

# NICOLA LESTER

Session 3:

Therapeutic skills and creative ways of  
working

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# AIMS OF THE SESSION

1. Key skills for therapeutic practice
2. Creative ways of working
3. Working with loss and bereavement

KEY SKILLS FOR  
THERAPEUTIC PRACTICE



# 1. BEING PATIENT

You need to demonstrate your ability to be patient at all times, particularly when working with individuals who challenge your approach and, perhaps, impact negatively on the other people in the group.

Often the best way of demonstrating your patience is to try to understand someone's behaviour rather than seeking to change the behaviour straight away.

Remember that all behaviour is trying to tell you something about what is going on for that person, at that time and can be a useful source of information.

## 2. BEING NON-JUDGMENTAL

It is essential to treat everyone the same regardless of any personal feelings you may have towards them or about their behaviour.

It is natural to judge each other - this is a normal human reaction, but it is equally important to make sure that this judgment is not evident when you are working with someone in need of support as this will affect the relationship that you are able to create and maintain with them.

### 3. BEING KIND

Kindness can be difficult to enact, particularly consistently, and if someone rejects your attempts to offer support and help, or are dismissive of your ideas and suggestions.

Everyone you work with should be treated with what is known as 'unconditional positive regard'.

This means always trying to view them positively, regardless of how they behave or how challenging their behaviour.

## 4. BEING CONSISTENT

This means treating everyone in the same way all of the time.

For example, always being kind, supportive, understanding and patient, no matter how someone behaves.

Being consistent in how you treat people will allow you to develop good relationships, which in turn enables people to feel safe and supported.

## 5. BEING HONEST

Sometimes it is incredibly difficult to be honest, particularly if you know that it might cause pain to the person that you are trying to help.

For example, if there is need to make a safeguarding referral or raise a concern to other services or a parent/caregiver, it may be tempting not to be completely honest for fear of causing distress.

However, qualities such as honesty, openness and transparency can actually be incredibly helpful in strengthening the relationship and a useful way of enabling the people that you are working with to feel safe.

Managing expectations and establishing boundaries from the outset when you begin to work with someone is particularly important.



## 6. BEING UNDERSTANDING

Remember that everyone's experiences are different and it is important to take the time to understand how people have come to make sense of their experiences.

It is important to remain objective and to focus on understanding the impact of someone's experience rather than judging the event itself.

## 7. LISTENING ACTIVELY

It is important to demonstrate your ability to listen to someone's experiences and to actively engage with them in order to understand these.

This can be achieved by asking them questions to elicit further information and by continually checking that you have understood them correctly.

## 8. BEING WILLING TO BEAR WITNESS TO ANOTHER PERSON'S DISTRESS

Perhaps most crucial is your ability to bear witness to another person's distress.

This will require you to manage your own sense of helplessness and simply be present whilst they tell their story.

You may encounter people who disclose such significant levels of trauma that you feel overwhelmed and unable to know where to start or how to begin to help.

In these circumstances it is important to remember the significance of being present and willing to listen as they tell their stories.

Never underestimate the impact of simply being there in these moments and how beneficial this will be for those you are working with.

# DEMONSTRATING EMPATHY

Empathy is defined as the ability to understand and share the feelings of another person.

You can demonstrate empathy by doing the following:

- Putting aside your own viewpoint and trying to see things from the other person's point of view
- Validating their perspective (demonstrating that you understand how they are feeling)
- Listening and checking your understanding of their perspective

# MANAGING ACUTE DISTRESS

When interacting with someone who presents as distressed, you should try to engage them by:

1. Asking them about their immediate needs and support them to meet these
2. Helping them to understand the impact of stress and trauma on both their mind and body
3. Using this information to provide them with reassurance and support
4. Connecting them with their social support networks (this may start with working with them to identify who are good/positive sources of support)
5. Providing additional support and information to those people the individual has identified as being in their social support network

# MANAGING OVERWHELM

Dissociation is one way in which the mind copes with too much stress and leads the person to become disconnected from the world around them.

