

Talk to Royal College of Psychiatrists

21/ 04/ 2021

Journey of the Devon Letter of Hope

Slide 1

Hello my name is Marie ash and I work for Devon Partnership Trust as a Senior Peer Support worker and I am part of the Safer from Suicide Team. I am also a suicide survivor and part of the group that wrote the Devon Letter of hope. My Recovery in Mental health began after my last Suicide Attempt and the realisation that it was not death I wanted but an end to the mental, physical and emotional pain I was in.

Slide 2 and 3

This is the finished article it is in a z card form which has the letter of hope on one side and contact details plus the 3 step plan. The Daisy design on the front is a painting that one of the group members had painted but it also links in with the Daisy for Recovery Devon and the daisy for Devon partnership Trust to show the collaborative working between individuals and organisations as DPT and Recovery Devon were instrumental in creating the Devon Letter of Hope.

Slide 4

This is the audio version of the Devon Letter of Hope, It can feel quite powerful and it still touched me, it was recorded by Hiblio TV in south Devon and has the voices of most members of the group as one member had declined to be recorded, which was supported and accepted with care.

Slide 5

The idea came from Dr Helen Smith who worked for DPT and was involved in suicide prevention and part of the Zero Suicide collaborative. The Idea was shared with Recovery Devon and a lady with great experience called Caroline was asked to gather together people who had lived experience of suicidal thoughts action or bereaved by suicide this was through a variety of networks. The group consisted of 5 women and 1 man, Dom a psychiatrist and part of the group to offer support if needed.

Slide 6

The first meeting was held in Exeter we introduced ourselves and Dom explained the support he would offer to us, Caroline would lead the group initially although later on in the process she left the group and was supported in this decision. Importantly the way this involvement would be valued was explained that it would be by payment at an hourly rate and how to apply for this was discussed. The whole process was then discussed. At each of these points there were lessons learnt but I will explain these further on.

1st session:

We were given a mixture of other Letter of hope related to suicide we worked through many different ones and highlighted parts that we individually thought helpful, this was to continue at home and another meeting was booked to go through our individual thoughts we also kept in contact through email.

2nd Session

When we gathered together we shared our individual thoughts on what was meaningful. The dynamics of the group started to develop with some strong voices with definite views, the brief was to write the letter. We were then asked to take ourselves back to the time we had thought or attempted to take our lives and to write a letter to ourselves we could use the points we had found helpful in the other letters or our own ideas, there were a mixture of short and long letters.

3rd session

In this session we went through our individual letters and as a group discussed which bits of these letters we felt most needed to be included. The letter was beginning to take shape, individual stories were shared to help the group understand why certain words were used, as one member was a veteran they explained the need to be given permission to talk or ask for help, another member it had taken 14 years to find the final resting place of a loved family member because at the time it was considered a crime within the Catholic church and therefore was buried outside the gates in consecrated ground. This continued from home with email going between each other and changes being made. It was at this point that the groups understanding of what we had been tasked to do became blurred as some members wanted complete control of wording, the design and layout every aspect of its creation and finished product.

4th Session

Our group leader was dealing with distress in their family and had received some unkind remarks from within the group, remember this is a highly intense and emotion process so feelings are often high, they made the decision to leave the group which was supported by Dom and myself. We managed to agree on the wording that would form the letter and these words were from each of our hearts and every word and sentence were looked at to ensure our meaning and care came across. The more assertive members gave specific details on how the letter would look in regards its format and a threefold design was put forward, this included which support groups to have on the reverse side and agreed this and felt that including the 3 step plan was important. Unfortunately a change was made that we were not aware of this changed the whole meaning of the letter and this was not discovered until the first print run had been completed

In the part of the letter which says 'Tell people it's so painful I want to die' it was changed to 'Tell people it's so painful I don't want to die'. This totally changed and negated the whole letter, the print run had been completed..... Luckily on the three fold and z card this mistake was at the beginning or end of the line so the word don't could be tipexed out with one of the mouse tipex! Russ and I went through all over 2000 letters of hope to ensure this was done and we could get the letter out to as many people as possible. Throughout the final process I acted as an intermediary between group members and kept Dom and other of the situation at all times.

