



NE Glasgow Bereavement & Blether Report

Community Based Group Support for People Bereaved by Suicide, Alcohol, Drugs & Violence - Lessons from the Bereavement & Blether Café, Bridgeton, Glasgow

May 2020

Susie Heywood, Health Improvement Senior & Marie Stewart, Health Improvement Practitioner Glasgow City HSCP

Community Based Group Support for People Bereaved by Suicide, Alcohol, Drugs & Violence – Lessons from the Bereavement & Blether Café, Bridgeton, Glasgow

Introduction

This report presents the story of the Bereavement and Blether Café, a North East Glasgow based group for local people who have been bereaved by suicide, alcohol, drugs or violence. It summarises the background to the development of the programme, outlines how the group is delivered, and highlights some of the evidence base for this work. It ends by asking the reader to consider whether an expansion of this model might help to address some of the gaps in current provision.

Background

Since the adoption of Glasgow City HSCP's Strategic Direction for Health Improvement and subsequent Locality Outcome Improvement Plans (formerly Single Outcome Agreement with the Scottish Government) the North East Health Improvement Team has been working to people and place based approaches. This has meant shifting to an approach which focuses on particular neighbourhoods or on groups of people with particular needs, with the primary vehicle for this initially being the Thriving Places approach. For information see <https://www.glasgowcpp.org.uk/thrivingplaces>

The concept for the Bereavement & Blether Café came from conversations held between Health Improvement staff and community members in the early days of the Thriving Places approach in Parkhead, Dalmarnock and Camlachie. Working alongside the Thriving Places team, which comprised a community organiser and two community workers, HI staff supported the development of a weekly Tea Dance for local, mostly elderly, residents at the Barrowfield Community Centre. The tea dance was an opportunity for workers to build relationships with local people and initiate meaningful conversations in order to learn about the realities of life for local people and the issues which most concerned or affected them.

Very early on the theme of bereavement and loss came through. As a result various pieces of work were carried out to respond to these needs including a day of commemoration and remembrance held at a local community centre, and a generic drop-in bereavement café where people could drop in to talk about their loss and grief. It became clear however that there was a need for a very specific approach for people who had lost a loved one through suicide, alcohol or drugs. The social stigma which can accompany losing someone in these ways, and the unique and difficult feelings, circumstances and experiences of those left behind required a very specific approach which was not being met through the generic approaches being trialled. It is important to note here that the experiences of people who suffer this kind of grief are also variable, and dependent on a host of factors which can influence someone's grief response.

At the same time as these discussions were taking place, the North East Glasgow Health Improvement team as a key partner in the North East Glasgow Suicide Prevention Forum commissioned a piece of community consultation which asked local people "what do you need to help make North East Glasgow suicide safer?" (Woods, 2016) Amongst the findings was a need for support for those affected by suicide bereavement who themselves are at increased risk of suicide.

As a result of both pieces of work, the Bereavement and Blether Café was developed. This is a monthly facilitated peer support group for people who have lost a loved one to suicide, alcohol or drugs. A recent research study by the Mental Health Foundation in Scotland demonstrated very clearly the need for specific service provision for individuals bereaved through suicide (Cameron & Solomon, 2020) and

similar experiences and needs have been identified amongst people who have experienced a bereavement from substance misuse (Adfam & Cruse Bereavement Care, 2014)

581 males and 203 females took their own lives in Scotland in 2018 (ScotPHO, 2019) which roughly equates to two people each day. The number of drug-related deaths in Scotland increased by 27% in 2018 to reach 1,187, with the highest rates being found in NHS Greater Glasgow & Clyde (National Records for Scotland, 2019). This is the largest number ever recorded and more than double the number recorded a decade ago and has resulted in widespread calls for action around this public health emergency. In 2018, there were 1,136 alcohol-specific deaths, meaning deaths which were wholly attributable to alcohol misuse (National Records for Scotland, 2019). It is likely that each of these individuals represents a network, small or large of family, friends, loved ones and colleagues who are left behind.

People who have been bereaved in these ways may experience disenfranchised or stigmatised grief. This can happen when you are grieving but feel, for a variety of reasons that you can't talk about or share your pain with others because it is considered unacceptable to other people. This can often trigger more complicated or protracted grief responses, leading to deterioration in the mental health and wellbeing of the bereaved person (Sveen & Wallby, 2008.) The Scottish National Suicide Prevention Action Plan (2018) explains that:

“The period of time following a death by suicide or a suicide attempt represents a critical time for compassionate, high quality care. Good and timely support and information need to be available to people who have been directly affected by suicide. People who have been bereaved by suicide are themselves at a higher risk of suicide. Grief is intense and the emotions – particularly around stigma and isolation – experienced in the aftermath can differ considerably from those following other types of death.”