When you are working with someone who is distressed it is really important to keep them connected to the 'here and now'.

These are known as 'grounding' techniques, where the aim is to try and bring someone back to the present.

# GROUNDING TECHNIQUES

'The Fives' activity:

You could ask the person to identify the following:

1. Five things they can hear right now
2. Five things they can feel right now
3. Five things they can smell right now
4. Five things they can taste right now
5. Five things they can see right now

# UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA ON ENGAGEMENT

It is important to remember that you may be engaging with people who are in a state of stress.

This means that they may:

- Become quickly overwhelmed by information and advice
- Struggle to retain and process information
- Find it difficult to remember things
- Struggle to concentrate and focus (this may include remaining engaged with support and their ability to follow advice)
- Disconnect from those around them (including sources of support)



# GUIDELINES FOR TRAUMA INFORMED ENGAGEMENT

- check understanding
- seek feedback about your approach
- summarise information and actions (either verbally or written)
- present information in small, manageable chunks
- where necessary, be proactive in your follow-up

# CREATIVE WAYS OF WORKING

Working creatively with people who have been exposed to trauma can be extremely beneficial to:

- Stabilise and support them to regulate their emotions
- Develop adaptive and effective coping strategies
- Understand how they are feeling
- Identify potential triggers
- Increase self-awareness
- Develop a therapeutic relationship to enable them to feel safe to share their experiences and stories
- Provide them with a variety of ways in which to tell their stories

# CREATIVE WAYS OF WORKING

- Facilitating conversations
- Developing self-awareness
- Managing anxiety
- Remembering
- Facilitating connections
- Supporting coping
- Expressing feelings
- Saying goodbye

# FACILITATING CONVERSATIONS

- Coaching cards can be an effective way of facilitating conversations
- It can sometimes feel 'safer' and alleviate pressure to talk about how they feel
- Ask someone to select a card which best represents how they are feeling and to explain their choice
- There is no right or wrong way to do the activity, whatever they choose and for whatever reason is useful information and prompts a conversation
- The activity can be adapted to ask participants how they would like to feel instead or even repeated during later sessions to see if they feel differently over time

# FACILITATING CONVERSATIONS

## ‘The 5 word story’

Ask them to create a 5-word story on any subject: how they are feeling; how their week has been; what they think about the future; how they see themselves.

The words don't necessarily have to construct a coherent sentence, it may just be a group of five different words.

Once the person has presented their five words, you can then explore further why they have chosen these words. What prompted this? What do these words mean to them?

# DEVELOPING SELF-AWARENESS

The 'glass jar' self-awareness activity

Use a glass jar and a brightly coloured liquids/juice

Ask them to fill their trauma jars to represent how much trauma they feel is in their lives at the current time

Once the activity is completed you can ask questions about how full the glass jar is

# DEVELOPING SELF-AWARENESS: ENHANCING RESILIENCE

In order to move the conversation on to thinking about resilience:

- ask someone to think about how much room there is in their glass jar to enable them to cope with more stress
- what might they need to do in order to empty out some of the liquid to create more room?

This activity can also be adapted to use other resources such as different coloured sand or pebbles instead of liquid.

Depending on the nature of your work, it may also be a useful tool for measuring the impact of your work on self-awareness and resilience

You could encourage individuals to take photographs of their glass jar and keep a record of any changes when the activity is repeated.

# MANAGING ANXIETY

## Using 'Worry Dolls'

- The indigenous people from the Highlands in Guatemala created Worry Dolls many generations ago as a remedy for worrying.
- According to legend, children tell their worries to the Worry Dolls, placing them under their pillow when they go to bed at night.
- By morning the dolls have gifted them with the wisdom and knowledge to eliminate their worries.
- In addition to placing Worry Dolls under their pillow at night, children or young people can be encouraged to give the Worry Dolls to an adult as a way of expressing their anxiety and to prompt the adult to provide reassurance and support.