What have we learnt?

- Be very specific about what the expectation of the group is, this could be time limit, what part of the letter is to be decided by the group (This caused discord with the group when some decided they wanted full control of every aspect of the letter) Possibly Setting up a Task and Finish group with very clear parameters.

- It's important to have a check in and check out, people need to feel there is a safe space to raise any concerns, we all need to be willing to talk through issues with the task to be completed
- Have robust support readily available and to everyone involved in writing a letter of hope.
- The need for a project to be time limited, a slight amount of flexibility can be built in but not an open ended time line this can be costly and possibly distressing for those involved.
- Think of the geography of the area as traveling (This was 2016-2017!) was an issue and a lot of the work was don't via email we didn't use or know of Teams!! Face to face meeting where important for us.
- Set a budget for payment and be very clear on what will be paid for and make this clear there is a limit of payment. This helps everyone know and understand what is expected.
- Be aware of endings, this is intense and emotional work some may struggle with this others may be relieved it's finished.
- We all felt and still feel very proud of what we achieved and they have been part of a letter that has saved lives
- The initial idea was part of a QI and was offered to patient on discharge from a psychiatric inpatient stay as we know there is an increase in risk of suicide. It was trial for 6 months and at various times we asked people set questions on what they thought of the letter and had it helped them, we used the PDST Methodology.
- Getting feedback whenever possible

7th slide

On the two high bridges a shortened version was used alongside the Samaritans signs, Jonny Benjamin MBE was asked to read it he said it's great but wouldn't have read it all on the bridge he was on. The shortened version has now been removed as research suggests this might not be helpful.

We put together briefing packs for different department in North Devon District councils and The Letter of Hope was part of this so the different department could offer this to clients if they were concerned for someone which they often face.

In Liaison and diversion being given to people in custody who express feeling suicidal, One person reported that if they hadn't have been given the Letter of Hope they would have taken their life.

I've offered it to people when I've been out, once in Cornwall when there were posters of a missing young man when asking about it I found out they were many people distressed by this so I gave the couple of copies I had with me I always carry one.

In Ask for Jake we have it and when delivering SafeTalk or ASIST training.

Use in a discharge pack with other information that is bespoke to the individual, possibly PSW could use it as part of the conversation while coproducing a safety plan

Story from the bridge

My daughter in law was crossing the bridge in Barnstaple when she saw a man on the other side of the fencing. She stopped others called the emergency services she held him and talk to him, part of the conversation was that he felt no one cared he was going through a lot of loss. Danielle said she

cared because she was there and that she knew I would care and she told him about the Letter of Hope that at the time was still there. The services arrived and took over when she got home I spend time with her debriefing and given her the opportunity to talk.

My family are proud of the work I do in suicide prevention and my part in the Letter of Hope, I remember thinking at the very beginning of my recovery journey that if I could do something to help 1 person 1 family to not go through what me and mine did then there is some sense in it all. Mine is a story of Hope and there is always hope, we just need to find it and yes at times we may need to hold that golden glob of hope for someone until it can given back.

Hello

My name is Marie and if you are reading this you may feel you are in a dark, frightening, lonely and empty place, where it feels like there is no hope and life feels too painful to keep struggling with.

May I sit with you, as I too have been in a similar place where life felt like hope no longer existed in it. I will not pretend to know exactly what you are feeling because those feelings will be uniquely yours.

While I am here with you, please believe me when I say I am holding hope for you.

While sitting next to you, I will ask you to tell me your story, all the time I will be holding a golden globe of hope for you. I will listen while you tell me about your fears, losses, confusion, pain and all the dark thoughts that invade you, let the tears fall its ok, all the time I will be sitting beside you hearing every word, sensing the power and depth of your feelings and fears.

I will sit in silence and gently place that globe of hope into your hands this is your hope, you are worthy of it, because you are a unique and precious person. Hold it, let it fill every part of your being, let the warmth spread through your body.

Now I will leave it with you and know that if at any time you feel that despair, I will be here for you, holding hope for you, waiting to listen and give that hope back to you.

I have often found this thought helpful, somewhere in the world a new day is dawning so hope really does spring eternal.

Marie