

HONEYSUCKLE FC

EVALUATION REPORT



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NHS
Liverpool Women's
NHS Foundation Trust



Edge Hill
University | Faculty of
Health, Social Care
and Medicine



Foundation
THE CLUB'S OFFICIAL CHARITY

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Thank you to the men who kindly shared their time and views as part of the study.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

In the UK in 2021, 3624 babies were stillborn or died shortly after birth (MBRRACE-UK, 2023). There are a range of bereavement and counselling services offered to families after the death of a baby. However, these services can often focus on support for the woman and bereaved men can be left feeling unsupported. Honeysuckle FC is a group which runs bi weekly for men who have experienced pregnancy loss at any gestation and early neonatal death. The session consists of one hour of talking therapy / peer support with trained professionals who lead an open discussion with prompting questions followed by one hour of football. Honeysuckle FC had been running nearly one year and it was felt important to examine and evaluate the value of the support offered for men following the death of a baby.

Aim of the study

To examine men's experiences of accessing Honeysuckle FC and the self-reported impact of the service on them and their family.

Methods

The study used a sequential mixed method qualitative exploratory design. The data collection was conducted by an external researcher, independent to those delivering Honeysuckle FC. Information was collected using short online open text surveys and a group discussion which explored the insights gained from the survey. The link to the survey and the invitation to join the discussion were sent to all men who had been to a Honeysuckle FC session through the established WhatsApp group.

The data from the online survey were analysed using qualitative content analysis techniques organising the data into codes and themes. These themes underpinned the group discussion. The data from the surveys and discussion were synthesised together.

Findings

Twenty-one men answered the online survey (68% response rate) and ten men took part in the group discussion. Data were organised into four key themes.

“There was nothing out there for me”; a lack of support and a need for, alternative support for men.

Men reported struggling to find bereavement support which met or recognised their need for support. Some men had tried some other types of support such as counselling, but this had not met their need.

“It is a safe space to play football and share with people who understand”; Why Honeysuckle FC works.

The men reported many positive aspects of Honeysuckle FC. The men reported it was a safe space needed which enabled them to share their feelings with men who had “been through the same heartbreak”. The men also reported how football made it easier to build relationships and break down barriers.

“The impacts are astronomical”; the Impact that Honeysuckle FC has.

Men reported multiple positive impacts of attending Honeysuckle FC. These included the positive impacts that they had personally experienced as well as their confidence in discussing their grief, reduced isolation and improved relationships with partners and wider family members.

What worked well and what could be better?

Men reported many positive aspects of attending Honeysuckle FC, including the team approach and the friendly supportive nature of the sessions. They also described a few aspects which could be strengthened such as more support for men attending for the first time and opportunities for partners or wider family members to share the experience.

Conclusion

The study shows that Honeysuckle FC fills a notable gap in the provision of bereavement support to men who have experienced baby loss. The combination of playing football and having a safe space to share feelings with men who had experienced similar life events, made Honeysuckle FC ‘life-saving’ and ‘life-changing’. This sports-based bereavement group offers men unique and valuable connection and support.

Recommendations

Honeysuckle FC has a positive impact on men's physical and mental health and helps support positive relationships with partners and family members. Therefore this initiative needs continuing support and investment.

Honeysuckle FC as a model of provision for supporting men with grief by combining football and supported group discussion could be adapted and adopted at other venues nationally and internationally.

Honeysuckle FC fills an important gap in offering bereavement support, there is a need for increased awareness about the importance of support for men experiencing baby loss and the stereotypes and misconceptions which can persist about men's grief.

There is need for further evaluation, using standardised measures, to evidence the impact of provision like Honeysuckle FC and the benefits of sports-based bereavement support.



BACKGROUND

Despite the growing recognition of the psychological and emotional impacts of pregnancy and baby loss on expecting parents, the majority of literature and subsequent care guidelines focus largely on women's experiences (Obst and Due, 2018). Recent research highlights the high levels of grief experienced by men who have experienced pregnancy loss and neonatal death (Obst et al 2021), with men demonstrating significant symptoms of anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder after baby loss (Badenhorst et al 2006).

There is a notable and continued lack of support services available specifically for men who have experienced baby loss, both within the maternity and neonatal services and within community organisations (Mirlashari et al 2022; Department of Health and Social Care, 2023). Seeking men's perspectives of support following baby loss is important, given noted gendered differences concerning help-seeking, service access, grief styles (Badenhorst et al 2006, Obst et al., 2021) and peer support more generally. There is very little evidence regarding the development, delivery, or impact of support for men following baby loss. There are several research papers which examine the effectiveness of interventions in this area (Aho et al., 2011), however these support services align with traditional models, talking groups and supportive professionals. A review undertaken by Jones et al (2019) identified gaps in current research and recommended examining men's health and wellbeing following perinatal loss as a research priority.

There is very little known about the role of sport, football and targeted peer support for men who have experienced baby loss. There appears to be a lack of studies within a UK population.

Honeysuckle FC is a collaboration between the Liverpool Women's Hospital and the LFC Foundation specifically for bereaved dads and men who have experienced pregnancy loss at any gestation and early neonatal death. The group meet bi-weekly for football sessions, and although most of the group are local to the area, men travel from North Wales and Staffordshire to be part of the team. The aim of the sessions is to provide a safe environment for the men to share their experiences. Before each training session or football match, the men spend the first hour in the changing room (called 'changing room chats'), where the men discuss within the networking session how their week has been. This discussion is supported by clinical staff, LFC Foundation mental health team, peer support volunteers and their teammates. This is followed an hour-long football session.

Figure 1. Honeysuckle FC Model



Due to the unique nature of this service and lack of evidence within this field, the team felt the generation of research data would help gain insight into the men's experiences of the service. It was felt important that data were collected by someone independent to the direct provision.