We know for example that people who have been bereaved by suicide are at higher risk of suicide themselves (Pitman et al, 2014). We have been told that the police and coroner processes such as inquests which often follow these types of death can be protracted and can place additional stress on bereaved families. Despite these processes, loved ones are very often left without an answer to the pressing question of “why?”

There are already some projects operating in the local Glasgow area which support the needs of people bereaved in these ways. For those bereaved through suicide these include PETAL (People Experiencing Trauma and Loss), Touched by Suicide Scotland and although not housed in Glasgow the support offered by Chris’s House (a Lanarkshire based centre of help, response and interventions surrounding suicide) is worthy of mention here. For those bereaved by alcohol and drugs we are aware of support being offered by FASS (Families Affected by Drug and Alcohol Use) and AL-ANON. We are not aware of any organisations which bring these two types of bereavement together in the way the Bereavement & Blether Café does, however there are a number of generic bereavement organisations operating nationally such as Cruse Bereavement Care who will be providing some support.

It is also important to recognise that there will be numerous individuals or community based groups that we are not aware of offering support at community level. This will include the support offered on individual bases within faith communities. This also includes the wide range of more general mental health and wellbeing support services which although not suicide bereavement specific, will offer some support. For example the Glasgow City wide Lifelink service which offers one to one or group therapy to individuals experiencing stress. National helplines such as Breathing Space or the Samaritans service are also available.

The needs of bereaved people have been adopted as one of the key strands of work of the Glasgow City Suicide Prevention Action Group who have a dedicated subgroup looking at the issue of suicide bereavement. Additionally, Action 4 of The Scottish Government's Suicide Prevention Action Plan (2018) promised timely and effective support for those affected by suicide available across Scotland by working to develop a Scottish Crisis Care Agreement. In 2019 The National Suicide Prevention Leadership Group which was formed to take forward this and other identified actions commissioned the Mental Health Foundation Scotland to undertake a piece of research into the support needs of those bereaved by suicide (Cameron & Solomon, 2020). Although the findings of this research confirmed what many people had been saying for a number of years, having this Scotland wide piece of research which outlined the case and brought together the evidence base for support for those bereaved has helped drive action. Two pilot projects are about to be commissioned in NHS Ayrshire & Arran and NHS Highlands which will provide the much needed postvention support for bereaved families.

The Bereavement & Blether Café

The Bereavement and Blether Café originally began as a partnership between NE Health Improvement, FASS, Touched by Suicide Scotland and Pure Potential Scotland. These organisations came together to develop a community based group which had a focus on disenfranchised grief. The group would reach out to bereaved adults who may be feeling isolated and not receiving any support from existing services.

The idea was to create a space where people could drop in and be around other people who had experienced bereavement through alcohol, drugs, and suicide, without feeling fear or shame, and to reduce the feelings of isolation. More recently the group has been opened up to people who have experienced the loss of a loved one through violence. Due to staffing changes the group is now delivered solely by health improvement; however those who attend are made aware of the support offered by other organisations outwith the group.

The group is held in a private room within a local library. The venue has the benefit of being discreet, emphasising the importance of this anonymity for visitors.

Promotion

When the group was first formed, some resource was put into promoting the group locally. Promotional materials were created, a concertina zig zag card and a poster (appendix 1 and 2). These were electronically emailed around various networks across Glasgow and hard copies were distributed across the NE of the city through organisations, community groups and at events. The local area of Bridgeton was targeted and promotional materials were accepted by local funeral directors, Credit Union, bookmakers, pubs, pharmacies and other local businesses. This was repeated several times throughout the year.

These promotional activities brought with them a chance to chat to local businesses and people, all of whom accepted the materials, and learn about their own views, experiences, stories and challenges (personal and professional). These conversations validated the need for community based bereavement support. Strong links were made with several local funeral directors, who went on to provide in-kind gifts to some of our related work, such as coffee, tea, biscuits and even a ride to the beach in a limousine for a small group of older adults.

