



What is it like to be a Grief Support Worker?



Thank you for wanting to find out more about training to become a volunteer Grief Support Worker with Balloons!

We are always on the lookout for volunteers to join our fantastic team of Grief Support Workers – with your help we can reach more children and young people in our area.

Volunteering is a really rewarding experience and we would support you fully through your journey. We provide training, support and supervision, ongoing CPD opportunities, social and peer support from other volunteers and cover all expenses.

But don't just take it from us – here are a few stories from some of our Grief Support Workers to give you a bit more insight.

Why I volunteered with Balloons

I first thought about volunteering with Balloons nearly a year ago when I was approaching “retirement”. I saw this as an opportunity to focus on doing interesting things and experience less pressure – basically I was looking for more fun and less stress, while hopefully being a bit helpful along the way. I know the value of a bit of well-timed individual attention, and how difficult it can be for bereaved young people to find appropriate support, so Balloons seemed like a worthwhile option to explore.

After some basic preliminaries, I was accepted for the autumn term training. I found myself part of a small group of enthusiastic people, from varied walks of life (health, education, engineering...) spending our Tuesdays being taken through the Balloons training programme, skilfully facilitated by Balloons trainer, Donna.

We looked at theoretical, practical and personal aspects of grief and bereavement, and were introduced to the way Balloons works. This is usually through one-to-one work with children and young people using age-appropriate art and craft work, stories, work sheets and exercises to enable conversations about their experiences, memories, feelings, challenges, hopes and dreams.

The training provides the framework and after completing the training, I was allocated my first child. Yes, it felt daunting, but summoning my courage I set off for the school... and six weeks later I completed my first piece of work, still in one piece and feeling happy that the young person had had the opportunity she wanted to talk about issues around the death of her mum with someone outside the family setting. She had a few new coping strategies and a bit of a plan for moving forwards. Is everything resolved in her life? No, but she has taken a few more steps on her journey, and had someone to walk those steps alongside her, encouraging her natural resilience and reinforcing her strengths and self-confidence.

Would I recommend volunteering with Balloons? The answer is a resounding YES. The staff team are available, supportive and encouraging. The waiting list is unfortunately pretty long, so gaining more volunteers is vital! The volunteers are an eclectic group, with a common interest, who meet regularly to exchange experiences about the work, eat cake and generally enjoy sharing ideas. I've made new friends, learned new skills and am looking forward to getting to know child number two.

Friends on a journey

I had worked overseas for 30 years and wanted to do some volunteering here, preferably with children. I saw an advert and applied to Balloons, and started my training in 2018. Amongst many other things, I learned to be a better listener!

I am comfortable talking about grief. My daughter died in a bus crash in Ecuador when she was 19, so I have firsthand experience. The children we work with would normally turn to close adults for support, but they themselves are grief stricken, so an outside person is invaluable. Everyone grieves so differently. It's a very special privilege to walk alongside someone on their grief journey, just for a short time.

I've enjoyed the variety of children I've worked with, and what's been lovely is that I've been to schools all over our region in Devon to meet the children in their familiar setting. It's important that the school provides a private space for us to work without interruption.

I am also involved with offering pre-bereavement support. Whilst different from our usual grief support work, it is still child led and we find the children are often worried about practical details. We try to answer their questions clearly and honestly and prepare them as best we can for the death of a loved one.

In our first sessions we come with an open mind and see what is important for that individual child. Sometimes we work with the child to find a way to mark the death of their loved ones. This is especially important when there has been a 'Pure' cremation where there was no service for the child to attend. We might suggest the child could decorate a candle, or maybe decorate some biscuits or write their loved one a letter. Something that can take the place of the ritual of a funeral and gives the child a sense of closure.

Sometimes, if they have strong feelings of anger, we teach them breathing exercises or other strategies that can help them manage their emotions. We encourage them to draw and express their feelings of anger on one side of a pillowcase and then express their happy memories and feelings on the other. We suggest they cuddle up to the happy side and pummel the angry side to get their negative feelings out in a physical but safe way.

In my experience, children are incredibly good at making their own strategies for coping with challenges and difficult situations. I once helped a child write a letter to her teachers explaining to them what support she did and did not need from them.

I try to leave children with the sense that it's ok not to know something - as no one knows everything.

My biggest challenge is when a child doesn't want to talk. I bring along stories and jenga to play in early sessions –the children enjoy smashing it down and it creates a chance for them to get the measure of me. For some children it isn't the right time for the support –grief can render them speechless. I always make sure the child and school know that they can come back to Balloons in the future when they feel ready.