METHODOLOGY

Aim

To examine men's experiences of accessing Honeysuckle FC and the self-reported impact of the service on them and their family.

Objectives

The study focussed on examining;

- men's experiences of accessing Honeysuckle FC
- men's perceptions of the impact of Honeysuckle FC on their individual and family well-being.
- men's perceptions of the support offered to men after the loss of a baby.

Dad's Advisory Group

A core group of three men who have experienced baby loss and also volunteer for Honeysuckle FC formed a Dad's Advisory Group (DAG). These three men were consulted (via emails, phone calls and meetings) on all aspects of the research design. The DAG provided feedback on the recruitment and data collection materials, helping to shape the flyer, the wording and questions on the online survey, the questions and format of the group discussion and who should moderate it. One of the men also attended regular team meetings to inform the development of the research themes and evaluation report.

Research Design

The study used a sequential mixed method qualitative exploratory design using a short online survey consisting of open response questions and a group discussion. The use of both methods aimed to provide in-depth understanding of the men's experiences whilst also providing the opportunity for men to share their views anonymously.

Recruitment and Sample

All men who had attended a Honeysuckle FC session were invited to take part. Men were made aware of the study and the short online survey by a flyer which was distributed by the Honeysuckle FC leads during the face-to-face sessions and then posted on the established WhatsApp group.

The flyer included a link to the online survey. Using the WhatsApp group enabled those men who no longer attended Honeysuckle FC or were not able to make the face-to-face groups to share their views. The study information made it clear that participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous.

Recruitment for the group discussion was through a separate flyer distributed during the Honeysuckle FC sessions and posted on the WhatsApp group. The information about the group discussion was posted at least two weeks before the planned discussion date to enable men time to read the information, ask questions and make a decision about participation. Men were prompted to contact the research lead if they wanted to take part.

Online Survey

The short online qualitative survey was designed specifically for this research study, with input from the DAG. Fourteen open text questions asked men to report what prompted them to attend Honeysuckle FC, their experiences of attending the sessions, the reported impact of the group on them and their family and asked them to identify any changes which would improve their experiences of Honeysuckle FC. The survey was designed to take about 15-20 minutes to complete. The anonymous survey design hoped to enable men to feel able to honestly share their experiences and the men were reminded not to share any personal details within their responses which may identify them. The survey was administered within Microsoft Forms, as this was a format familiar to the men and included an immersive reader option. The end of the survey included links to support services in case taking part prompted any men to become upset or identify a need for additional support.

Group Discussion

The group discussion was held an hour before the usual Honeysuckle FC meeting. The discussion centred around the main findings from the survey, where the men were asked to respond to these findings and add further depth to our understanding. This format meant that men were not expected to share direct personal or sensitive experiences as part of the group discussion. The group discussion format was familiar to the men as it aligned with the usual format of their 'Changing Room Chats' sessions. The group discussion was facilitated to create a casual and conversational approach and used large sheets of paper and written notes to prompt additional information sharing. The DAG felt that the discussion should be facilitated by those who had established and trusted relationships with the men and this was balanced between the identified importance of data being collected by someone independent to the direct delivery of the intervention. The group was facilitated by LB and supported on the evening by PC and MK.

Time was spent at the beginning of the group discussion outlining some key 'ground-rules' for example respecting people's opinions and not sharing information outside the group about others. Written consent was obtained from the men who took part prior to the group discussion commencing. It was made clear to the men that once they had taken part in the group discussion, they would not be able to withdraw their data, as it would be too difficult to separate out their individual's contribution. Additional staff with mental health training were present in case any men became upset during the discussion. The group discussion was audio-recorded.





Analysis

The data from the online survey were analysed using qualitative content analysis techniques (Hseih & Shannon 2005). Two members of the team (LB, PC) independently coded the open text qualitative responses from the survey and then met to discuss the codes and how these could be further organised. The data were organised into themes.

The group discussion was centred around these themes. The data were analysed according to the existing themes, whilst inductively allowing for additional codes to be developed.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was gained from Edge Hill University Health Related Ethics Committee (HREC) (REC reference: ETH2223-0336). Consent was gained for survey participation by the men electronically ticking a box to confirm they had read the study information and that they were aware that once they had clicked 'done' at the end of the online survey they could not withdraw their data due to participation being anonymous. The researchers gained written consent from all men taking part in the group discussion. It was made clear to those taking part in the group discussion that once they had taken part, they could not withdraw their data as it was part of a multi-participant discussion. Information for additional support organisations was shared with men at the end of the survey and the end of the group discussion.

FINDINGS

68%

Response rate

21

men answered the online survey

10

men took part in the group discussion.

At the time of data collection, Honeysuckle FC had been running for almost a year. Most men who answered the survey had been attending Honeysuckle FC for more than eight months. Most men reported in the survey that they had heard about Honeysuckle FC via the Liverpool Women's Hospital Honeysuckle team or bereavement midwife (n=16). A smaller number learned about Honeysuckle FC via other sources such as social media (Facebook), family members and other dads.

The qualitative data from the surveys and group discussion are organised into four key overarching themes.

1. "There was nothing out there for me"; a lack of support and a need for, alternative support for men.
2. "It is a safe space to play football and share with people who understand"; Why Honeysuckle FC works.
3. "The impacts are astronomical"; the Impact that Honeysuckle FC has.
4. What worked well and what could be better?

1. “There was nothing out there for me”; a lack of support and a need for alternative support for men.

The men reported how they had faced challenges in identifying or accessing appropriate support services for their grief before arriving at Honeysuckle FC. The men also discussed perceptions of others and myths within society which they felt impacted on the provision of support for men experiencing baby loss. This section includes two subthemes as follows.

- The lack of support available to men experiencing baby loss.
- The assumptions, perceptions, myths, and stereotypes that influence men accessing support.



