

AGE BETTER
IN SHEFFIELD

The Ripple Effect

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Activity Phone Calls:
The Ripple Effect's response to
supporting bereaved older people
during the time of Covid 19.

Context

Janet Browse, from Sheffield Mind who runs the ABiS Ripple Effect project working with older bereaved people, some of who have considerable mental health challenges, is used to being in contact with her clients and supporting them in what she would describe as very “visceral ways” such as ensuring they are eating well by cooking a meal with them and then eating together. Covid 19 and lockdown changed all of that and Ripple Effect switched to completely phone based client support from 24th March 2020, including support for recently bereaved people who were new referrals.

“Making new relationships over the phone, building trust and engaging with people is a more difficult task. Fortunately referrals have been from our existing referrers who have made this process easier by sharing their experience of working with the individual in question (the background to the loss, the type of support the person may be open to, their mental state and wellbeing right now) so that we are not ‘cold calling’”.

Janet Browse

The challenges of supporting clients by phone

- It can be difficult to tell how someone is really doing over the phone. We would normally take cues from a client’s appearance, the state of their home and their body language and all this is lacking.
- Some people are less comfortable talking on the phone than in person, others manage fine.
- For a few clients, text and email “check ins” work ok; they are actually more open and honest about their feelings when they can type them.
- The transition for new clients from phone support to face-to-face if/when this is an option may be a little odd for those who have never physically met us before.
- It is possible to do some types of practical support over the phone: we have filled in forms etc. but everything takes longer. Also, the types of practical support needed have changed as people struggle with shopping, medication etc. in the lockdown but we have supported these needs.

The challenges of supporting clients by phone

"I attempted to behave on the phone in a similar manner with existing clients as I did in their houses. We chat about lighter things, e.g. what we are watching on the tv, sharing community gossip, sharing news of friends, ordering food shopping on the internet. Talking about feelings, reminiscing on memories of the person lost comes as a by-product of these conversations. The main difference is that previously I would perhaps prompt topics, ask the odd question to gain a response, but 80% of the time would be listening. Even using phone techniques of verbally acknowledging what someone is saying (rather than nodding, eye contact etc, which you would do in person to show you are listening), the client soon feels uncomfortable if they are doing most of the talking on the phone. The balance shifts to at least 50/50 with who is talking, and, as the client is often desperate for news of the outside world and has little news of their own to talk about, there is more talking from me. Spending hours every week chatting to people has started to make topics run dry with some. With some people you can talk about e.g. favourite films for hours as a totally natural conversation, others it is more effort and you need more topics at the ready for if they don't volunteer things they want to chat about."

Janet Browse

Silence on the line can be awkward

"My strategy was to try to distract with normal conversation and have a laugh if possible, and only touch on Covid19 if they have a concern they raise. I'd make sure to include a lot of open questions to prompt them to discuss more serious topics if that is what they need to do and at some point in every call we talk about their bereavement, at which point I shut up and listen. Allowing people time to talk and express feelings and cry if they need to is important, but judging how long to leave an empty/quiet phone line is a hard thing to judge. At what point does the person feel uncomfortable? How do you verbally show you are still there so you can do the equivalent of a facial expression of support/hand holding which would be natural in person? I am sure bereavement phone lines know/have been taught this stuff but I am learning as I go."

Janet Browse

Activity phone calls that provide practical and emotional support

Janet was determined to find a way to make the phone calls to her clients as meaningful and supportive as possible. She found that developing “activity phone calls” provided her and the client with a more positive experience and an opportunity to connect. This is what she did, told in her own words.

Janet’s Learning Log: I just wanted the phone calls to be as creative as we try to be in the community with Ripple Effect, and one thing we have learned is that signposting/encouraging/telling people to then go and do something that will make them feel better is not always effective, especially when they are demotivated, feeling low, or feeling fearful about something. They actually need a little hand holding from a friend to motivate them and support them to get out of a rut, and to try something new, which is why in the community we become friends and take people to social events or out for coffee, or help with cooking side by side etc.

For example, we have had clients who I know have food in the fridge (as we support practical needs too) but are sat eating biscuits on the sofa because motivating themselves to go to the fridge is more than they can manage right now (taking into account the mental health challenges and recent bereavements which tend to characterise our clients).

What has worked for me is calling around lunchtime and over the phone preparing a sandwich together.

Encouraging someone there and then to do the same as you and go to the fridge and decide what is going on your sandwich, arguing about the merits of Marmite, putting the kettle on at the same time, then sitting down in front of a quiz show on the TV while we eat together and guess the answers on The Chase helps you feel like you are sharing an experience and have a friend with you, and as a bonus I know that person has eaten something vaguely healthy today.

Another thing I’ve tried is “Walk and Talk” which is a massive win on all of the Five Ways to Wellbeing for those who are basically able bodied and not shielding.

Encouraging someone to go out for their exercise walk at the same time as I do is far more likely to result in someone leaving the house than “You should go for a walk, it will make you feel better”. So, we put on our shoes together, and leave the house. We are socialising and walking together on opposite sides of the city, but I will talk about what

I can see, what I can hear, who I can see. If they see a neighbour I will encourage them to wave from a distance and say hello (I will constantly reiterate that the other person may not have spoken to a soul in days either, and they could have helped them by making their day in a small and significant way). I will get them to teach me something, and I will (attempt) to do the same – the name of a flower or bird, something about the local area – get them to talk about their favourite place to walk, reminisce on good memories and make plans for the future on where they will go back to when they are able to. After a 15 minute walk, they will hopefully have

- Connected (with their environment and their community and me)
- Be Active (they have left the house for a walk in the fresh air)
- Keep Learning (share knowledge and experiences)
- Give (say hello or wave through the window to another isolated person)
- Take Notice (look at the world around them - it is still there!)

People report feeling so much better for doing these things and makes the call far more than a chat (not that I am talking down chatting – it is most of what I do!)

It is a very simple approach, and won't work for everyone but I enjoy the calls more, and there is no limit to what you can do – I am baking bread with a lady who has never done it tomorrow, and am still looking for someone to help me with the crossword out of the newspaper (or I have a puzzle book here if someone is unable to go out, so I can post one out).

You can do ANYTHING according to what a person likes to do, and makes them feel better, which is the whole point of the personalised and holistic nature of The Ripple Effect.

Thank you to Janet Browse and the Ripple Effect for sharing her learning log with us and enabling us to produce this ABiS Learning Bite.

Age Better in Sheffield

152 Rockingham Street

Sheffield

S1 4EB

www.agebettersheff.co.uk