

Angela Samata: Hello. I'm Angela Samata critical advisor to the Heart of Glass on their work around suicide. I was the presenter of the BAFTA nominated BBC One documentary, Life After Suicide. And I've spent the last two decades working on arts projects and also projects that look at suicide prevention. Welcome to this series of conversations with the people behind the creation of the Suicide Chronicles, which is a long term artistic project, exploring how we might collectively create a language to share our experiences of suicide. Each chronicle focuses on one individual story or one particular aspect of suicide, and the project asks, What's important? How are we responsible for each other? What kind of world do we want to live in and how do we want to hold each other within it? In this episode, I'll be speaking with Pete Johnson, creator of Chronicle Three Full of Grace.

Angela Samata: Pete, thank you so much for agreeing to talk to me today. It's the morning after the first public showing of Suicide Chronicle number three, which is focussed on you and your experience. And I just want to say thank you so much for an amazing film. It's an amazing piece of work that you have made with Mark Storor. And thank you so much for collaborating on it. And I think we're probably equal now in making each other cry. 'The Make Each Other Cry Stakes' - I think we're probably equal now.

Pete Johnson: I think we are. I think we are, yeah. And thank you for... Well, thank you and everybody that was involved. For watching it. It's a big ask to watch that kind of thing as well.

Angela Samata: I think it felt like a privilege. You know, it felt like it was a real insight into your experience. And I just think it was urm... Yeah, it just felt like a real privilege to be part of that public audience, that public sharing of what's taken a long process to to create, you know, and that collaboration between you and Mark. The coincidence is that the first public sharing of the Suicide Chronicle number three just happens to be, well just happens to have been six years to the day when you and I first met.

Pete Johnson: Thanks to Facebook reminding us. Absolutely. Yeah. Yes. Under strange circumstances it was erm... Yeah. No, it's been weird, hasn't it? Because I think for the first time we're allowed to talk about the meeting that we had with Prince William...So yeah so I had obviously I lost... So the story is I lost my mum to suicide when I was 15 months old. And I am now quite an old

man. Well, an older man. And in that time between when I, when I first met you six years ago when I was 45, I hadn't really had any conversations about, about it with anybody at any great length. And then you brought me into a room full of other people bereaved by suicide and the future King of England to talk about it. And so began a story, and six years of self-development, I guess? I don't know? I don't know how you describe the last six years for me.

Angela Samata: But I think what's really interesting for me about that is that you watch the you know, you watch the film I presented, you know, *Life After Suicide*. You saw that on television. And then, you know, the next minute I'm asking you to come into a room of other people bereaved by suicide. And you've never really met anybody else bereaved by suicide. And you said yes. And I'm wondering what it is that enabled you to say yes to coming into light, what must've been quite an intimidating kind of situation. You know, you'd gone from not talking about your mum's death for 45 years and then coming into a situation where I'm saying, okay, could you be the first one to speak in this very formal setting to give the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge an insight into what it's like to be bereaved by suicide and not be able to talk about it? I mean, what is it that enables you to say yes to that? Because I'm not sure I would have said yes to that.

Pete Johnson: Yeah. And I think it's because you don't tell me things till the last moment. I didn't have a chance to get out of it. But also, I don't know. The TV programme was significant in my life in that I didn't know I was...well I didn't really know other people had similar experiences and I didn't know you were allowed to talk about it. So, so the TV programme resonated so significantly in me, you know, I can remember the feeling now of, of I watched in my bedroom just on TV before going to sleep. And the resonance is I can, I can feel that feeling now. And I, I had no choice but to reach out to you, not knowing you would bloody respond and get me into all sorts of dunches. But it is that and that resonance and the conversations that we had just gave me the trust initially in you the you weren't going to stitch me up. And there was no stitch up. But it also told me with the people that appeared in your programme and actually probably the end bit where you're talking to your son, I tweeted, because we're social media whores. But I tweeted...

Angela Samata: Well speak for yourself.

Pete Johnson: Well I am, yeah. I tweeted on that night 'I am that boy'. And it was just that connection that made me go, okay, I need to I need to explore this myself. And actually, that the the whole resonance set me more like why it made me question, why can't I talk about it? Mm hmm. Just because I haven't had the opportunity in the 45 years previous preceding.

Angela Samata: So I'm right in saying that your mum ended her life when you were just tiny, you know.

Pete Johnson: 15 months.

Angela Samata: 15 months old. And that through the time when it happened and there's the social stigma around suicide bereavement that you and your family members, especially your dad, didn't talk about your mum's death and I'm right in saying that actually you were a teenager when you found out that your mum had ended her life?

Pete Johnson: Yeah. I can't say there was no conversation. There was no lengthy conversation that was sensible. There were moments of upset and not even a handful of moments. You know, I can count probably on one hand the moments of discussion, and they were awkward and uncomfortable. But the stuff that I've been able to do over the last few years is to think about it and actually go and have the conversations, proper conversations. With my father he was left alone by the system and the world. So for a man left with three young children, who wasn't particularly comfortable with the emotions himself, what could he do? So he protected us as we've spoken before, he protected us as best he could, and that was in a very functional operational 'make sure we're okay financially' 'make sure we're okay with work' and that's 'protection'. But actually the emotional bits were were missing and you're right, I found my mother's death certificate when I was 15, and that was the first I knew about it. And again, that resonance of your TV programme. I remember that moment when I was 15 and I took that piece of paper. And and I sometimes reflect on the struggles that I've had being about that discovery of that piece of paper. But actually, it's it's not I think I think that's a red herring for me personally. I clung on to it for quite a long time. But actually it's deeper and it's subconscious and it's, it's, it's stuff, you know.