1.1 The lack of support available to men experiencing baby loss.

This sub-theme included responses from the survey and group discussion where men expressed feelings of being unsupported or they experienced gender differences in the support offered. Men discussed that there was 'nothing out there' for them after they experienced baby loss. Men described how "There is not much support out there for men". One man discussed how men were often expected to "just carry on as normal"

“

As a group of men, as men as a species, we get ignored a lot of the time, whether it's in hospitals after that, after the event of a loss, just expected to go back to work and carry on as normal.

”

Men highlighted how they had accessed some support services with their partners including those offered by Claire House (children's hospice), The Alder Centre and Liverpool Women's Hospital, but described that some of this support was generic and not specific for those who had lost a baby;

“

We got offered a lot of like generic support, as opposed to it being specific to bereavement of a child.

”

“

As a bereaved father I was not offered any other counselling

”

Or the approach had been seen as too specific and focussed on baby loss and perceived as not helpful, with one father stating "I joined [service] but it really wasn't for me as they were discussing things in too much details, pictures etc."

The men did recognise and discuss how there is not "one fix for everyone" and everyone experienced grief and needed support in different ways.

Many of the men also discussed how support had been targeted towards their partner and that there "wasn't any support for men", leaving them without support. One man stated *"There wasn't really anything for men set up that I was aware of my wife got offered stuff and she was quite fortunate."* and men discussed at length how they felt the support they needed was different to their partner;

“

I felt that my wife had so much support after our loss with things such as complimentary therapies. They were offered to myself but I needed something different.

”

“

It is all designed for women, and what women go through, you know, I found nobody who gets it. I had to force myself and try and find people, and then there's nobody out there. And that's why I didn't speak to anyone for a year and a half, because I just couldn't find any anyone.

”

This lack of support to meet their needs resulted in many of the men feeling that there was "little support just for men when we lost our babies." With one man saying, "I didn't feel like there was anybody who understood because it was all set up for dealing with women."

There's nothing else, so whatever I had to do, I had to find it myself.

Other men discussed support that they had been offered and had either chosen not to access or tried and discontinued. Men explained that in some cases the counselling or talking therapy support offered had felt awkward for them and "it wasn't for me."

"I don't really like talking, and I'm very good at kind of skirting around the topic if I'm not asked about it."

The men described how once they had made it to Honeysuckle FC, they had not felt the need to access any other support services as "*Honeysuckle FC is enough to help me.*"

"Counselling was offered however I've not taken this up as I feel that the Honeysuckle FC team is giving me the support I need."

It was almost like it was generic, so there's nobody out there who understands men who could talk to men about it... because they're all trained to think this way, but that's not how I think.

1.2 The assumptions, perceptions, myths, and stereotypes that influence access to support.

The men discussed the assumptions, perceptions, myths and stereotypes that can prevent men accessing support. Many men discussed how they felt that society expects men to just “get on with it” and that needing support and expressing struggling with grief is perceived as a weakness.

“I think the feeling is that men ‘just get on with it’ and that needs to change, men need just as much support as women through difficult times.”

“

Men don't grieve, men don't cry. Having men being strong and the assumptions that they are fine.

”

Men also discussed that they felt that they had to ‘be strong’ for their partner and family, that they had to “*be the strong one and be there for everyone.*” Several men shared this view.

“That you have to always be the protector of your wife/girlfriend/family or you can’t show how you feel. It’s very important to express how you feel as a dad. Mental health is a huge issue in men and this is a massive opportunity for men to reach out and get the support they need.”

“It’s almost like our job is to make sure their [wife/partner/girlfriend] all right... and then I deal with myself later, which is not the right answer obviously.”

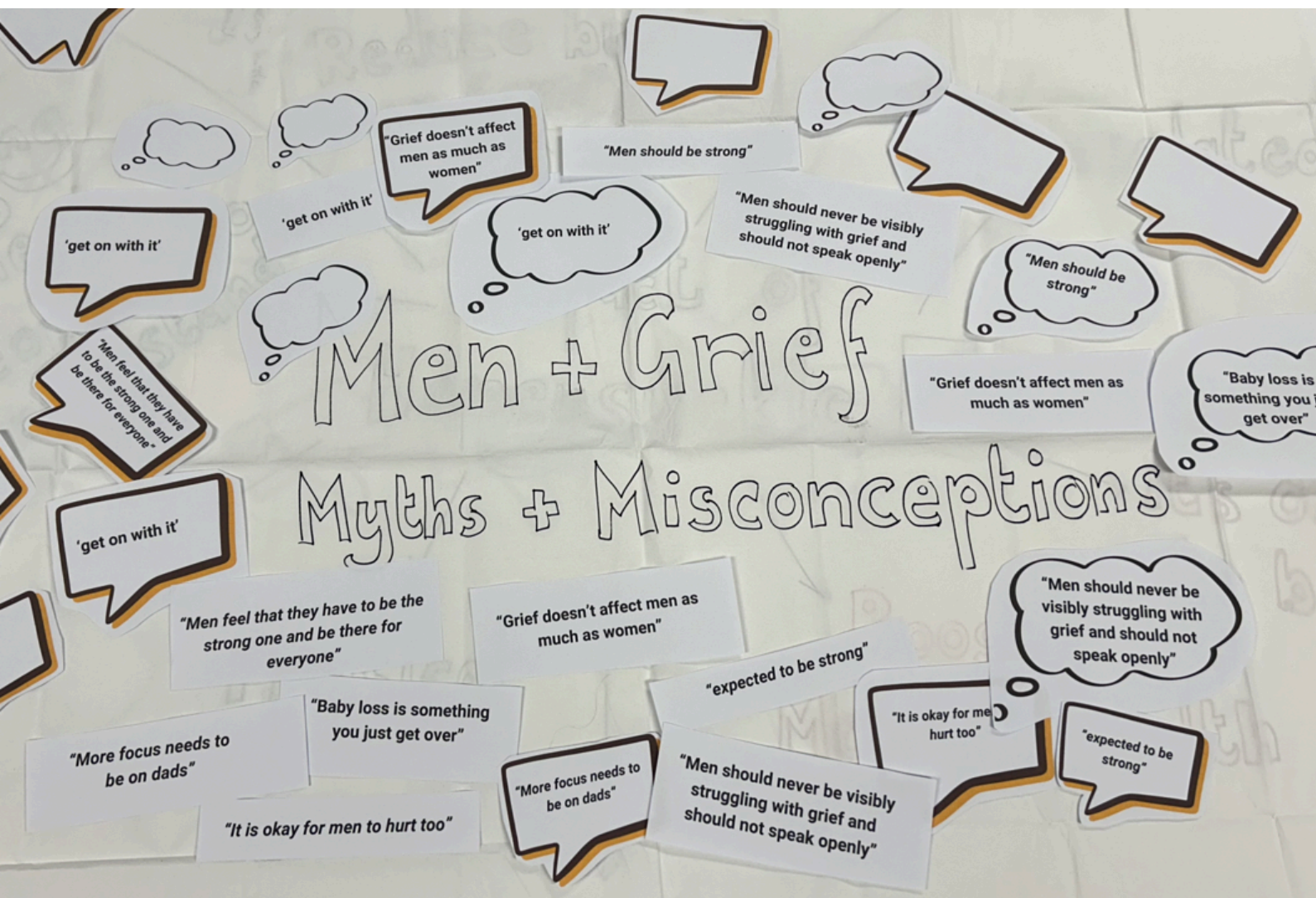
The men described how support often focussed on the woman and this left the men feeling their grief was not recognised or dealt with when in fact *“it affects men as much as women.”*