My greatest joy is when I sit by each child in the last session looking back at everything we've done together! Hopefully I have been a supportive friend on a small part of their journey and we can say goodbye very positively.

I consider my time volunteering for Balloons is the most worthwhile part of my week!



My heart goes out

When I was a primary school teacher (I'm now retired) a child in my class went to Balloons sessions. He always returned to class smiling, more at ease, brighter. It was a powerful impression that stuck with me.

When I retired I wanted to be helpful, so I applied to Balloons. We then went into lockdown and I did my training on zoom.

The work is so rewarding for me. I like going into schools and it's such a privilege to work with these young people and give them help and support on their journey.

It's uplifting. During the 5 to 6 weeks of sessions the children relax and it gives them the opportunity to work things out. I have empathy for the children, as I have been through grief myself. I feel for them and I want to do whatever I can to help and support them. I feel I am doing something positive which will help them in the future. The activities we do enables them to explore their feelings and emotions and then gives them strategies to help them cope.

You might be helping them with their anxiety, or anger, or low self esteem. You validate their feelings and provide them with the opportunity to talk about their grief and the person they have lost.

I feel very supported by Balloons as an organisation; they are so professional and so lovely. There is always someone to talk things through with.

I put a lot of pressure on myself to do a good job and do the right thing. I put a lot of preparation into the sessions to be able to be flexible and follow the child's needs.

Sometimes in the first session the child doesn't want to talk about the person who has died, so I talk about making a memory box and the possibility of putting in some photos. At the next session they have often brought in a photo and then start to talk about this person.

It's important to have some lightness in the sessions as well, often by playing games – snakes and ladders usually goes down well. At the end of the sessions we have a celebration – looking forward and reflecting on what they've achieved.

In my experience the sessions are usually an uplifting experience for them. We show them how to work through their emotions. Taking things home that they've made helps to facilitate a conversation with their families. They see that they can cope and are more able talk about their grief and the person that has died. It creates a space where they can open up and ask questions.

I think about them all and my heart goes out them.



The colour green

I trained with Balloons in 2016. I am a former nurse and midwife and latterly spent 17yrs volunteering at Hospiscare. Donna, a member of staff from Balloons came to give a presentation and I was deeply touched and drawn to the Charity and its work. My daughter died just before she was four and I had no bereavement support - I was terribly affected by her death, so I fully appreciated the importance of the work of Balloons.

And what a team I've joined! The staff and trustees are wonderful in so many ways and are very values driven. The staff are always available and most supportive to us, their Grief Support Worker Volunteers. Within a natural compassion they build reflection into the charity's work, always striving to make things better. An innovative outlook is core. After the conclusion of each case I have supervision and am given space to explore and share my own reflections on the sessions. This is most important and feels very supportive and informative.

As a volunteer, personally I feel very privileged to be supporting these children and young people during a very difficult time in their young lives. I loved the training; it was very in-depth and I continue to enjoy learning and hoping to make a difference. I usually spend the first session getting to know and understand the child or young person, by building rapport and trust. The focus of the work is to listen, and reflect back to the child in their words, so they know they are truly heard.

Grief is a unique experience for everyone. I feel language is very important and tone of voice. I use honesty in such words as 'dying' and 'death' rather than the confusion of euphemism. I like to think I am helping to emotionally refuel these children and young people, as they often don't understand the confusion of their feelings and emotions after the death of a loved one.

Colour comes into the children's conversations a lot: for one child everything was about 'green' which was his late dad's favourite colour. When we did any craftwork, he always wanted to incorporate green pens and materials in this. It was a very important link to this cherished relationship, his memories and means of expression.

I am only able to work with each case for a limited time and need to trust that my intervention is positive, helpful, comforting, and empowering. My hope is that it will serve these children and young people well in the future. It would be lovely to follow through with each case as the months go by, but there is naturally a need to move on and let go, and that can be hard. There is always another child or young person on the waiting list. They are given a quilt at the end of the sessions, generously and lovingly donated by the Linus Project. These bring great comfort to so many.

Volunteering for Balloons has been the biggest privilege and joy. There's something special about this wonderful Charity, volunteers, staff and trustees, it's quite some team. How worthwhile it is to know that so many benefit from the simplicity of care and kindness at such a difficult time in their young lives.

Want to know more – email admin@balloonscharity.co.uk for an application pack, or call us on 01392 982570.

