

### **Three final letters**

I wish to end this thesis with three letters. These letters are a way of presenting my findings and recommendations that is congruent with a narrative approach.

The first is to emergency workers – police, paramedics and others who are likely to be the first responders to those bereaved by suicide. One of the key areas that participants and I hope to influence are the ways that first responders engage with those who have been bereaved by suicide. As a way of conveying the ideas and suggestions from this research, I have crafted a letter – on behalf of the women who participated in the research and myself – in the hope of influencing future first response practices.

The second letter is written for future insider researchers to show how the insider feminist methodology of this study has contributed new knowledge, and to provide company and ideas to future insider research projects. One of my hopes for this project has been to further legitimise insider feminist research. Two of the underpinnings of feminist research are placing women participants at the centre of the inquiry and contributing to beneficial social change for women (Fine, 2007; Lather, 2007; Oakley, 1981). As such, my research wasn't just a retelling of stories; it was a political project intended to create positive change. I drew on a feminist poststructuralist approach to explore options that might break from, revise or embrace societal norms and judgements for those transitioning through widowhood after the suicide of a partner.

The final letter is addressed to the women who were participants and who made this research possible. I have chosen not to write a traditional summary to conclude this thesis. Instead, I want to close with this letter to the participants, which emphasises feminist understandings of collaboration, care, partnership, love, passion and the value of contributing on behalf of others.

#### **A letter to first responders**

*To emergency workers – police, paramedics and other first responders,*

*As first responders, you have an incredibly important role to play in instances of suicide. One of our primary hopes for this research is to pass on our knowledges to help you better care for the bereaved. The women participants in this research wish to share with you their*

*heartfelt advice. First though, we need to let you know that we appreciate the skills that you bring with you as first responders. We also want to acknowledge how difficult it must be to regularly confront situations of suicide. We hope you receive whatever support you need.*

*We also hope that, one day, in order for the bereaved to be able to come to terms with their new reality, you as first responders receive appropriate training in relation to the ongoing effects of historical stigmatising attitudes towards suicide in order to not marginalise the bereaved.*

*The following points reflect our personal experiences with first responders:*

- *Please do not brush us off as the most significant thing in our lives has just occurred.*
- *Please think about pastoral care. It would be ideal to have someone with lived experience accompany you to be with the bereaved.*
- *If you are a male first responder attending to a woman who has just lost her male partner to suicide, please be mindful of power relations and language. For example, please don't refer to us as hysterical.*
- *Some of us did not appreciate first responders interrogating and implicating us in the suicide.*
- *Some of us appreciated first responders sitting with us, supporting us and not leaving us alone.*
- *Please make clear the process in relation to where the body will be taken and what will happen next.*
- *Organise follow-up: perhaps a person with lived experience to call and check in with the bereaved. Please provide us with local referrals for support.*
- *It is so important to us that you take care of our loved ones' bodies, and we really appreciate communication about the overall situation as it makes a difference.*
- *We need to be asked how we would like to say goodbye to our partner. Some of us might want to see the body and hold their hand; some of us might not wish too.*

*Some of us would like the opportunity to speak with you first responders and share our knowledge to make it easier on people who have lost a loved one to suicide. There is a need for local community forums to bring together people with lived experience, frontline workers and people with a range of perspectives to discuss ways to maintain the rights and autonomy of those in crisis.*

*Local community discussions that bring together frontline workers and those they care for could be instrumental in bringing about change for bereaved families.*

*We hope this might be possible.*

*Thank you for reading our letter.*

*In good faith,*

*Marnie Sather*

This letter re-presents some of the original contributions to knowledge from this research into a practical format that I look forward to sharing with first responders. It is hoped that this will lead to greater care in the immediate aftermath of a suicide.