“Everyone including the dad is focussed on mum and ensuring she is okay etc which is great, but I think more focus needs to be on dads.”

"The perception that you are not strong if you admit you're hurting; it is in fact quite the opposite."

Some men had encountered comments from others which had undermined their feelings of grief, with a sense that it was something they would get over.

"That baby loss is something you just get over, it's something that lives with you forever it just becomes part of you."



“

The perception that we have to be the strong one and that our feelings are not as important as the partners

”

“

People perception of baby loss is just 'Oh you can try again'. It's the most ridiculous thing ever for people to think that it will replace your baby, or make you feel better. No matter what gestation your baby was at, they are and will always still be your child.

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CHARLIE

2. “It is a safe space to play football and share with people who understand”; Why Honeysuckle FC works

The men reported many positive aspects of Honeysuckle FC. The men discussed the safe space and trust within Honeysuckle FC which enabled them to share their feelings with men who had “*been through the same heartbreak*”. The men also discussed how football made it easier to build relationships and break down barriers. This section includes two subthemes as follows.

- Safe space and trust within the team
- Football makes it easier to build relationships and break down barriers.



2.1 Safe space and trust within the team

Most men, in the survey and as part of the group discussion reported that Honeysuckle FC offered them a safe space to share their worries and concerns with *“likeminded people who have been through the same”* and can understand. *“The chat helps me to understand that I’m not on my own and other people are feeling how I am, and that they understand me.”*

“

I was looking for options of someone to talk to and I happened upon this group. This seemed like a great place to do that because it only involved other men who have gone through the same thing and offers a safe space to talk.

”

This shared experience seemed to provide the men with the space to openly acknowledge their grief without feeling judged as a result of some of the myths and misconceptions about men’s grief after baby loss as discussed in the last section. *“It’s been great to be around other dads who have experienced loss and so open about it.*

“

Hearing that there was going to be support group for dads/men to have the opportunity to grieve in a safe space was amazing.

”

This shared lived experience was reported as essential to be able to truly understand and offer advice. *“The other dads who are in the session, they have been through baby loss and can offer the best advice.”*

Honeysuckle FC was described as helping to prevent men feeling alone and enabling them to get *"things off their chest"* within a safe space. *"I wanted to connect with other dads who have experienced loss to try and find a common ground so I didn't feel so alone."*

I don't have my friendship circle, I don't know anybody who's lost a baby, or who's been vocal in losing babies. So don't really feel like talking to them about it or have a space where I could just talk about how I'm feeling, because people don't really understand it, if they've not been through it

The men discussed how valuable the support group remained to them, despite the time which may have passed since they lost their baby. This highlights that men needed support often many years into their grief.

"All the lads have experienced loss and are so open with each other and everyone is at different stages of grief. Some lost their baby's years ago and some only months."

The men also discussed that the group and open discussion helped them 'keep everyone's babies memories alive' and recognise that they were *"still a Dad, just in a different way"*.

Many of the men's accounts made it clear how important Honeysuckle FC was to them, going beyond a support group to forging life-long friendships; *"Honeysuckle FC now feels like a family, all sharing our highs and lows and helping each other when needed."*

I class the lads as family, so it's worked out amazing meeting new mates but also people who have been through the same as me.

I fully believe that I have made some new friends for life who truly understand what it's like to go through the pain and suffering of losing your child.

The sharing aspect of the group is amazing, being able to share thoughts and feelings and hearing others do the same is so powerful.

I was struggling mentally and I was looking to share my feelings with people who would understand. That shared connection allows me to open up without any fear or judgement.



2.2 Football makes it easier to build relationships and break down barriers.

The men discussed at length how sport or football specifically helped to develop relationships and break down any barriers to accessing support and talking about their grief. For some of the men, the football was the reason they first attended Honeysuckle FC.

"Heard there was a man's support group which involved playing football and just thought that's better for me than the other support groups on offer."

“

When the baby passed, the bereavement midwife was saying come to this and I was saying no but as soon as the football was mentioned, I was like, that's me.

