

[Skip to main content](#)

University links

University links

For staff

- [For Staff](#)
- [Services A-Z](#)
- [Student Education Service](#)

For students

- [Minerva](#)
- [Mobile app](#)
- [For Students](#)

Faculties

- [Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Cultures](#)
- [Faculty of Biological Sciences](#)
- [Faculty of Business](#)
- [Faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences](#)
- [Faculty of Environment](#)
- [Faculty of Medicine and Health](#)
- [Faculty of Social Sciences](#)
- [Lifelong Learning Centre](#)
- [Language Centre](#)

Other

- [Staff A-Z](#)
- [Campus map](#)
- [Jobs](#)
- [Alumni](#)
- [Contacts](#)
- [Library](#)
- [IT](#)
- [VideoLeeds](#)
- [Leeds University Union](#)

Follow us

- [Facebook](#)
- [Twitter](#)
- [YouTube](#)
- [LinkedIn](#)
- [Instagram](#)
- [Medium](#)
- [Weibo](#)
- [The Conversation](#)
- [RSS news feed](#)

Close quicklinks

Search Destination

[Living With Dying](#)

- [Home](#)
 - [Home](#)
- [Blog](#)
- [Family Historians](#)
 - [Family Historians](#)
 - [Workshop: Family history and academic history](#)
- [Leeds General Cemetery](#)
- ['Remembrance' Exhibition](#)
 - ['Remembrance' Exhibition](#)
 - [Events Programme](#)
- [The Grief Series](#)

1. [Home](#)
2. [Blog](#)
3. Caring for our collaborators and ourselves in public engagement

Caring for our collaborators and ourselves in public engagement

Category

[The Grief Series](#)

Date

Monday 15 October 2018



Jessica Hammett (University of Leeds) with Ellie Harrison (The Grief Series)

This blog post is about how we care for our participants and how we care for ourselves when we do public engagement work, especially when we are researching difficult topics; in the case of this project death, grief and remembrance. Working with Ellie Harrison, artist and creator of [The Grief Series](#) has been inspirational for us. We recently collaborated with Ellie on the [Journey with Absent Friends](#), a month long pilgrimage with an art-filled caravan called Perle to sites of personal significance for Ellie. She has written about her care strategies, developed over a decade of working on grief:

In The Grief Series the process of participant care is bespoke to each project, but there are threads running through. In order to genuinely care for an audience it isn't enough to say it, it has to be woven into the fabric of the piece. With a subject as emotive and difficult as death and bereavement you can't just launch straight in, you have to first remove factors that cause anxiety and establish trust. The environment is key to foster comfort and trust. A mountaineer I met said 'The art of adventure is travelling safely in dangerous places' which is a mantra I have kept close for working on The Grief Series. You don't just ask someone to jump off a

mountain and hope that the bungee cord you've provided is secure. You train, you consider, you test in a safe environment, you make sure you have the right tools to hand. So when talking about death what is the equivalent of a safety helmet and harness?

One key thing is make the distinction between something that is therapeutic and therapy. Cooking, going for a run, going to the pub with friends might all be therapeutic but it's not the same as seeing a qualified counsellor. That's why we signpost counselling and support services as part of the artworks. In our grief party bags, along with a slice of rosemary cake during the Meal with Absent Friends, on a carousel topped with a golden horse in The Unfair.

To gift people agency over their experience I'm always looking to create spaces that are visually beautiful and interesting to attract people. I'm drawn to the everyday things that trigger memory or engagement. To places that feel in some way familiar. A hotel. A funfair. A caravan that evokes childhood holidays. I want to create a welcoming environment and consider not just what an audience see but what they smell taste and touch. Interior designer Ilse Crawford said that 'Empathy is the cornerstone of design' and each element of the worlds I create is scrutinised for its textural impact, its functionality and how it makes the user feel.