### **A letter to future insider researchers**

*Dear future lived experience/insider researchers,*

*It is with great excitement that I am writing to you.*

*I am picturing you as someone with lived experience of a particular topic that you are now seeking to research.*

*Valuing lived experience in research is not a new phenomenon; Indigenous researchers and consumers of mental health services have a long history of standing up to prejudice and discrimination and using their own experiences to guide and transform research. The University of Melbourne, over a decade ago, was the first to establish a lived experience academic role. This role still exists, and subsequent research into this position has provided the impetus for further development at other academic institutions (Byrne, 2017).*

*When I started my research at The University of Melbourne, I did not know the degree to which I would be able to include my own experience, but I was fortunate to be given the opportunity to create a research project with women who, like me, had lost their partner to suicide.*

*One of the things I'd like to convey to you is how important it was for me to consult with 'insider practitioners'. Through my work as a narrative therapist, I was introduced by Cheryl White (Director of Dulwich Centre) to colleagues in Palestine and Rwanda who provided me*

*with invaluable advice. I was able to consult with these colleagues who had been through horrific experiences that were similar to those of the people they consulted with. Wael Dawabsha in Palestine served time in an Israeli prison and now counsels men who have been in a similar situation. When I asked him about this, he said his insider experience spared the men having to give all the details of what happened to them, as there was a shared understanding. This shared understanding brought visibility, connection, solidarity and a 'place to be known' (W. Dawabsha, personal communication, July 2018).*

*Ibuka is the Rwandan national genocide survivors' association. Their counsellors were survivors of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi and their work involves supporting other survivors. An Ibuka counsellor said, 'Sometimes we share our own experiences in ways that make it possible for other survivors to speak' (as quoted in Denborough, 2010, p. 7). When I spoke to Adelite Mukamana<sup>1</sup> who was the head of the Ibuka counselling team, she offered significant ideas for working with people who share the counsellor's 'problems of memory':*

- *It's important to create some distance from the 'problems of memory'.*
- *Make sure you get home to tend to your own families and do the homework and mealtime.*
- *Keep in mind that making contributions to others' lives is a form of 'collective healing' and will not kill you (A. Mukamana, personal communication, November 2020).*

*Although Wael Dawabsha and Adelite Mukamana were speaking to me from their perspectives as insider or peer counsellors (not researchers), their advice has been profoundly influential to me throughout this research project.*

*The research of Kristina Lainson (2020), an insider researcher and narrative practitioner, also lit the way for me. She described how her research about enduring anorexia was*

*inevitably influenced by my own insider knowledge and experience that I have sought to neither escape nor privilege, thus offering a narratively informed insider-practitioner-researcher interpretation. (Lainson, 2020, p. 320)*

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<sup>1</sup> Adelite Mukamana was in her early twenties when, as a newly qualified psychologist, she found herself in the position of coordinating a team of equally young and inexperienced colleagues to support survivors of the Rwandan genocide.

*The writings of Wilkinson and Kitzinger (2013) have also been influential as they describe how sharing one's experiences when working from a feminist perspective helps to create:*

- *nuanced, rich alternative stories*
- *co-created knowledge*
- *passion and wisdom*
- *rapport.*

*To develop rapport, I shared parts of my story as a way to link our interwoven stories and generate new possibilities. I spoke about experiences and stories that had felt unspeakable to offer a scaffold for the participants. I also briefly revealed my personal story to participants in the invitation, and women responded well to this. One woman said:*

*You are probably the only person I have ever talked to about how it felt being at the park where my husband died. I have talked about going, but I have never talked about how it felt.*

*Another participant said:*

*I knew straight away I wanted to share my story; [that] you are willing to share your experience put me totally at ease to share mine. I felt reassured. We are both mothers and you shared with me so that just made me feel comfortable.*

*A third participant said:*

*Your words are to the point, factual yet not clinical. Honest without being patronising. I also appreciated how you shared your experiences without it being about 'you' as the central person.*

*I believe what these women are describing is the value of feminist insider research.*

*I also want to convey to you my keen interest in the ethics of self-care. At times during this project, I thought about the words of Audre Lorde: 'Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare' (Lorde, 2017, p. 130). As lived experience researchers, we need to explore how we want to conduct ourselves in relation to agentic self-care.*

*Researchers with our own lived experience may well continue to experience challenging times. I confess there were times I felt tremendous shame, and struggled to consider myself a legitimate researcher. Prior to speaking to the women who were the participants, I could not have anticipated the challenges that would arise for me at times during the interviews and in*