”

"Football was the initial attraction to it. I don't think I would have gone if it was just a mens support night. The football acted as a buffer really and helped let my guard down to then talk to others before or after the sessions."



For some men it was the badge of Liverpool Football Club that *“draws you to it, that makes you go.”*

“Let's be honest. It was the badge that brought me. Well, football is with a nice bonus. It was in Anfield so I thought - why not?”

Many of the men discussed how playing football helped them on many levels, with some describing how it helped them to *“blow off steam”, “burn off some emotion”* and release what were often well guarded emotions.

“It was organised to help us dads to have a safe space to express our worries and feelings and play some football to help let off some steam. For me the football is a bonus.”

“

That sports makes it easier to build and break barriers down. It made it easier to talk to other dads about our experiences as your already talking through football.

”

The action of playing football, the movement and the informal nature of the interactions and session led to many of the men saying it was easier for them to share their feelings.

“I think having a sport as common ground helps a lot as men aren't as open as they should be, a sport (football in this case) helps us bond as a team and trust each other more as the sessions go on, therefore we become happy to share our experiences.”

“

I'm 45 so football is not really my thing. But it's about just being this person where someone just talks to me without trying to psychoanalyse me

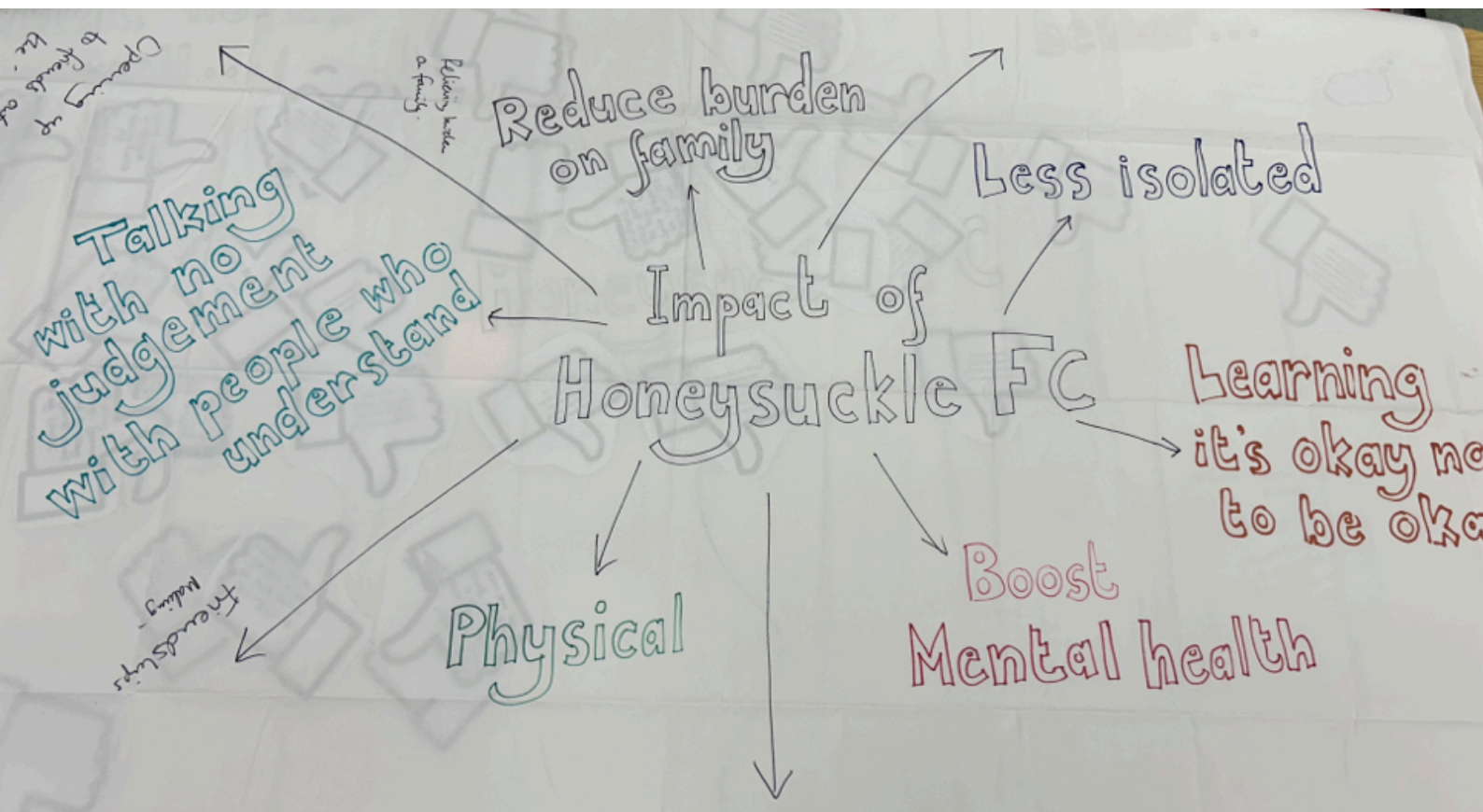
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3. “*The Impacts are astronomical*”, the impact that Honeysuckle FC has.

The men shared the impact Honeysuckle FC has had on both them and their family. This section includes two subthemes as follows.

- Impact on self
- Impact on family and friends



3.1 Impact on self

The men reported in the survey and as part of the group discussion, the multiple benefits and positive impacts they had experienced as a result of coming to Honeysuckle FC. The impacts were described as “astronomical.”

The men described that the support from Honeysuckle FC had improved their mental health and happiness.

“I feel happier when I know the session is coming round.”

“I honestly feel just a little bit happier in life even after this short time of going.”

Some men discussed a benefit to their broader well-being; *“This has boosted my wellbeing massively - far more than 1:1 therapy.”* Some of the men reported the impact the support had had on their lives and well-being as life-changing.