Next comes structures for participation. I'm looking for something with enough structure to feel like a clear invitation, but enough freedom for people to express themselves. Prompt cards are used and the pace and direction is dictated very much by the participant: the person can go as slowly as they'd like or navigate themselves into safer territory by moving on quickly. Prompt cards were used in What is Left? as a strategy to generate audio interviews that were related in theme but not formulaic, and participants could choose questions from a range of options. In The Unfair they were transformed to create an 'Angry Jenga' set with prompts to consider if anger was always a negative emotion. The prompt cards were first developed in The Reservation as a story swap and we took it in turns to share our stories, breaking down hierarchies between facilitator and participant. The content of the prompts is different for each project but the tool is the same, and multiple choice is a tried and tested way of working.

We also have strategies in place to care for the team, such as Daily 'Check Ins' at the start and/or end of the day where people can discuss how they feel in a structured environment. These have taken different forms: for one project it was a meal and 'Check In' at the start of the day and a drink and a decompress at the end of the twelve hour day. As well as talking, we've used a numbering system so that people can number their feelings out of ten instead of having to talk about something painful or go into why they feel that way.

Ellie is doing ground breaking work on participant care and self-care in the arts, and many of these strategies could be used just as productively within academia. Indeed, in some ways these strategies for participant care connect to and extend oral history methodologies where a great deal of attention has been paid to ethical practice and addressing power imbalances. [Lynn Abrams has described](#) how oral history not only records the voice of marginalised individuals and communities, it can also highlight their own interpretations and understandings of their experiences, and has the potential to empower participants to transform their own lives.

These practices are about good ethics, but they also make our work better. Writing in defence of the role of emotions in research, [Kathleen DeMarrais argued that](#), 'careful attention to emotions – our own and others – is essential in quality research', as well as for communicated that research to other people. In Perle the caravan during the *Journey with Absent Friends*, caring for visitors led to more meaningful experiences and conversations, and it also encouraged them to record some beautiful, emotional and revealing stories of grief for our archive.

And yet, despite an increased interest in emotions, it is still reasonably uncommon for historians to put themselves, their experiences and their feelings into their research. We might not aim for objectivity, but there is still a suspicion that our judgement is clouded if we get too close to our research. Auto-ethnography is one field where this divide between the researcher and the research disappears, and it has not been without its critics. In response, [auto-ethnographers Carolyn Ellis, Tony Adams and Arthur Bochner have written about](#) the therapeutic benefits that this methodology can have:

Writing personal stories ... makes "witnessing" possible – the ability for participants and readers to observe and, consequently, better testify on behalf of an event, problem, or experience; writing allows a researcher, an author, to identify other problems that are cloaked in secrecy—e.g., government conspiracy, isolation a person may feel after being diagnosed with an illness, and harmful gender norms. As witnesses, autoethnographers not only work with others to validate the meaning of their pain, but also allow participants and readers to feel validated and/or better able to cope with or want to change their circumstances.

[I recently wrote](#) about the role that Ellie's biography of grief played in creating meaningful visitor experiences on the *Journey with Absent Friends*.

Putting ourselves and our emotions into our research and being open with project participants about our own experiences makes the work better. It builds trust, breaks down hierarchies, and makes the work more meaningful to readers and viewers. But it's not always easy to talk about our own experiences, and just as we create a caring environment for our participants we need to create spaces for self-care where our feelings are acknowledged and validated. This might be particularly difficult in a professional setting for all sorts of reasons, and particularly for early career researchers who seem to be increasingly responsible for this type of work. Ellie's strategies are important here too. We can be aware of support services and self-help strategies (writing a journal, maintaining a work/life balance, and so on), but we can also care for each other through talking about how the research has affected us, holding the space for each other, and by being kind. As Ellie writes: *In order to genuinely care it isn't enough to say it, it has to be woven into the fabric of the project.*

Footer navigation

Site information

- © 2025 University of Leeds, Leeds, LS2 9JT
- [Terms and conditions](#)
- [Copyright](#)
- [Accessibility](#)
- [Privacy](#)