As well as the physical promotional materials, monthly Tweets and Facebook posts were carried out and these were re-posted by various local services and community members. Information about the Café

was included in the local Health Improvement Newsletter and circulated to local partners and organisations. An 'A frame' blackboard was also placed outside the library on the morning of the Cafe. Despite this effort initial attendance numbers were low, and it was clear that most of those who did come along had heard about the group via word of mouth rather than from seeing a poster or a flyer.

As a result more recently we have moved away from promotion in this way, though the group is still promoted via social media channels and the Health Improvement newsletter. Promotion is now mainly through word of mouth, updates to various relevant partners and groups and also at community events or training courses. For example, we have been delivering the Living Works 1.5-hour Suicide TALK training session to various community groups and this allows us to promote the support offered at the Bereavement and Blether Café. Local Primary Care community links workers have also been made aware of the Cafe and they promote to clients as appropriate.

The Model

The Bereavement and Blether model is a simple one which we believe could be easily replicated in other areas. The intention for the group is to support participants in an informal way while ensuring enough of a structure for people to feel safe and comfortable. The group is open to new members at any time and there are no expectations or requirements for attendance. For example, there is no cut off point for non-attendance and no limitations as to when people can access support or duration of support. This recognises that for many people, particularly those who have lost someone in these ways, there can be no limit to the period of time they experience this bereavement. It is clear that for human beings distress, pain and grief can come and go dependent on a variety of factors and circumstances. Those attending the group may also be dealing with a range of other issues which demand their time, and can sometimes impact on their ability to attend the group regularly. For example two current participants are kinship carers and have family members in prison. Life beyond the grief can continue to be complex and challenging.

When someone makes an enquiry about the group they will either contact the group facilitator by telephone or permission is sought for the facilitator to telephone them. After the initial telephone conversation the facilitator will offer to meet the person one to one at a convenient location, often a local public library. The first face to face meeting enables the person to discover more about the group and the facilitator to begin the process of building a trusting relationship. This process has proven to be very successful with the majority of these meetings leading to attendance at the group.

When a participant attends the group they are asked for a contact telephone number and postcode. Each participant is called the day before each monthly meeting as a reminder. This has proved to be a positive and very valuable personal touch to each participant and gives them an opportunity to perhaps share something on their mind that they would not discuss in the group.

A local library was selected as a venue for the group due its accessibility within the community and the discreetness of the available private room, providing those attending with anonymity. The café setup differs from a usual café set up with seating in a circle allowing each person to see everyone else. Usually the circle accommodates six to twelve chairs and in keeping with the café theme the facilitator provides hot and cold drinks and light snacks, which helps keep it informal. We have always found hot drinks and food to be an effective way of bringing groups together in a relaxed atmosphere. Currently the size of the group can range from six to twelve members each month so this is easily maintained.

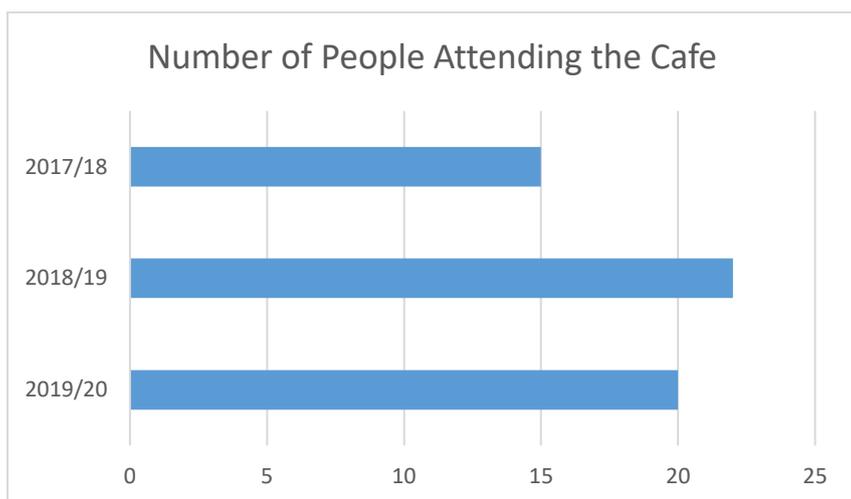
Depending on whether or not new people are present, group members may introduce themselves, discuss their progress from previous month, or share the reason they why they come to the group. The

group is run according to participants' needs and guided by gentle facilitation, retaining a flexible format whilst ensuring each participant is offered the opportunity to be listened to individually without interruption. It is made explicit that there is no pressure to talk if a person is not ready to or does not wish to. New participants are welcome to just sit and listen until they feel safe to share their story.

