



Exploring the Impact of Death & Grief in Older People's Arts & Wellbeing Services Examples of Working Practice

In advance of the session and in preparation for the discussions, we invited participants to:

- **think of one example** of any successful project, activity, or approach to engaging effectively or creatively with the topic of death and grief that you have encountered in your work
- and **why you think it worked**.

The following examples of working practice were very kindly submitted and are shared here with the kind permission of Amabel Mortimer ([University of Gloucestershire](#)), Emma Rodwell ([Talking About Our Generations](#)), Anna Batson ([Plymouth Music Zone](#) & freelance practitioner), and Caroline Mawer (multimedia artist & theatre/movement maker).

Many thanks again to them, and to everyone who took part in the session, for their invaluable contributions and support for this conversation.

Example 1:

Context: Adult Hospice Care local secondary schools (Year 7 pupils)

- **think of one example** of any successful project, activity, or approach to engaging effectively or creatively with the topic of death and grief that you have encountered in your work:

Intergenerational day hospice and schools project, carried out over 6 weeks.

Project to help create a community relationship and open culture in which people become more comfortable talking about death, dying and grief.

Careful planning with all staff/volunteers involved and patient reps a vital part of the coproduction process. As the project developed young people were also part of the planning group. Consent obtained from all involved.

- Week 1: The young people, their families and teachers invited to the hospice for a tour and to meet patients engaging in the project. Refreshments given, stories told (led by hospital psychologist) and project ideas discussed and agreed as a group.

Hospice Creative Lead/schools Art Teacher/hospital psychologist plan week on week activities and rough final celebration outline in time between week 1 and 2.

- Week 2: Introducing the project plan. Buddying up young people with hospice patients, getting to know each other session. An open and respectful circle was formed in the day hospice facilitated by key staff.
 - Week 3: Making/Creating together in day hospice setting
 - Week 4: Making/Creating together in day hospice setting
 - Week 5: Finalising pieces/performances in day hospice setting
 - Week 6 final week: Celebration including exhibition or performance at the hospice. All families and staff invited to participate. Refreshments, marking of achievements and carefully facilitated end of project.
- and **why you think it worked:**
 - Having authentic, honest and patient/participant led planning and conversation was definitely key.
 - Demystifying the hospice environment for non-hospice colleagues, young people and families of all involved.
 - Understanding the young people's perspective of death/dying/grief was vital as we didn't want to create and unsafe emotional situations. This also stood for any staff we worked with who came from outside of the end of life working environment.
 - Working with a cross-sector, multi-disciplinary team to ensure a strong, boundaried and compassionate way of working and safe environment: Trust.
 - Having a psychologist on board and in each session to help open and close the creative group.
 - Using non-confusing language around death, dying and grief

Example 2:

In answer to your questions, I ran a session where we talked about how we would like to be remembered. It enabled people to talk about lost loved ones and what was important to them and what they have treasured about those relationships, as well as the helpful things that were said and done when navigating their loss. It also helped people open up about what was important to them now and anything they might want to do differently before their deaths, and was potentially helpful if we are involved with funerals. It was an incredibly moving and powerful session.

I think it worked because so often people are scared about talking about death despite it being the only certainty for us all. It took me numerous attempts to persuade the charity to let me run this session even though it had come from a group discussion and was what we

wanted to do. I think everyone also felt heard and seen and it was a nice chance for people to say nice things to each other.

Example 3:

Plymouth Music Zone worked for many years in partnership with St Luke's Hospice, Plymouth which is an independent charity providing advice, support and end-of-life care for people with life limiting illnesses and their families. I was asked to deliver on the partnership work between the two charities for several years, during which I delivered music workshops at the hospice itself and sometimes within the grounds / gardens depending on the day.

From the outset there were no opportunities to duck out of conversations about death, dying and grief because the hospice setting itself was a constant reminder of why the group was taking place there. The group were a mix of people who either had a family member at the hospice, were patients themselves, or recently bereaved and making use of the support offered at the hospice, even if they had lost a loved one there. It was a very successful group that welcomed new members gently and supportively.

There was always at least one highly experienced staff member from the hospice there on hand to provide support to both myself as well as the group members. The space was comfortable and welcoming and set away from the main part of the building and wards with privacy and less of a hospital feel. Communication was excellent surrounding the sessions and trust between myself, staff and the group was nurtured in all directions between people. Musically we had to be highly flexible and adapt anything that had been planned according to moods, news and shifting emotions.

A key thing for me was that St Luke's encouraged me, other PMZ staff and our organisation to sign up to Plymouth's Compassionate Friends Network which provided us with some team training to explore healthy conversations around death and dying / grief and offering ourselves as a safe space at PMZ as well as the hospice for people to feel able to openly talk about their grief and for our staff to feel more supported when they were regularly facing losing people as part of our work.

The project worked because we had funding (at that time pre-Covid!) to provide regular activity, staff support, emotional support, trusting relationships on organisational / personnel level, training and support was offered around the project and provided us with some tools to feel less worried about having difficult conversations within our work.

Example 4:

I made a multimedia theatre piece about my dad's good death.

This was a Life-Changing Death-Changing Experience: “Come and immerse yourself in some Deathbed Skiing: starting on the side of a mountain; catapulting down to a last Breath; and ending in a luscious Fruiting Forest of Dreams.

Even if you're not quite yet an international skier, you are definitely an expert on the best sorts of living and loving. And everyone's interested in Ultimate Living - including how to choose a Life-Exit as stylish and individual as you want to be.

You will never think of death in the same way again!

An intimate performance with spoken word, choreography and wrap-around video.”

The event ended with audience discussion - I had to throw people out of the theatre / then out of the lobby onto the street cos everyone wanted to keep on talking.

It worked because it was both personal and universal - with lessons everyone could use. Despite, or maybe because of, including details of my dad's last breath / his heart stopping / me washing his body, it was both positive and gloriously beautiful.

I aimed at us all laughing and crying and it being thoughtful and empowering - and all of that happened.

Created thanks to support from Wandsworth Arts Fringe through Wandsworth Grant Fund.



(Image courtesy of Caroline Mawer)