# REMEMBERING

## Creating a 'memory box'

- A memory box can be a useful tool to engage with someone who has experienced loss
- Memory boxes can either be purchased or can be built and decorated (e.g. using an empty shoebox)
- The purpose of the memory box is to use it to store memories, photographs and other objects associated with the loss.
- Working with someone to create the box may facilitate opportunities for them to talk about the meaning of the objects and to share their story in relation to the loss
- It is a useful activity for learning more about a person's perception of loss
- It often generates more information than asking directly about experiences of loss and may feel like a much 'safer' way of sharing

# FACILITATING CONNECTIONS

‘Who is there for me?’

Sometimes it feels like there aren't any people who care, or that there are not enough people to talk to. It can be a good idea to remind the person who these people are by encouraging them to make their own friendship bracelet or wristband:

- Make a list of seven different people who care about them
- Choose a different colour thread for each person on the list
- Tie all of the threads together to make a friendship wristband

# SUPPORTING COPING

Make a personalised mental health first aid kit

- What kind of things would be found in a real first aid kit?  
Make a list
- Now make a list of things that might help in the event of a bad day
- A variation of this activity could involve children and young people creating their own mental health first aid kit to include items such as a 'Worry Dolls', calming glitter jars and lavender-scented play dough (for relaxation)

# EXPRESSING FEELINGS

## The 'photovoice' project

- The photovoice project is a way of encouraging children and young people to engage with the world around them and to make sense of their experiences through taking photographs and writing narratives to accompany them.
- You could ask someone to take specific pictures to represent the following:
  - what makes you think of the future
  - what connects you to the past
  - the here and now

# SAYING GOODBYE

## 'Five More Minutes'

- This may be a useful activity for children and young people if they did not get the chance to say goodbye to their loved one.
- Ask them, 'If the person who died could come back from just five minutes, what would you tell them?'
- You could encourage them to write the message as a letter (this can then be kept in their memory box or given to an adult/caregiver for safe-keeping).

# FAMILY FOCUSED ACTIVITIES

- Encourage activities which bring families together
- Encourage parents to engage in the creative activities to help them engage with children and young people

# FAMILY FOCUSED ACTIVITIES

Ideas include:

- **‘Our family’ and ‘Where we live’**

You could encourage each family member to draw a self-portrait on a larger piece of paper with a picture of their home.

- **‘You make me happy when’**

Ask each individual family member to write a message to another member of the family starting with ‘you make me happy when...’

This is a good way of starting conversations amongst the family by asking them to identify what each other does which is helpful and supportive.

- **‘You can help me by’**

This is another good way of asking each family member to identify what they need from each other.

# UNDERSTANDING TRAUMATIC BEREAVEMENT

- The impact of sudden, traumatic loss is so devastating it results in trauma symptoms
- The bereaved are faced with the dual task of mourning the loss and coping with the trauma that accompanied the death



# UNDERSTANDING TRAUMATIC BEREAVEMENT

Common physical and emotional reactions include:

- Detachment and dissociation
- Intense fear and helplessness
- Anger, panic and guilt
- Denial
- High levels of distress
- Loneliness

# SUPPORTING BEREAVED FAMILIES: ADVICE AND GUIDANCE

There are a variety of different ways in which family members may respond to a death. With each reaction, it is important that you:

- Acknowledge the family's grief
- Remain calm and try to ensure a safe environment
- Respond to and respect the needs and wishes of the family
- Seek additional welfare and medical support if needed

# SUPPORTING BEREAVED FAMILIES: PRIORITIES AND EARLY INTERVENTION

- Focus on addressing any immediate practical and emotional needs (ask what they need)
- Encourage them to mobilise and connect with sources of social support
- Remember to be creative and innovative to enable this connection to social support
- Encourage regular eating and staying hydrated (where necessary focus on physical health needs)
- Encourage people to sleep when they can, even if only for a few hours at a time. If sleep remains/becomes problematic you may need to refer to a medical practitioner for additional advice
- Try to reduce the potential for overwhelm and encourage them to take on one task at a time, draw on the support of other family members and delay non-urgent activities