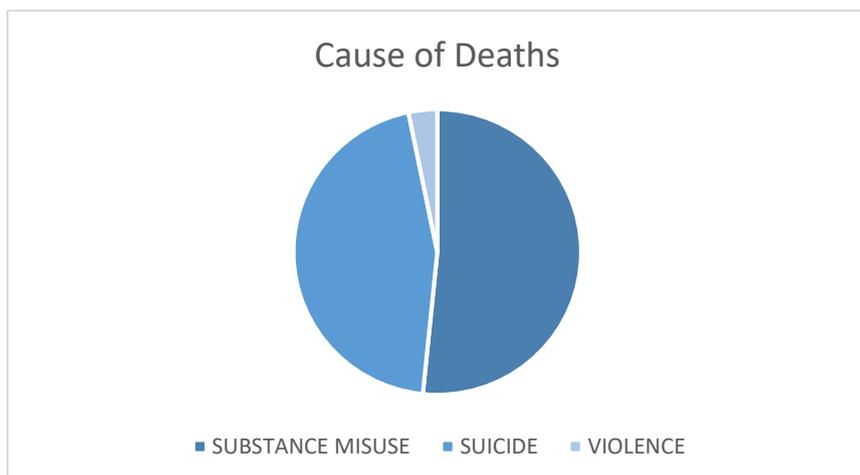
At the beginning of the group the facilitator asks members to agree to protect the identities and stories of fellow members. This is an important part of establishing trust and safety. Participants understand however, that confidentiality agreements are not absolute. The facilitator is obligated by law to tell the authorities if members express intent to harm themselves or others or if there are any concerns over the safety of children or vulnerable adults, though this has not yet been necessary.

Attendance

To date a total of 31 people have accessed the café over the 3-year period and most of the people attending are female. With an average monthly attendance of 10 participants, 4 have accessed the group since its beginning in 2017. The core group of 4 are an essential support to the other attendees both within and outwith the café environment. It is worthy of note that although promoted to people in the north east of the city, the group attracts participants from across the city and neighbouring authorities. The reason for this appears to be two-fold, both a lack of provision of this kind but also an increased anonymity when attending outwith the immediate locale.



The deaths have been predominantly caused by substance misuse and suicide, and loved ones lost include fathers, brothers, partners, daughters, sisters, friends, but most predominantly sons.



Participants found out about the cafe in a variety of ways: promotional materials, local funeral directors, GP practice, Community Link Workers, pharmacies, Twitter, Facebook and word of mouth.

How does the group help people?

It is important to note here that the Bereavement and Blether group has not been fully evaluated. Feedback from group members is given informally and usually verbally. What is described here is taken directly from member feedback and facilitator observation.

Group support can help comfort people by allowing them to realise they are not alone. Members of a group can develop a shared understanding, increased empathy, and an ability to listen, understand and build trust with others.

“I like coming to the meeting. I know am not alone with my thoughts. I can share my story with the group members in the group without any prejudgement or criticism. We all have our burdens to carry. But it’s good to share my grief and thoughts so I know I am not alone.” **Participant feedback**

“I have been coming to the café for 3 months and it has given me great support. [The facilitator] and all the people here have been amazing, and I hope to continue.” **Participant feedback**

“I do not discuss my personal circumstances anywhere else, therefore it is the only release I have. It is a relaxed friendly café with no pressure and you are able to talk about anything that is giving cause for concern at that particular time. Whether it is grief with the loss of a loved one or trying to cope with ongoing life issues.” **Participant feedback**

Attendees express that the group creates feelings of optimism, and helps group members realise that they are not alone in their experiences. As participants describe their initial experiences and feeling of loss, and how they have dealt with this complex and difficult time, other participants are able to show a compassion and empathy borne from their own lived experience. The group is facilitated in a way that allows participants to feel comfortable to release suppressed emotions. This act of release and sharing can be healing. Participants also express positive experiences and share how the support of others has helped them move forward, to process feelings and to find it easier to talk about the situation.

Listening to others speak about their personal experiences can help put their participants’ thoughts into perspective. They may feel that their pain and loss is unbearable at present but the group helps instil hope that over time things improve and supports a growing acceptance that people often never find the answer to “why?”

