**Supporting the bereaved by telephone**

The current situation means that, for now, offering pastoral support cannot be face to face. This is especially difficult in the case of bereavement where normally we would make a home visit. Providing support over the telephone can be more difficult, but it is much better than no contact at all. It is also important to recognise that this different way of ministering may bring added stress for you, the minister.

We hope you find these notes will provide guidance that help you make these pastoral contacts as effective as possible, whilst also advising on your own self-care.

**Basics in pastoral care by phone**

* It’s important to introduce yourself and say why you are calling. Be aware that you may need to explain more than once.
* Check that it is a convenient time to call; you can’t see what is going on so be sensitive to their response and offer to call back at a more convenient time.
* It’s about their story and not about your story. You don’t know “just how they feel”. Even if you have experienced bereavement your experience and reactions are likely to be different from theirs.
* The shock of loss can be overwhelming and completely disorientating and exhausting
* Just LISTEN! Don’t attempt to solve problems, though you may need to talk about a service. Listening can of course include ‘active listening’ – i.e. occasional recap questions to check understanding / show you’re still there / show empathy, or the odd appropriate short comment or noise… but the default position is to be quiet, and just be there, listening. Don’t rush to fill pauses. More Active Listening Skill tips can be found below
* Tone of voice –when you are speaking on the phone, obviously you can’t rely on noticing their body language. The next highest % of communication is tone of voice. How you say is more important than what you say. The words themselves are less important.
* Aim to speak less and listen more.
* Ask open questions; don’t assume.
* Name the fact that you don’t have words for what has happened.
* Aim for empathy more than for sympathy. Check yourself that you are not sounding patronising. Bereaved people do not need to be infantilised.
* Tears can be very healing, but may feel difficult to cope with over the phone. Don’t try to ‘cheer them up’; simply reassure them that it’s ok to cry, that you are with them, and then wait quietly.
* Notice rather than diagnose – “that sounds really hard” rather than “you must be feeling x, y or z”
* Attention span may be short. Offer to call again, but only if you are going to do so.
* Normal safeguarding principles apply

**Useful questions**

* Is it ok for you to talk now or would you prefer me to call back?
* Do you mind if I ask about …(the deceased)?…….what happened?…..their story?...what did they really enjoy? Should I be picturing an outgoing person or someone who preferred their own company? etc.
* Do you have other people who are supporting you/ with you?
* You are in my prayers. Would you like me to say a prayer now or would you prefer not? It might be a good idea to have a few prepared prayers that you can refer to.

**If planning a service**

* Acknowledge that the current situation makes things doubly difficult and explain that the service will be shorter than usual [we may move to a situation where the number of mourners are reduced to zero]. There are resources on the Church of England Church Support Hub which you may find useful: <https://churchsupporthub.org/funerals/> and you may want to refer them to the national Church of England website: <https://www.churchofengland.org/life-events/funerals/here-everyone/support-when-you-cant-attend-funeral>
* Within the constraints of time, try to make the plan for the funeral as personal to the deceased as possible
* Offer to send the order of service and/or any words you used, after the service by email or post (often the Funeral Directors will produce an Order of Service)
* Recap what you think you have heard or any arrangements you have agreed. Grief is exhausting and disorientating.
* Be aware that, when things are happening that bereaved people can’t control, it is natural to become overly concerned with details that can be controlled.
* Be aware that the bereaved person may not know what to expect at the crematorium or graveside. Ask if they would like you to talk through it with them.
* Check if there is anyone else you should be liaising with.
* Ensure that they have your contact details.
* Reassure them that you would be pleased to talk with them further (assuming that you are).

**Caring for yourself**

* This work is draining. Be kind to yourself
* It’s ok to say to someone who is supporting you “I found that really hard”. To do so is not a sign of weakness; rather it is a sign of strength to be able to acknowledge weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9)
* Prayer support – you might ask a couple of people to pray for you as you make a call or prepare to conduct a funeral, but be aware of confidentiality issues.
* Don’t take expressions of anger against God, the Church or yourself personally.
* Do take seriously your own feelings of sadness/anger/disorientation. It’s not unusual or weak to be affected by trauma and tragedy.
* Don’t be surprised by a delayed reaction in yourself. We often cope in a crisis and the pain/shock hits a little later.
* Beware the danger of being energised by this work and then ‘hitting a wall’. Try to stop before you feel you need to.
* Try to get more sleep and rest and to keep to a routine as much as possible.
* Find someone you can debrief with – a colleague, cell group, chapter.