“I truly believe I would be lost or 6ft under without being able to express my issues in a safe space that Honeysuckle FC provides. my wellbeing is much better so I am able to work and socialise in a normal manner without suffering in silence.”

The men described that the support had helped them “get back to being me”.

“I feel like I'm getting back to the person I was before we went through such a traumatic time. I still have the same frustrations with sad times but able to express them better and bounce back from them quicker. It feels like I've grown through the grief as the team has grown.”

“It's helped me get back to the version of myself I was before my experience.”

The group was described as being a place where the men could be “*authentically me*” and did not feel the pressure to “*put on a brave face*” and “*just say they are okay*” and this resulted in them actually getting something meaningful from the group.

“It’s only if you come to places like this that people like, ask if you’re okay and they proper mean it. So if they say, are you alright? You just say yeah, yeah. They don’t really want to sit with me in a boxer [pub] with me crying my eyes out.”

Many of the men described how they had experienced isolation and reported that coming to Honeysuckle FC had helped them feel “*less alone in this*” and more connected in their grief and lives.

“Grief is very isolating,.....when you go to a group you see people that are going through similar to what you are or who have been going through. So naturally, that’s gonna make you feel less isolated and it’s a really positive impact of this kind of the group.”

Many of the men described the impact of connection as an antidote to isolation.

“It’s had a huge impact, I think it just showed that you’re not alone in your grief.”

“Have made new connections, that think will last, and offered a forum for me to share - this has helped a lot.”

The men discussed that the Honeysuckle FC sessions group gave them something to look forward to and a reason to ‘get off the couch’ and engage.

“It gets you off the couch. The more you sit there, the more you’re thinking and the more you’re going down and down and down.”

“

It gives me something to look forward to and makes me feel proud that I am doing this in memory of my baby boy.

”

The men also described how their confidence had increased as a result of coming to Honeysuckle FC, both in their ability to be open about their grief and in life more generally.

"It has helped massively with my confidence, I never thought I would of been able to walk into that room on that first day, so I feel like that has helped me in my day to day life too."

This confidence impacted on the men's ability to face issues in other aspects of their life.

"I think it has given me confidence to share more and build bonds with people in general."

“

It has given me confidence to meet new people and face challenges at work in a more positive manner.

”

As well as the mental health benefits, the men described how their physical fitness had also improved.

"Helped me get back into playing football and improve my physical well-being, but also helps me share things that I don't want to burden my family with. It's a great outlet for me and I feel refreshed after each session."

“

The Honeysuckle FC sessions are more than just a kick about. It's a group of men who support each other, listen without judgement and share in each others grief.

”

“

Mental health has had a big improvement since I started coming to these sessions. I feel comfortable with like-minded players and the staff are amazing for support and just being mates. That's how I see them. Mainly my mood has improved.

”

3.2 Impact on partner, family and friends

Many of the men discussed how the support from Honeysuckle FC had made a “*significant improvement*” in how they could talk about their grief with others. The support enabled them to be more open with their partners and family.

“To be honest, we talk now, more. I'd say not like, as much you know, as probably she'd want me to, but I think I find myself talking to her a lot more, I don't know why, but I feel like I can talk to her a lot more. It's almost like once you start talking, you keep on talking, keep on talking.”

“Me and my Mrs can talk a bit easier about the situation.”

Attending Honeysuckle FC was described by the men as having made a massive positive difference to their relationships with their partners and within their families.

“My girlfriend really likes the fact that I attend, she knows I am getting support which helps to reassure her, she can see the difference in me once I've been and it helps us both.”

“My wife has been trying to get me to talk to someone for over a year but I've been very resistant. She asks me about the sessions in general terms but I can see that it's made her happier. She obviously cares about me and wants me to be better.”

“

My wife is very happy that she can see a difference in my mood, before I would snap and be down a lot. She said she's happy when it's game week because I change into an excited kid on Christmas Eve. Massive change to my life.

”

The increased openness also stretched to feeling able to share feelings and experiences with wider family members and work colleagues.

"I have become more open towards my friends and family when speaking about my feelings."

"Really enjoy these sessions, they've helped me massively in my recovery, helped my partner and our families too."

As well as facilitating more openness between their men and their partner and families, Honeysuckle FC also provided the men with a place to *"To say things that I can't say to friends or even my wife because they wouldn't understand."*

"Having somewhere where I can talk without worrying about upsetting or worrying my wife was perfect for me."

“

I actually think it's helped me with my family because my misses was bothering me for months and month...since I have started coming, I think it's made her feel a lot better. So it's actually not a burden on my family but it is actually relieving a little bit of a burden on the family I think as well.

