to monitor progress throughout the six weeks.

This early interaction with the school therapy team takes away the stigma of counselling and therapeutic work and introduces reflective thinking from the start of the pupils' secondary school life. And because parents are also informed about the group, this allows them to feel reassured that there is emotional support within the school and that their children are in established, professional hands. And of course, supervision is key for all the therapeutic groupwork done within the school, as it gives us time to reflect with co-leaders on our work with the children.

Specialist groupwork for bereaved young people

But building on this transition work, and moving into new territory, I have now, as mentioned, co-led a group with Dominic Cookson, who is a person-centred counsellor and supervisor volunteering with Cruse. Additionally, he has experience of facilitating therapeutic workshops for teenagers at the charity Body and Soul, whose focus is helping those affected by childhood adversity.

We contacted Cruse specifically because we were hoping to set up groups for young people affected by bereavement, and wanted to call upon their expertise in the specifics of bereavement. After an initial meeting, a plan came together, and Dominic drafted a programme for the group, which I could then adapt, based on my knowledge of the young people's needs and ability. The programme would take place over six weeks, and be designed to broadly follow a pattern of grief. So different sessions focused on understanding loss, shock, anger, sadness, acceptance and endings. The sessions were designed to be as interactive as possible, and included art, music, drama and also boxing pad work to encourage the healthy release of anger.

Children were then identified to join the programme via the school's transition group. Seven children from Year 7 identified that the loss they'd experienced made it harder to adapt to a new school and were asked if they would like to join the group. Once they'd agreed, parental consent was sought.

The group met for the six weeks, and then for one extra session, where they presented to the



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school's headteacher and their Head of Year the puppet play they'd created, which outlines the different responses to grief. The programme will now form a template for further bereavement groups that will run at the school.

Benefits and challenges of joint working with Cruse

The benefits of working this way allowed us to bring together two different knowledge bases. I had knowledge of the school, staff, parents and young person, a relationship had already been established, and the children were comfortable and used to the groupwork space. This meant therapeutic work could start almost straight away. Dominic had specialist knowledge in the subject area, and both of us were able to think about modelling relationships within the group, as well as monitoring dynamics and suggesting potential alterations to the programme. Having two therapists was key for other elements of the groupwork. The children were able to explore their feelings without limitations, because if a child was too distressed to remain in the group and needed to step outside for a breather, one therapist could deal with this while the other therapist explored the feelings that this departure brought up with the other members of the group. The group built a sense of togetherness, allowing the young people to feel less isolated in their grief. And seeing others speak about grief helped to remove the taboo around the topic, and made therapy in general a more accessible resource to the client group.

This type of groupwork also saves money. From the school's perspective, it was only paying for one counsellor, and from the charity's side,

not only did they not have to provide a therapy space, but they, too, only had to provide one counsellor. If you have two therapists working with seven young people who would have needed one-to-one counselling, it's clear how this would save money and time for everyone in these straitened years. And one-to-one work would not have built the peer support network that could continue after the group had finished meeting.

Some of the challenges we faced were about ensuring the young people understood confidentiality and why it would be important for everyone. They also needed to remember to attend, and to attend punctually, when there were so many other things going on for them in the school day. A positive to this was that the young people reminded each other.

Another challenge was that the young people were at different stages in terms of feeling willing and able to speak about the person they'd lost – which led to one member of the group feeling they weren't ready to complete the programme.

Conclusion

Overall, Dominic and I both feel that this joint working was a very positive experience that brought a range of expertise to the running of the group. The specialism of each counsellor's knowledge base made for efficient work, which saved time in preparation. And having the group meet in a school setting helped bring together the children's worlds of home, school and community. In addition, the programme was a natural progression from the transitions group that the young people had already attended, thus meaning that they had already developed

an ability to share deeper thoughts and feelings with their peers.

We hope that sharing our experience here will encourage other counsellors to consider specialist joined-up work with charities that offer therapy.

Reference

1 Hafez L. Integrated care pathways in school. BACP Children & Young People 2016; December: 36–39.

