

Mental HEALTH &

Wellbeing

Part 1

Our Frontline offers mental health and bereavement support for NAFD members

In December, as part of National Grief Awareness Week, the NAFD launched its partnership with Our Frontline, a collaboration of leading mental health organisations, which have come together to provide a single service to support the millions of key workers who are putting their mental health under pressure as they form 'our frontline' against COVID-19.

The partnership offers valuable mental health and bereavement support for NAFD members and client families across the coming months.

Our Frontline comprises Samaritans, Mind, Shout 85258 and Hospice UK, supported by The Royal Foundation. It provides round-the-clock one-to-one

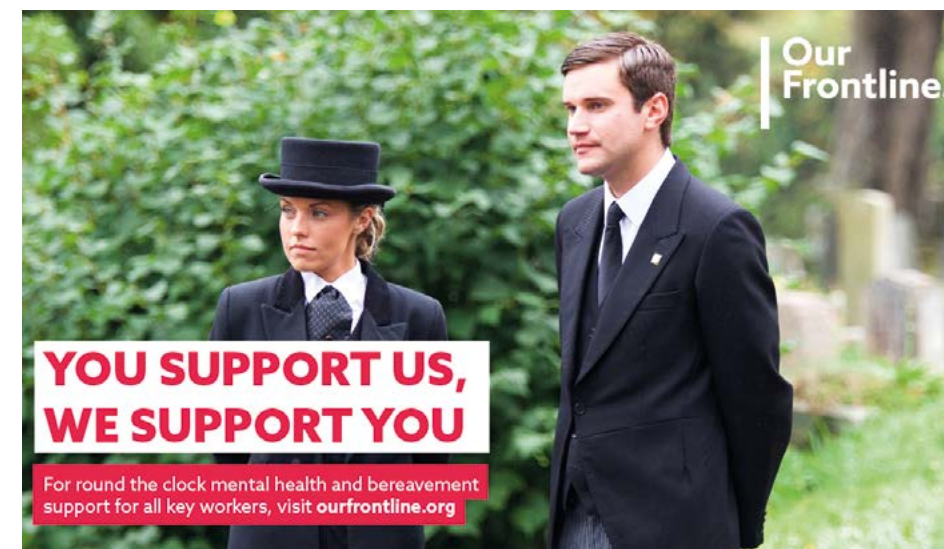
support to frontline workers, including funeral service staff, who are part of the national response to the coronavirus. The service provided offers mental health and bereavement support by call or text, and tailored online resources to suit the individual.

By combining their services, the partners in Our Frontline aim to offer practical, non-judgemental support with problems ranging from feeling overwhelmed or stressed through to coping with the bereavement of a colleague or family member. This support is important right now. But it will be equally critical in the months ahead, as the pandemic draws to a close, to make sure that the UK

rebuilds and recovers the mental health of our frontline workers, alongside our economy and communities.

To help launch the support for funeral firms, NAFD member Walter C Parson, based in Devon, kindly provided this image of team members Harriet and John – and we would like to thank them very much for their support.

You can find out more at ourfrontline.org. If you do benefit from their support and feel comfortable sharing your experience, please contact us at editor@nafd.org.uk as we would love to hear from you.



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For example, most people have access to a medicine cabinet at home and, if we have an upset tummy, a cut finger, a headache or a sore throat, then we don't think twice about going to the cabinet and looking for something that we know will help us.

In the same way, I encourage people to think about the tools that they have that can support their mental health and wellbeing. For me, it could be going outside for some fresh air for a walk, or an early night, because I know that, for me, the hours before midnight are worth twice as much as the ones after. I have also cut down on alcohol, because although it makes me relax at that moment, I know that it impacts on my sleep

and the symptoms of the menopause. For other people, it might be music that makes them feel good, phoning a friend or snuggling up with a good book or movie.

We are all different, and different things will help us all, but it is important to know when we need to access our coping mechanisms and try and ensure that we access healthy and helpful ones. Even when we are rushed off our feet, we can always take 60 seconds to just do some breathing or calming exercises that can make a big difference in the moment, especially those people that can feel their anxiety rising.

Business owners need to be in tune with what their staff need. As a minimum, I would recommend that members of the management team are trained as mental health first aiders, so they have a clear understanding of mental health and how it can impact people at work. It also sends out a clear message that they are taking the wellbeing of their staff seriously and want to help.

At Rosedale we have mental health first aiders available for staff to speak to, and we send out regular reminders of the help lines that people can call to ask for help or support. Through the last lockdown, we did a virtual walking challenge that encouraged us all to get outside and walking, no matter what the weather. We logged our miles each day and, initially, we tried to get from John O'Groats to Land's End in four weeks, but the challenge was so well supported that we ended up having a staff member row us over the channel and we carried on walking across Europe! We sent weekly postcards from each country we visited and gave everyone who took part a little goody bag at the end of it. Loads of people said they walked loads more as a result of the challenge,

Part 2

A funeral director's perspective

By Anne Beckett Allen,
NAFD Tutor Rosedale Funeral
Home, East Anglia





“
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and I know I did. It gave us something positive to focus on and united us all in a really special way.