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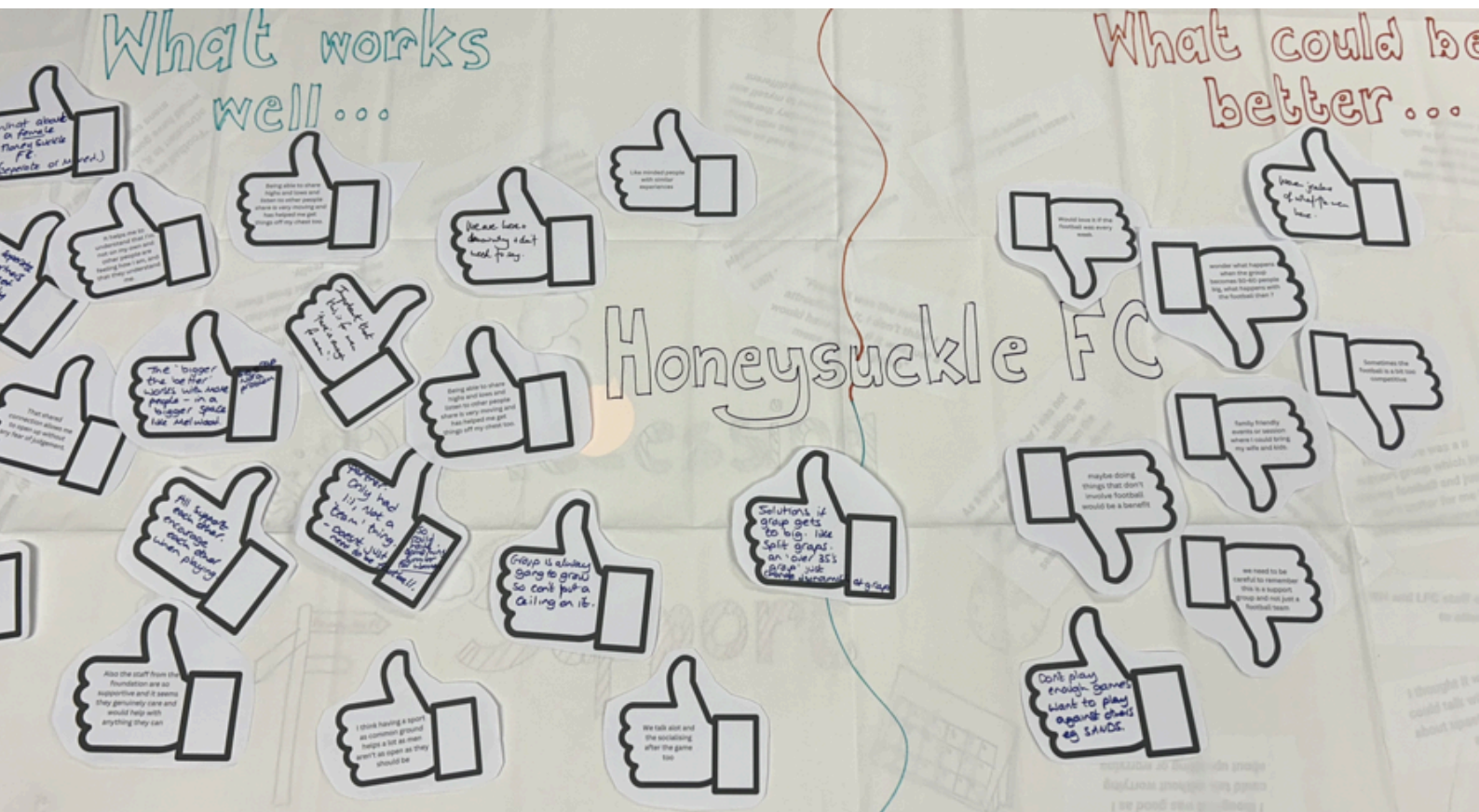
POWER

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4. What works well and what could be better about Honeysuckle FC

The men shared their thoughts around what worked well and what may be improved. This section includes two subthemes as follows.

- What works well
- What could be better



4.1 What works well?

The men were asked to report in the survey and discuss in the group, what they felt worked well within Honeysuckle FC.

The men discussed multiple ways the team had positively impacted on their experiences and outcomes. All of the responses were full of thanks *“from the bottom of my heart”* for being part of *“an amazing team”* which was described as *“life-saving”*.

“On a personal level I think that the staff at Honeysuckle FC are amazing at what they have provided and that they would be proud of what has been achieved with this group”

The benefits of Honeysuckle FC being made up of different facilitators from different organisations was noted as particularly beneficial, *“What a fantastic job The Liverpool Foundation, the Honeysuckle bereavement team and the volunteers are doing.”*

“

I truly believe this group will save lives, mental health, relationships. Thank you Honeysuckle FC”

”

The Honeysuckle FC team were praised for the friendly and caring attitude which made the men feel welcomed and valued. *“The staff from the foundation are unique and so supportive and it seems they genuinely care and would help with anything they can.”*

“The team were reported as always having “time for the dads” and creating an “amazing vibe” which, as described earlier, allowed men to “feel safe to share their vulnerabilities, views and experiences.”

The team were reported as working together to “create bonds with the others.”
“I couldn't begin to thank everyone who has put time and effort into running this enough. It's quite simply changed my life for the better.”

“

The team are amazing. They really care. I'm very thankful that they've helped create something like this for us.

”

The men discussed how Honeysuckle FC was welcoming and there was support even when subsequent successful pregnancies were shared within the group. “*I think [name removed] was one of the first to share it [new pregnancy news] and I think it was, like, quite relaxed and everyone was made up for it.*”

This sharing of positive news was described by the men as being different to support groups for women where their partners went and where they had felt unable to share good news within their group.

“The women don't talk about it. If they get pregnant, then that is it, they just don't turn up, whereas we embrace it with everybody.”



4.2 What could be improved?

Men were then asked to consider what could improve Honeysuckle FC, in many cases the men reported that *"Honestly, nothing. It's perfect the way it is."* However, some of the men felt that more of the sessions would be good.

"Would love it if the football was every week. Would happily pay for sessions if it helped this to happen."

Some of the men recognised that a bigger facility which could be more accessible by public transport or road would be good for the group.

"Being in a bigger changing room/room where we could possibly split up and have more space."

There was a really interesting discussion in the group and some reports within the survey about the possible tension between the role of Honeysuckle FC as a support group and as a football team. Some of the men discussed that the football could be very competitive at times, which could be difficult for those who just *"turn up for the sport and to have a laugh"*.

“

I think we need to be careful to remember this is a support group and not just a football team.

”

Some of the men expressed an interest in other sports or social activities being introduced that were non-football related like *"foot golf, bowling, social evenings etc."*

Some men also discussed how it would be nice to involve others, like partners and families in Honeysuckle FC related sessions.

"Make one session a month available for partners to come as I think it would help the teams partners feel more involved and also strengthen relationships between teammates partners."