**Others sources of support**

* The Diocese provides a completely confidential counselling service which can be accessed through Revd Canon Jane Vaughan-Wilson. Jane can be contacted via email: jane.vaughan-wilson@truro.anglican.org
* We also offer Reflective Practice Groups for clergy. Some are working by Zoom – for more details, contact Sally Piper by email: [sally.piper@truro.anglican.org](mailto:sally.piper@truro.anglican.org)
* The Chaplain to the Readers, Jim Seth is available to provide support to Readers. He can be contacted by email: [jseth@btinternet.com](mailto:jseth@btinternet.com) or phone on **07597 202551**
* The Diocese has compiled a number of resources for support on our website: <https://www.trurodiocese.org.uk/resources/covid19/bereavement-support/> <https://www.trurodiocese.org.uk/resources/covid19/prayers-for-use-during-this-period/><https://www.trurodiocese.org.uk/resources/covid19/information-for-clergy/>
* Further resources are available on the Church of England website**:** <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/Guidance%20on%20mental%20health%20and%20wellbeing%20and%20Coronavirus.pdf><https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/Wellbeing%20of%20clergy%20and%20lay%20ministers%20during%20the%20coronavirus%20pandemic.pdf>

**Further ‘generic’ information on Active Listening Skills**

Active Listening is a structured way of listening and responding to others, focusing attention on the speaker. Suspending one’s own frame of reference, suspending judgment and avoiding other internal mental activities are important to fully attend to the speaker.

When we communicate with one another we do so not only with words but also non-verbally—by gestures, looks, the way we hold our body, the movements we make and so on. Indeed some of our most important communications happen without words.

When we are with those we know less well, we need to be more careful about making sure nothing gives an impression of judging, not caring about or minimising what we are hearing. Good listeners need to be aware of the messages they may be sending out about their attitude to the person they are listening to. The way we sit, our tone of voice, the way we keep or break eye-contact—these are just some of the signals others may pick up about our responses to what they are saying or how they are feeling.

People who are very anxious, for example, are likely to be extremely sensitive to the signals they think they are receiving from others.

Additionally, as noted above, offering support over the telephone brings with it the added complication of no visual signals – for the speaker or the listener. So listening well becomes even more important.

**Some Guidelines for Active Listening on the telephone**

**Paying attention**

* As far as possible, remove distractions
  + External - animals, children, TV, your mobile phone
  + Internal – put you own agenda/ feelings/ needs to one side
* Ourselves
  + Need to pay attention to own responses
  + Our own story can help us to get close, but take care
    - not to share own feelings/story
    - with flippant/ jovial comments that come across as insincere
    - tone of voice
* The other person
  + Focus on – their story/ needs/ interests/ feelings
  + Empathise - this short clip helps explain the difference between sympathy and empathy <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw&feature=youtu.be>
  + Concentrate on what is being said and what is being said ‘underneath’ by
    - noticing recurring words and phrases
    - noticing emotion

**Keeping Cool**

* Ensure that you are relaxed/calm/unhurried
* Avoid:
  + expressing shock, anger, defensiveness
  + expressions of over concern/ flattery/ undue praise
  + exclamations of surprise/ intolerance/ disgust

***NB*** *Anxious people may well be oversensitive to reactions they perceive in us*

**Keep what you say to a minimum**

* Always
  + be accurate, simple and to the point
  + use their name as appropriate
  + remember that silences can be helpful
  + use occasional non-verbal encouraging sounds so that they know you are still on the line (complete silence can be very can be very discomfiting, because you wonder whether the caller has disappeared (especially relevant when calling to/from mobiles)
* Use questions
  + to clarify/ explore feelings – pick out key word(s)
  + **Open** how long/ how/ what/ when/ who/ where
  + **Very open** “Would you like to tell me more about … ?”
  + **Avoid ‘Why?’** too searching – makes/forces people to think too hard in difficult circumstances and can be confrontational; may make people feel foolish
  + **Closed** Only when needing very specific information
  + After asking, wait, leave thinking time; don’t rush in with another question – they may simply be gathering their thoughts before replying.
* Avoid
  + changing subject/ interrupting unnecessarily
  + making assumptions and finishing their sentences
  + asking a question and not waiting for an answer
  + making false promises – “You will get better”
* Paraphrasing/ repeating last few words/ picking out a phrase
  + serves to prompt
  + shows that the listener has heard and checks that heard correctly
  + playback for speaker to aid – reflection/ thinking/ give new dimensions
  + invites development of the story
  + allows speaker to confront for themselves an aggressive/ controversial statement
* Be Tentative and careful when summing up
  + try to link ideas/ experiences/ events/ reactions
  + reflection of unstated feelings NB “You seem” not “You are”

**Acceptance of the other and their story**

* Avoid
  + being judgmental/ moralistic/ authoritative
  + criticism **–** by words/ non-verbal reactions etc
  + condescension
  + giving own reactions/advice
* Encourage
  + to make own assessment/ decisions – valuing themselves
* Be open minded

**Remember**

**The more you listen the more you will remember**

* Don’t take notes of what is said generally
  + You will remember less because you are listening less
  + They will be aware that you are not giving your undivided attention
  + They may tell you less/ feel uneasy
* Do take factual notes – e.g. Specific details – names etc.

*NB These are guidelines not a set of rules.*

PJS (Diocese of Exeter) and SAP and SW (Diocese of Truro)

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