Exploring the needs of hospice shop staff when dealing with a person in distress. Is the SAGE & THYME model appropriate?

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Introduction

SAGE & THYME was introduced to Princess Alice Hospice in 2011 and made available to all staff throughout the organisation. Since then a variety of staff have completed the workshop (see figure 1.). The retail department is vital to our existence providing 12% of our income and representing the hospice in the local community through our 36 outlets.

It became evident in the first few workshops that retail staff frequently encounter distress, particularly with people bringing goods to donate as a result of bereavement connected to the hospice. Because of the nature of the organisations currently licensed to deliver SAGE & THYME, the hospice is unusual in training retail staff with this model.

Aim

The aim of this study is to assess the self-perceived confidence of hospice retail staff when dealing with individuals in distress before and after the SAGE & THYME workshop and therefore to explore the appropriateness of the training model.

Method

Purposeful sampling of retail staff attending a SAGE & THYME workshop identified 8 participants (2 employees, 6 volunteers). They were approached and agreed to two interviews one before the workshop and one after. The semi-structured interviews lasted 20–45 minutes and participants were asked to recount conversations with someone in distress.

After transcribing, the interviews were analysed and interactions classified according to Heron's six category interventions as Prescriptive, Informatice, Confronting, Cathartic, Catalytic or Supportive. The data was examined for emerging themes, these related to the influences on the interaction, the circumstances, the response to distress and the impact on the participants.

Results discussion

Influences on the interactions related to the personal and professional history of the participant. A significant number mentioned personal experience of family bereavement leading to involvement with the hospice. Three participants felt that previous professional experience had equipped them to deal with distress.

The circumstances of the interactions recalled were often related to the emotional attachment of donors to the goods brought to the shop and the difficulty in parting with them. Three participants reported that they have ‘regulars’ who come to the shop, often donating several items at a time or stopping to talk when shopping. These conversations were frequently related to illness and bereavement.

Participants described giving practical help such as a glass of water or tissues for distressed people and responding using instinct. The participants reported feeling inadequate on occasions while some felt satisfied that they had return visits. Following the workshops the participants reported a greater willingness to engage distressed people in conversation and a greater confidence in listening to distress.

Success of the model

The SAGE & THYME® model provides a structured approach to using foundation level communication skills. It was developed by clinical staff at the University Hospital of South Manchester NHS Foundation Trust. It is suitable to be used by any member of staff (e.g. secretary, clerk, nurse, doctor, volunteer, social worker, or student) for anyone who is distressed or concerned.

SAGE & THYME is a mnemonic which guides the person in and out of a conversation with someone who is distressed, providing structure to encourage the worker to hold back with advice and prompting the concerned person to consider their own solutions.

The model is taught in a three hour workshop for up to 30 participants using three licensed facilitators and a variety of teaching methods.

There are currently over 40 organisations in the UK who have a licence to run workshops including NHS organisations, hospices and universities.

Conclusion

The participants of this study are hospice retail staff. They have a wealth of professional and personal experience to guide them in supporting people in distress. The hospice shop is seen by some donors or customers as a place to receive informal support from the organisation and as such the effectiveness of our staff is crucial to our continued good reputation and community support. Heron (2001) describes three types of helping; contaminated (where the helper’s own emotion and agenda interferes with the helping), natural (usually clean and clear but with occasional slips into helper’s agenda) and a more advanced level (where the helper is aware of the potential of interference with the interaction and can correct this). Heron (2001) believes that the natural helping is prevalent in our culture.

The results of this study indicate a shift in the interactions from informative and prescriptive to catalytic and supportive, suggesting the helping is more focussed on the distressed person rather than the helper. This demonstrates a more advanced, less contaminated interaction. The stated aim of the SAGE & THYME model is to facilitate the helper to encourage the distressed person to regain control and to be supported in arriving at their own solutions.

This suggests that the model is appropriate for retail staff working in situations where they encounter distress and find themselves in a helping relationship as a result of association with an organisation known for its caring ethos.


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