*reading the transcripts. I was prepared for the conversations to be profound and distressing at times, but I had not factored in that they could cause me to 'relive' certain parts of my story. I became aware that after some of the interviews that my body would become cold. This occurs when I am reliving traumatic experiences. What helps me in these moments is to reach out to someone who knows my history or to look after myself in ways that I know will be comforting. I realised early on that I needed time to myself after these tender interviews and to have support in place. I felt it necessary to call a colleague after each interview, not to speak about the content of the interview but to reset my day. Initially, I booked interviews day after day. I subsequently learnt it was more beneficial to stagger the timing of the interviews.*

*I believe it is an ethical requirement for us as insider researchers to maintain existing supports such as supervisors, colleagues and, where appropriate, counselling. It was also important to keep my family involved in the process.*

*One of the other insider researchers who I sought out to speak with was a fellow PhD candidate, J. Lewis. We discovered we shared the experience that, irrespective of the support we had received from our supervisors, it was complex to speak of 'reliving experiences' during the candidature. Lewis spoke for the both of us when she said, 'I do not want them to know how hot the potato is, because they might drop me' (J. Lewis, personal communication, August 3, 2020).*

*It was so sustaining to talk with J. Lewis that I urge you to explore peer mentoring as an invaluable component to supporting your research. One of my hopes after completing this thesis is to contribute to peer mentoring for insider researchers – to provide a place where everything can be spoken without researchers risking their academic reputations.*

*I do want to acknowledge how much work is required! And how significant it can be to take stock and celebrate milestones along the way. I found inspiration in observing other students reaching their milestones. The University of Melbourne also provided places of retreat and opportunities to take time out in libraries, gardens and writing bootcamps.*

*Finally, what sustained me throughout this project was keeping in the forefront of my mind the reason I set out to complete this PhD. The aim was to contribute to others in my situation and to make my husband and children proud. Many of the participants confirmed that their partners would have been proud of their contributions to this project.*

*I urge you to never forget what inspired you to initiate your lived experience research. With respect,*

*Marnie Sather*

### **A final letter: To the women who were participants**

*Dear all,*

*Your words, stories and commitment to this project enabled the historic contributions we are making to practice and to theoretical understandings in the field of suicide bereavement, particularly our part in elevating the experiences of children, who are so precious to all of us, whether we have biological children or not.*

*There are so many things that you wrote and said that stood out to me and kept my spirit strong when finishing this thesis. You all contributed to this study and we will find ways to circulate the knowledge we generated together. I include here some of the reflections that you shared with me about the project:*

*I could not put the chapters down. Now, so many people can know what I went through. [It ] brought a lot to the surface about my lack of support. I can now have compassion for myself.*

*I hope this study has empowered so many bereaved women.*

*I love how we gave the children a voice, as they have been left behind.*

*It had me reflecting about the friendships I have lost due to the stigma of suicide. I felt lucky to have some people around me.*

*This project validated every single experience and emotion I went through. I now know I wasn't 'going mad'.*

*From reading this I have changed my perspective; I am now going to cry if I want to cry. I am going to be kinder to myself.*

*I stayed up reading our work. I passed the chapters on to my mom and want to pass it on to my friend who supported me on that terrible night of my partner's passing.*

*Making the results a collective telling protects women against individual comparisons.*

*Finally, my story is validated. Thank you.*

*I had an out of body experience. I was reading my part about first responders and I thought 'Oh my God that poor woman', and then I realised it was me. I cried for me.*

*Reading this has given new breath to a much-loved series of forgotten memories.*

*I feel very honoured to be part of this.*

*I was taken aback when a participant acknowledged that this 'must be an emotional roller coaster ride for you too'.*

*Collectively, we stood together. Although we are all vastly different, each one of us has our own unique lived experience of bereavement through suicide. And now, what we have learnt from these experiences will be available to others.*

*As one of you so powerfully stated:*

*As women, we are doing this work collaboratively, trying to build an inclusive community that understands suicide. There is also nuanced variations; we have all got different stories. This research says here is what we have got to say to the community! We are hoping that our knowledge might help because there's not a big body of knowledge out there.*

*With thanks,*

*Marnie*