This was not the view of all the men as some were keen to protect the sessions as a man only activity, discussing how something similar but separate for women would be good

"But I don't know why you can't have something very similar for the women. I don't know what that is... netball, volleyball, or just walk but do something."

There was some concern from some men around the "success" of the group and how increased demand and more men joining may impact negatively on the well-established and positive dynamic within the group.

"I think we have to put a lot of focus on keeping the culture we have right now as a group as we continue to grow".

However, many men suggested ethical concerns with not welcoming everyone who could benefit from the support and made suggestions for how the group could be operationalised to allow for additional numbers.

"The bigger the group the better I think personally. The more people that come, we can play 11 aside games against each other and we can do our own tournament between us – playing each other instead."

“One baby every 4 mins dies so that is 2 parents every 4 minutes that lose a baby on average, we can't just say that this is the group size now and that's it, that's not very supportive. This group is always going to grow because of the nature of humanity unfortunately, so we can't put a ceiling on it.

Whilst there was overwhelming support for how these facilitated men to talk and share their feelings, some men raised how the talking aspects of the sessions (Changing Room Chats) could be improved,

"Rather than say, does anyone want to speak? and see who does want to speak.., just go round and see who wants to speak."

“

One thing that I find is, because we do Pits and Peaks, if someone does a Peak [something good that has happened], it is great news, so you almost feel bad about saying something bad.

”

The men also discussed how the experience for new starters could be improved, to help the transition into the group.

"I was just thrown in. it was just like bang, there you go. And if you are not confident, you are probably just going to sit there."

Men felt that there should be additional support to help new men on their first few meetings.

"...last week we had a new lad in and we were like, is that the new lad? but there was nobody there to like meet him and bring him in to the room. "

Men also discussed how new starters were introduced to the group via WhatsApp and the ongoing communications in this group.

"I think for new people joining it might be a bit more difficult join in that group straightaway before actually comes to the football. I think coming to the football will benefit people before joining the group to be honest."

"They're [new starters] are made to feel welcome. I think once you get into the WhatsApp group, it's like everyone says hello, but then it's like, as soon as someone posts something, especially when it footbals on, there's like all sorts going back and forth."





DISCUSSION

The study has delved into the experiences of grieving men and highlights their unique needs, which are often overlooked by traditional support systems.

Honeysuckle FC has been shown to be a sanctuary, providing a safe environment for men to explore their emotions, share experiences and receive invaluable peer support from people who had also experienced grief. The model of delivery which includes peer support, facilitated discussions and the football games sets the scene for open and honest trusted relationships to develop between the men. The findings show the benefit of sport as an activity to accompany support following bereavement, with the activity fostering a common interest which is not centred on emotions allowing the men to create positive trusted relationships within the group before opening up about their experiences.

The football develops teamwork and gives the men a physical outlet for their emotions. This was described as enabling more honest and vulnerable conversations in the pre-game discourse and encouraged men to tackle isolation and the 'suffering in silence' experience of grief they had encountered.

Being part of the Honeysuckle football team was reported as enhancing mood, improving physical health, and helping to develop a sense of connection for the men. Beyond personal individual benefits, the men also noted improvements in family relationships and increased open communication about their emotions.

Honeysuckle FC was able to break down some of the myths described by the men. Men referred to the project as 'life-changing' and commended the team for the support received. The different members of the support team all contributed a distinct and valuable part of Honeysuckle FC, the bereavement midwife from Liverpool Women's Hospital helped to facilitate many referrals into the group and as a trusted and known person helped lead group discussions. The LFCF coaches and mental health facilitators supported the open discussions and strengthened the feeling of connection between the men.

The study identified several practical recommendations to maintain the benefits of the project as the scale and interest grows. The suggestions included additional support for men attending their first meeting to enable smoother integration into the team and larger facilities to facilitate increasing demand. The facilities are currently being reviewed at Honeysuckle FC. There were some mixed feelings towards the involvement of families or partners within occasional sessions or as part of special events, with some men feeling strongly that it was beneficial for the group to remain solely for men, whereas others were keen to see more opportunities to involve their partners.

This study highlights the need for dedicated spaces like Honeysuckle FC to support men's grief following baby loss. There are opportunities to replicate the model across different geographical areas. This study has provided valuable insight into how Honeysuckle FC provides men with a supportive space for their baby loss grief and has provided a platform for further research into the role of football and sport in facilitating bereavement support for men's grief.



LIMITATIONS

Whilst interesting, useful and in-depth information was collected, this was a small study which involved a self-selecting sample. Even though over two thirds of the group responded (68%), it is unknown whether those with more negative views of Honeysuckle FC chose not to share their views as part of the study.

Despite the study being carefully designed to enable men to feel able to share their honest views, with facilitation only involving those not directly involved in the delivery of Honeysuckle FC, men may have felt the need to positively portray their experiences and perceptions.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Honeysuckle FC has a positive impact on men's physical and mental health and helps support positive relationships with partners and family members. Therefore this initiative needs continuing support and investment.

Honeysuckle FC as a model of provision for supporting men with grief by combining football and supported group discussion could be adapted and adopted at other venues nationally and internationally.

Honeysuckle FC fills an important gap in offering bereavement support, there is a need for increased awareness about the importance of support for men experiencing baby loss and the stereotypes and misconceptions which can persist about men's grief.

There is need for further evaluation, using standardised measures, to evidence the impact of provision like Honeysuckle FC and the benefits of sports-based bereavement support.

CONCLUSIONS

The study highlights how Honeysuckle FC fills a notable gap in the provision of support to men who have experienced baby loss. The combination of football and facilitated discussion enables the men to share feelings with those who have experienced similar life events within a safe and supported space. This combination was reported as making Honeysuckle FC 'life-saving' and 'life-changing'.



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