I feel a really important piece of learning for the funeral profession is that we have all pulled together and have proved just how resilient we are, but we do need to care for ourselves and each other as well.

I came across some information about geese in a book I was reading by Rob Parsons at Care for the Family, and I think in many ways the funeral profession has to be like geese. When geese migrate, they fly in a V-shaped formation and, in doing so, they add at least 70% more to their flying range than if flying alone as, when each bird

flaps its wings, it creates an uplift for the bird immediately following it.

When a bird falls out of the formation, they feel the drag and resistance of trying to go it alone and then quickly get back into formation to take advantage of the lift from the bird in front. They all take turns in being the lead, knowing innately that no individual can lead the whole time, so they really do work as a team.

And when a goose gets sick or wounded and falls out of formation, two or three others also fall out of the formation and stay with it to lend help and protection until it is either able to fly again or it dies. Only then do they launch out on their own, or join another formation to catch up with their group.

These geese show us the ultimate team work and we can learn a lot from their example: people who share a common direction and sense of community can get where they are going much more quickly and easily, as they travel on the thrust of each other’s efforts.

So, if we have as much sense as a goose, we will stay in formation and stand by each other when danger threatens. I am pretty sure they never feel fed up at having to fly there and back each year either, having a willingness to get on and do what needs to be done with grace, and also with apparent ease.

Geese are my new inspiration, and all migrating birds have a renewed level of respect from me.

There are two of our services that I would like to draw your attention to. We are delivering a mental health first aid course in Norfolk, in January, and will run others if there is sufficient interest from funeral homes. We are also delivering training for funeral professionals to ensure they have the knowledge and skills they need to support a family bereaved through suicide. There is much fear that the suicide rates are going to rise again, and business owners need to make sure their staff are supported to offer the very best service that they can. You can find out more at www.rosedaletraining.co.uk.

A professional counsellor’s perspective

Catherine Betley,
Professional Help Limited

We know that funeral directors and their staff have been severely tested by the pandemic. Their ways of working have had to undergo fundamental changes, meaning they could not offer the full service they would normally take such pride in - rather than ‘we’ll do everything we can’ to give families the send-off they want for their loved one, the conversation has had to cover all the things they couldn’t do.

What’s more, they have likely been exceptionally busy over the last few months, leaving them at greater risk of the effects of stress and burnout. Some of the obvious signs include exhaustion and irritability, but also look out for feelings of being detached or numb, withdrawing from loved ones, and physical manifestations such as headaches, high blood pressure and IBS.

With the second wave of the pandemic unfortunately well underway, funeral directors may feel they barely had chance to draw breath after the first one and, coupled with the usual challenges of the winter months, it can be easy to feel there is no end in sight. That is why it is especially important to take care of yourselves at this stage. In terms of advice for self-care it will come as no surprise that we recommend the usual things like getting enough sleep, regular daylight (especially in the mornings), light exercise, taking care of diet and resisting relying on caffeine or self-medicating with alcohol.

All those things can be easier said than done, of course, when you’re exceptionally busy and working in a high-pressure environment, day in day out. Having an outlet for stress, even for small periods of time each day - whether that is a chat with a friend, a short burst of exercise or getting lost in a book or TV for half an hour - can make a big difference. Try, also, to limit exposure to the pandemic outside of work, eg minimise time watching news channels or following related stories on social media. You are in the thick of it already; remaining mentally on the front line even when you’re not at work gives you no break.

Although it’s wise to minimise exposure to media coverage of the pandemic if you can, don’t try to deny or suppress difficult feelings that arise from your work. Some funeral professionals worry that admitting that things have been a struggle might expose weakness but, on the contrary, it is more likely to build resilience.

Your feelings, having been on the front line of this pandemic for several months, might take you by surprise and even appear to be contradictory: for example, on the one hand you might feel pleased and proud to be playing an important role in this time of national crisis, on the other hand you might feel exhausted, resentful and want to hide away. You might be experiencing feelings of guilt or even shame about all the things you haven’t been able to do in the course of your job, through

no fault of your own - this is a perfectly normal response, but it can be painful if you try to keep it to yourself.

Teams with a culture of open communication, where regular ‘debriefs’ are the norm and there is peer-to-peer support, tend to fare better in the face of extreme events.

Managers can even help by offering a positive reframing of the crisis, where it is reflected on and learned from, as opposed to being a traumatic event better forgotten. Research has shown that, in the aftermath of previous large-scale traumatic events such as terrorist incidents or massive accidents, many frontline responders and professionals involved have even been found to experience ‘traumatic growth’, where something positive has been learned or gained – though it may take some time and a period of reflection before that becomes apparent.

Open conversation and active monitoring of staff and colleagues enables quick identification of those who might need a little more help, and signposting to appropriate organisations for support.

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