



# Dealing with powerlessness

## A phenomenological study among palliative care volunteers

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### Introduction

#### Background

Being involved in palliative care triggers existential experiences and reflections in care professionals, family members and volunteers. This originates e.g. from compassion with the suffering or pain of patients or the mourning of relatives. Stress may be felt when in certain situations ideas about a good way of dying are not being met.

Co-ordinators of a Dutch hospice observed that successful 'being there' of volunteers was undermined by experienced powerlessness, often triggered by 'not being able to do anything

more'.

It was observed that different types of coping with powerlessness by volunteers may have impact on risks at compassion fatigue or burnout.

#### Aim

**This study explores the nature of volunteers' experiences of powerlessness and their dealing with it, in order to reduce drop outs and develop successful supervision strategies for hospice and palliative care volunteers.**

#### Methods

From four Dutch hospice and palliative care organisations 19 respondents were recruited with a letter describing the study. Four of them were male. Their average age was 62 years. On average the sample had 5 years of experience in end of life volunteering.

Informed consents were collected. Respondents participated in a phenomenological in-depth interview that was recorded and typed out verbatim. Analysis was performed following directions of the phenomenologist Karen Dahlberg.

### Results

#### Essence

As the essence within all the experiences came out the feeling of bemusement, resulting of a rupture of the situation with an inner horizon. This horizon exists of expectancies, intentions, thoughts, wishes, convictions or attitudes. The bemusement results from friction due to the several experiences: I do not know, cannot do this; I do not agree; I want to do this, but am not allowed; What I want does not succeed; I cannot bear this; I cannot handle this; 'Ouch' this touches an old emotional scar.

These originate from the own biographical line built up by experiences, life events, values about a good death and so on. Two examples from the interviews with palliative care volunteers, in which strong emotions were involved:

- "There was a 38 year old woman dying, a mother of 4 years old twins.[...] I was furious. And I thought, really, this should not happen."
- "Yes, and then the feelings of powerlessness arise again. And I think: how can someone react like this? It is your SISTER! Do something. It is your last moment with her."

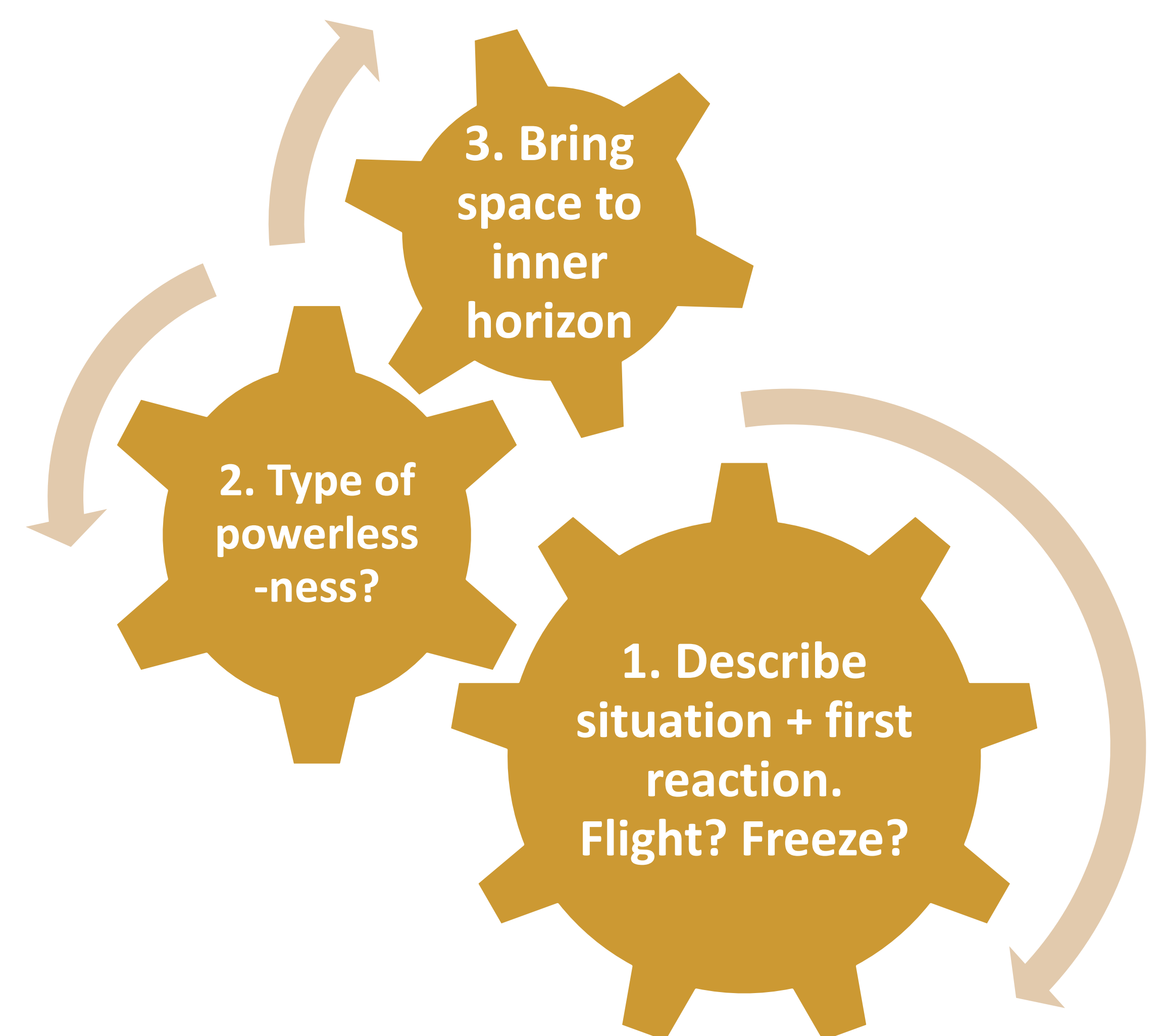
#### Conservative or transformative?

A primary reaction of volunteers is often: wanting to flee away from the bemusement and to regain control. We call these conservative, protective, defensive reactions. The consequence of this behavior is that it may be less easy to connect with this patient a next time. Two citations from the interviews:

- "Basically, I wanted to get out of the situation as quickly as possible. Like ehm, this is like too much, you know."
- "That covertly, in the heart, one tries to not enter the patient's room, to avoid that."

We also saw patterns of volunteers that were 'freezing' or fighting and regaining control.

Other stories showed a transformative interaction with the experienced powerlessness. It means that volunteers do not rest in the uneasiness within themselves, but transform the bemusement into more constructive thoughts about the situation as a whole. They form more future oriented thoughts and analyse their experiences in order to learn and develop. Their unrest becomes a source of self knowledge, a way to improve their 'being there' for patients. What does the tension learn the volunteer about herself, her attitude, her values? What can she change to realise more inner space?



Volunteer reflection model powerlessness

### Reflection model with circles

Based on these analyses we developed a reflection model for volunteers, in which they analyse step by step experiences with powerlessness they had. The first circle asks them to choose a situation, describe this in terms of When, Where, What, Who? And describe their first reaction: Flee, Fight or Freeze?

With reflection questions in the second circle they are helped to clarify the source of powerlessness in terms of not being able to do, handle, accept, perform the situation.

With the third circle they are encouraged in what they possibly can let go (like ideas about a good death) that brings more inner space to accept things as they are.

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