Although for many people the simple act of telling their story is enough, occasionally members of the group will provide advice or suggestions on how to cope with situations or challenges. For example members may suggest other groups or activities that they have found beneficial or suggestions for self-care. Often, social and instrumental support outwith the café is offered for those experiencing difficult times and this is arranged and managed by the members. For example, we have observed group members offering to drive other members to the monthly group. This kind of support can be hugely

beneficial to those in receipt of it, but additionally to those who offer it. Participants can gain a sense of value and significance by helping other group members. We have seen this happen across various groups that we facilitate as an organisation, using similar models with different groups and it is clear that this reciprocal support is hugely important and a vital step in recovery. We have observed friendships being built and new social networks being created for individuals who as a result of their grief often feel isolated or alone.

Additionally the facilitator has a good knowledge of local supports and has had training in suicide intervention skills. As a result referrals have been made at various points to specific support services, and occasionally suicide safety plans have been made with individuals who attend the group.

Guests visiting the café have reflected the mutual-respect afforded by group members and facilitator alike.

“Just wanted to say thanks again for having me along last week and especially for the always warm and authentic welcome given to people I link into the group. I refer people onto a lot of different groups and services as you might imagine but I’d struggle to think of many that offer the consistent safety and sense of trust that the bereavement and blether café engenders. It’s great for me as worker to know I can bring people along then quietly slip away safe in the knowledge they will be in good hands. It’s always immediately felt when people enter the group and I’d be gutted if it were to suddenly cease to exist. It’d be great to see more of these groups across the city.” **Partner Visitor**

As previously mentioned, no time limitations are placed on attendance and the group provides open ended support for participants. Participants make their own decision about if and when they want to stop coming and it is clear that the door is not closed. This is supported by participants not being formally referred or having a case file opened when they attend. Through observation and listening to group members each month it is evident to the facilitator that individuals start, little by little, to ‘piece themselves together’, find ways of coping and healing, and reaching out to others who are new to the group.

Over time and through the continual use of this informal group led structure participants came to trust the process and value the group time as ‘me time’. It is a space where they can focus on themselves, receive support from peers, and start to learn how to validate their own emotions.

Group Facilitation

The recent research from the Mental Health Foundation raised a number of concerns about peer support models for suicide bereavement (Cameron & Solomon, 2020). These included:

- Danger of people becoming dependent or stuck in their grief and a sense of persistent victimhood.
- Groups being monopolised by dominant characters
- The risk of cliques
- Issues around confidentiality

The success of the Bereavement and Blether group lies in ensuring that groups are facilitated in a way which allows individuals to feel safe, heard and included. The current group is lucky to have a very skilled facilitator with significant training and experience in managing difficult dynamics in groups. She has a

good understanding of group dynamics, and is able to utilise techniques to support her facilitation, thus minimising the risks of some of these challenges or behaviours becoming problematic.

Boundaries are the main issue that emerge in the group. Often, the participants have survived extremely upsetting events and it can be painful to revisit these. It can also be distressing for other participants to hear. Memories of trauma can continue to haunt individuals, especially if they try to avoid them. Individuals must make a personal choice about sharing their story and decide carefully who they entrust with this part of themselves. Individuals in the Bereavement and Blether group often choose to share and therefore agreements around confidentiality within the group are revisited regularly. It is the role of the group facilitator to manage 'over sharing', talking over other people, interruptions and handling difficult group behaviours. Situations are handled in a sensitive, discreet and impartial way.

Discussion

It is our belief that the Bereavement and Blether Café is providing a valuable support option for people bereaved through alcohol, drugs, suicide and violence.

Peer support models alone will not meet the needs of all people bereaved in this way, and the Bereavement & Blether Café does not attempt to be all things to all people. It is clear that a wider, more flexible support offer is needed, and it looks promising that this will be developed through the work of the National Suicide Prevention Leadership group. The pilot projects currently being commissioned by the group are intended to run for a two year period. It is anticipated that, should these pilots prove to be successful, similar interventions would be rolled out across Scotland. While it remains to be seen how the Covid 19 pandemic will impact on these timescales, the expectation is that this may further extend these timescales, leaving a continued gap in provision for Glasgow residents.

In the meantime Bereavement & Blether continues to support local people albeit virtually at this time. Given the evidence of continued support needs for this group we feel this simple and low cost model should be considered for wider roll out. Current delivery rests on one facilitator and so consideration needs to be given to how these skills can be shared with other individuals or organisations who might be in a position to replicate in other areas.

