

## **Opening the Dialogue on Death: Navigating the Journey of Bereavement, Grief and Trauma Within Probation Delivery**

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This document is the Published Version [VoR]

### **Citation:**

RUTTER, Natalie, FOWLER, Andrew, FERNANDO, Ruwani and BRADLEY, Alexandria (2025). Opening the Dialogue on Death: Navigating the Journey of Bereavement, Grief and Trauma Within Probation Delivery. Probation Quarterly (35). [Article]

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# **Opening the Dialogue on Death:**

## **Navigating the Journey of Bereavement, Grief and Trauma Within Probation Delivery**



As individuals we each hold our own experiences of bereavement and grief. Death affects us all, but our journeys of navigating this are profoundly personal, unique, complex and very much form part of our ongoing, and dynamic story. Open conversations about death are rare, especially when reflecting on the possibilities of impact and influence on a person's life moving forward. These inevitable experiences, occurring within both personal and social contexts highlight the role of emotion, relational work, and emotional labour. Particularly within the context of probation, they also underscore the recognition of trauma, addiction, and the impact of desistance from or persistence in crime. Within this article, we aim to shed light, provoke thought and invoke conversation. There has been research in prisons (Wilson 2011; Wilson et al 2022; Wilson 2023; Vaswani 2014, 2015 and 2018), but again, probation remains in the shadows.

Practitioners and criminalised individuals will have their own experiences and our understanding of how these are navigated within the supervisory relationship in practice is important. As a usually taboo subject, we encourage opening the dialogue. However, we recognise there must be careful consideration of the emotions involved, the wider emotional labour invoked, and the potentially triggering nature of experiences for both practitioners and criminalised individuals. Longstanding sociological thought recognises that emotions are located within an individual, their thoughts and (re)actions, but that individual emotions arise through continual processes of social interaction and communication (Mead, 1934). Experience of bereavement and grief conceptualises the importance of this, directly seen within the lives of criminalised individuals and practitioners, and how then this creates a unique web of emotion within the relationship developed.

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We understand the heart of probation practice as being relational, and the display and management of emotions are critical to effective practice (Phillips et al., 2020). Emotional labour can be described as the 'management of a way of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display ... for a wage' (Hochschild, 1983, p.7fn). As authors, we can relate emotional labour to our experiences of bereavement both personally and professionally across our varying roles. When working in probation Andrew experienced personal bereavements. Alongside Andrew listened to people's narratives on probation which featured cumulative loss, where the death of a significant person(s) was a regular feature and the death of acquaintances was a frequent experience. Often, Andrew heard accounts of traumatic deaths and in some cases by the person responsible for the death. When experiencing another miscarriage with his partner Andrew remembered a time when following safeguarding procedures, in supervision, he was taking a long list of children's names and dates of births from a male who cheerfully proclaimed with a nudge and a wink, there could be a few more. The pain of bereavement for Andrew manifested in feelings of anger, jealousy and resentment as having children was so easy for someone who didn't seem to care. Professionally, and engaged in emotional labour, Andrew's feelings were intentionally not expressed during the information-gathering process, but maybe he conducted himself with a bit more formality. As a practitioner, the management of emotions in a triggering interaction requires emotional skill (Fowler et al. 2019) and self-awareness. It was not until some years later Andrew overheard someone describe miscarriage as bereavement and then recognised how this painful experience had a cumulative impact across intersecting areas of his life. Reflecting, Andrew recognised that at the time of his bereavement, in his role as a

qualified probation officer, he did not know the difference between disenfranchised grief, traumatic grief and complex grief.

A risk in probation work is that the frequency of accounts of death from people on probation can normalise and diminish the significance of a life event for the individual and the practitioner. The practitioner's experience and understanding of grief can also have an impact on their response to their own care and that of someone on probation. Importantly, research suggests limited knowledge or training around exploring experiences of bereavement within criminal justice practice, and in addition, evidence suggests that there is insufficient awareness of resources available to practitioners (Read et al., 2019).

As an extension of his experiences, Andrew is currently a bereavement volunteer with Cruse, a position he has held for the last 2 1/2 years. Cruse is a charity dedicated to helping people process grief and understand their bereavement. On occasions, individuals that Andrew has supported in this role, have disclosed that they are also criminalised. In this client-led work, Andrew discusses their bereavement experiences, reasons for accessing support, aims, hopes, and feelings to enable an exploration of ways of thinking about grief, including grief models and metaphors.

Many factors can have an impact on the intensity and complexity of grief, for example, the nature of the relationship with the deceased, the circumstances of their death and whether it was traumatic, for example, suicide, murder and drug-related deaths (De, 2018). Criminalised individuals are more likely to experience traumatic bereavement (Vaswani, 2014) which can also result in experiences of stigmatisation (Perreault et al., 2010) and victimisation (Gekoski et al., 2013).

Recognising trauma, in its many forms, is important within and across probation delivery when working with criminalised individuals. Trauma itself can be linked to a single event like bereavement, or through a range of experiences and circumstances which may have led up to, or followed this.

Research by Rutter (2021; 2022), and recently within Fernando's comparative study of pathways of desistance across England and France (2024), has highlighted how experiences of bereavement can play a role in an individual's journey of desistance, or persistence in criminality. Bereavement results in periods of uncertainty (Farrall, 2009), and disturbing patterns of daily activities when the death of a close attachment is experienced, creating a far-reaching ripple effect (Vaswani, 2014). The role of relationships within desistance is well understood through the structural 'hooks' of attachment, emotional connections, and sense of belonging (Giordano et al., 2002; McNeill, 2009; Shapland and Bottoms, 2011; Nugent and Schinkel, 2016). However, this is only understood within the context of relational networks with people who are alive, which is then reflected in risk assessment practice. Therefore we highlight the importance of practitioners opening dialogue here and working creatively to accurately capture what may be influencing the behaviour in the lives of those they are working with, within the context of bereavement and trauma.

What we also feel is worth reflecting on is how one's experiences of bereavement somewhat mirror the process of desistance from crime. They are both seen as an ongoing 'journey' that is far from linear and straightforward and are both influenced and experienced through emotion.

Listening to individuals' experiences of bereavement across our own different roles and understandings enables us to recognise, and begin to conceptualise, the role of emotion, trauma, attachment and the ripple effect of bereavement alongside the importance of developing and building resilience. All of these are important in the context of understanding and supporting both bereavement and desistance within probation practice. The significance of meaningful care, compassion and social support have been described as integral within the relationships of people attempting/maintaining desistance, recovery from addiction, and those navigating loss and bereavement (Logan, Thornton and Breen, 2018; Maruna, 2017 and Stevens et al., 2015). It is perhaps the presence of timely social support and quality of informal relationships which have the greatest opportunity to enhance resilience and reduce isolation and stigmatisation.

Our understanding of the impact of death, and an individual's journey of bereavement and grief requires acknowledgement and increased understanding. Although there is arguably some understanding between death and experiences of bereavement and grief and its impact on desistance, this is minimal. Probation must understand the role of varying life events on an individual's offending behaviour, and greater understanding is needed here. It is also important for us to gain a stronger understanding of what work may already be taking place to share best practice and reflect on what is available across different sectors to enable us to think about 'what next', referral pathways for support and the tools for practice within the context of probation. We encourage you to start this conversation together, in your teams and with us.

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