# SUPPORTING BEREAVED FAMILIES: GUIDELINES FOR BEST PRACTICE

- Provide effective support (either face to face or remotely)
- Enhance engagement
- Reduce overwhelm
- Help them to regain a sense of control
- Enable them to actively participate in the bereavement process
- Adopt a trauma informed approach to care and support

# SUPPORTING BEREAVED CHILDREN: ADVICE AND GUIDANCE

- Provide honest and accurate information
- Where possible include them in the decision-making process
- Don't try to protect them from the truth
- Encourage parents to maintain a sense of routine and stability and to provide them with consistent love and support

# SUPPORTING BEREAVED CHILDREN: ADVICE AND GUIDANCE

- It is important to remember that children and young people will respond in a similar way to adults but they may show how they feel in different ways.
- This may be linked to their developmental stage as well as any past experiences in dealing with either a bereavement or trauma.

# SUPPORTING BEREAVED CHILDREN: ADVICE AND GUIDANCE

The possible responses of children may vary. They may:

- cry
- get angry
- be noisy
- talk about the person who has died
- not talk about them at all
- play and behave as though nothing has happened

Remember these are all normal responses.

# SUPPORTING BEREAVED CHILDREN: ADVICE AND GUIDANCE

Other types of reactions include:

- Difficulty understanding death and what this means (this will be dependent on the age of the child)
- Denial and disconnection from what has happened and the world around them
- Shock and disbelief
- Physical symptoms (for example, loss of appetite, sickness)
- The need for information and asking questions



# EXPLAINING DEATH TO CHILDREN: ADVICE FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

## Ages 2 and younger

- Children under the age of 2 will not have an understanding of the concept of death, however, they understand 'here' and 'not here'.
- Children at this age are very aware of the emotions of the parent/caregiver and may experience separation anxiety.
- It is important to try and maintain a normal routine and to ensure familiarity (both with adults and the physical environment).

# EXPLAINING DEATH TO CHILDREN: ADVICE FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

## Ages 2-6 years

Children tend to think in concrete terms. As such they may need to be told that the death is permanent and given some facts about the death.

For example:

*'When someone dies, their body stops working. Their heart stops beating and their breathing stops. The brain does not send or receive messages. They can no longer see, hear, talk, touch, taste, smell, eat, play, think or feel and they cannot move.'*

# EXPLAINING DEATH TO CHILDREN: ADVICE FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

## Ages 7-11 years

Children within this age range have a better understanding of the permanence of death and will likely have questions about the death as well as being more likely to express emotion. It is important to tell the child the honest facts about who died, where, how and when and encourage the child to discuss their feelings.

# EXPLAINING DEATH TO CHILDREN: ADVICE FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

## Ages 11 onwards

- You should explain the death as you would to an adult. Adolescents are more likely to ask questions that a parent may not have the answers to.
- You should reassure them that it is okay not to know the answer and to say that they do not know.

# ADVICE FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS - WARNING SIGNS

There is no right or wrong way to grieve, however, some of the early warning signs which may indicate that a child is struggling with the loss and may require professional input, include the following:

- Frequent bed wetting
- Physical complaints such as nausea and headaches
- Difficulty sleeping or nightmares
- Changes to eating habits
- Spending more time on their own
- Separation anxiety
- Exaggerated feelings of blame or guilt
- Thoughts of hurting themselves or self-harm

# GOALS FOR WORKING WITH BEREAVEMENT

- Creating a sense of meaning
- Integrating the loss into the life of the bereaved and maintaining a bond
- Honouring and memorialising the person who has died

# QUESTIONS



THANK YOU





# CONTACT DETAILS

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