It is our belief that with the right skills and personal qualities, some training and a clear description of the model, other individuals could be equipped to undertake a facilitation role in any roll out of the Bereavement & Blether model.

Key skills and attributes of anyone looking to lead a group like this would include:

- A good understanding and/or personal experience of disenfranchised grief and the impacts it can have on individuals affected.
- A warm, friendly and relaxed manner with an ability to put participants at ease.
- Experience or training in working in group settings and the ability to facilitate the groups in a friendly yet impartial way.
- An ability to maintain a respectful and ethical environment. Groups should be free from discrimination or behaviours which may make members feel uncomfortable, harassed or threatened.
- An ability to ensure group sessions are non-judgmental and productive for everyone involved.
- An ability to create a group where there is no 'them and us' and to build trust within the group.

- Knowledge of local and national support services to signpost group members where appropriate.
- An ability to recognise, hold and respond to difficult emotions and distress.

In addition, any group facilitator should have some access to support themselves. Due to the emotional toll that supporting people in their grief can have, the current group facilitator is supported with regular supervision meetings, self-care plans and monthly debriefing from a therapist.

Next Steps

We would welcome discussion from interested local partners about how this work might be taken forward.

Report prepared by:
Susie Heywood, Health Improvement Senior &
Marie Stewart, Health Improvement Practitioner
Glasgow City HSCP
May 2020

References

Adfam & Cruse Bereavement Care (2014) Drug and alcohol related bereavement project: Scoping Review. https://adfam.org.uk/files/docs/Adfam-Cruse_Drug_and_alcohol_related_bereavement_Scoping_review_-_October_2014.pdf

Cameron, J. & Solomon, S (2020) Support for those bereaved by suicide: A qualitative research study. Mental Health Foundation.

National Records of Scotland (2019) Drug Related Deaths in Scotland in 2018
<https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/files//statistics/drug-related-deaths/2018/drug-related-deaths-18-pub.pdf>

National Records of Scotland (2019) Alcohol Specific Deaths
<https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/files//statistics/alcohol-deaths/2018/alcohol-specific-deaths-18-main-points.pdf>

Pitman, A. et al., 2014. Effects of suicide bereavement on mental health and suicide risk. *Lancet Psychiatry* 1(1), pp. 86-94

ScotPHO (The Scottish Public Health Observatory (2019) Suicide: Scottish Trends
<https://www.scotpho.org.uk/health-wellbeing-and-disease/suicide/data/scottish-trends>

Scottish Government (2018) Every Life Matters: Scotland's Suicide Prevention Action Plan
<https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-suicide-prevention-action-plan-life-matters/>

Sveen, C. A., & Walby, F. A. (2008). Suicide survivors' mental health and grief reactions: A systematic review of controlled studies. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behaviour*, 38(1), 13-29.

Appendix 1: Example of Promotional Cards



Here you can share your experiences of how you've coped or not coped with the death of a loved one, or ask questions about how others have dealt with such difficult times, or just sit and have a cuppa and maybe share some stories—All Welcome

***For some moments in life, there are no words.
Sometimes it's ok if you don't know why.***

Starting Thursday 2nd March 2017
10.15 – 11.45am
Bridgeton Library, 14 Orr Street, Bridgeton, G40 3TA
Every 1st Thursday of the month

If you would like more information on this café or you have been bereaved through other circumstances please contact Marie on 07766 085009 or at marie.stewart@ggc.scot.nhs.uk



Appendix 2: Example of Promotional Poster

*Have you lost someone due to
alcohol, drugs or suicide?*

Until you're in this situation, there's no way to tell how you will cope when a loved one dies. It's the hardest of times, but talking about it with others and sharing what's on your mind will always help.

***Come along & you'll be warmly welcome at our
Bereavement & Blether Café***

Here you can share your experiences of how you've coped or not coped with the death of a loved one, or ask questions about how others have dealt with such difficult times, or just sit and have a cuppa, and maybe share some stories – everyone is welcome.

Starting Thursday 2nd March 2017

10.15 – 11.45am

Bridgeton Library, 14 Orr Street, Bridgeton, G40 3TA

Every 1st Thursday of the month

If you would like more information on this café or you have been bereaved through other circumstances please contact Marie on 07766 085009 or at marie.stewart@ggc.scot.nhs.uk