Angela Samata: And then if we fast forward six years from that very first time that I put you in that kind of crazy situation of talking about your lived

experience for the first time, you know, it was kind of the most ... we talk about it we as being the most exclusive support group in the world because you were not only talking to the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge about your experience of not being allowed to explore your bereavement by suicide, but you also had other people bereaved by suicide sit in alongside you so there were ten people who came with us, you know, into that situation. And you said yes to that. And I'm wondering whether...What is it that enables you as somebody with your lived experience to say yes to my invitation, but also yes to the invitation to collaborate with the artist Mark Storer, and to create the piece of work that we saw in public for the first time last night. What was it that enabled you to say 'Yes'?

Pete Johnson: I think there's a million coincidences that happened since that first meeting. Errm when the people that were in that room were to me, incredible, because there was one guy who got very upset at the meeting and I've never seen anybody cry about this stuff before and become overwhelmed, like I'd been overwhelmed in my life. And then there was the lady doctor... Sangeeta, who writes just beautiful words. And I've read, you know, over the last six years, I continue in words... And I think it's just it was almost a permission to carry on thinking about it and to know that that was okay and safe. Because actually I went into some pretty dark places after it. Yeah, some very dark places. But I clung on to the thought that it was worth carrying on with with that introspection. And, you know, you've invited me to speak at a couple of other events. And each time I do them, whilst they are... None of it's a pleasure, to be honest. It's quite hard to do. But I come away having unknotted all of the conscious and subconscious, I don't know, trauma, turmoil in me and straightened out a bit. And it allows me to tell something about it to myself, to all of this, whilst I'm doing it to the public, to other people...it is a conversation with myself, I think. And so when you talking about Mark and the introduction to Mark...I'd already...I'm a frustrated, creative: I work in very operational things, I do stuff to do with money and sorting staffing out recruitment. And actually I'm a frustrated poet, an artist that is kind of embarrassed about it because I'm a middle aged bloke and I do my writing and then I go 'Nobody wants to know about it and it's not good enough and all this kind of stuff'. And it just coincidentally happened that I wanted to express something. I felt the creative urge to do something. And then. And then. And then it arrives. So it felt

like the right thing to do. And with the knowledge that I could. You know, Mark kept telling me, you can stop this at any time.

Angela Samata: You know, I just have to let you know that he didn't mean it.

Pete Johnson: Yeah, I know, I know. I realise that. And I realise that when you tell me I can do stuff and I have the choice that I don't have a choice.

Angela Samata: But again, I think even for people who are really sure and, and kind of, you know, have explored the lived experience, I think lots of people would have hesitated in saying yes to an artist who is internationally renowned for his exploration of very, very difficult subject matter. You know, some people still might have run a mile. And I wonder whether... I mean, in my experience, you know, the reason why I first said yes to talking publicly about my experience of being bereaved by suicide was a real feeling - and I'm wondering if you share it - a real feeling that the worst has happened. So bring the rest of it on. You Know?

Pete Johnson: And I, I particularly feel that now actually since doing the work with Mark. I particularly feel that. And so I've been on medication for a long time and I'm no longer on medication since since doing it. It was it was a significant. I think the worst has happened, but I've also recognised what it looks like and the feelings around it and I've expressed them. So you.. Nobody can tell me now what I should feel because I know... I think I know what I feel... And it changes. And there... Sometimes there are doubts. You know, when we were watching last night... The first one, I was going, 'Wow' what have I done here? Yeah, but, but it's, it's a moving it's so individual and I think it's really important to recognise it's such an individual thing. And Mark will joke and say: 'It's not all about you, Peter!' But actually, for this bit, this, this is, this is about me and nobody else's experience. My brother and sister, my father, their experience would be completely different. But I felt the urge that I had to express it... Again have that conversation with myself more than anything.

Angela Samata: And people who haven't seen the film, you know, it's incredibly poignant and it's an incredibly personal piece of work. And I'm wondering in those first meetings with Mark and in the start of that collaborative process, did you did you feel that you were erm I don't know, that you were listened to, that you were an equal? Part of the way that Mark works is to collaborate, you know, he calls it a collaboration. It's not a

commissioning. It's not anything else. He uses the word collaboration all of the time. And did you feel as somebody who never done anything like it before did you really feel that you were collaborating on it?

Pete Johnson: Yeah. Oh, God, yeah, absolutely. I mean, he was very he was very clear, and whilst I joke about it. I could have pulled out at any time, even up to last night. I could have said, 'No, let's not. I don't want this anymore'. I was concerned at the beginning that it would be a narrative about the facts of people's lives, which it which it clearly wasn't and didn't become. I was worried that ...so part of the film as an animation and I was worried that that would represent and have the look of actual people. And it would almost be ... and I was I was worried, very worried that it was and it kind of is, it's a complete self-indulgence of my experience. But actually, I, I hope that if some one person sees it and it makes them able to go on the journey or start a journey, or if it's a short journey or a six year journey, then that's alright and that's worth doing. Mhm. And I needed it to be so...it needed to be gentle, it needed to be hopeful and I think it hit...and it's bloody dark in places and, and I worried about the darkness of it as well. But actually that's the reality I've carried darkness and Mark. Yeah. Absolutely listened.

Angela Samata: And I think that's the key isn't it? You know when you...when because what you've actually got is it is it is almost like a precious gift almost to offer the world your lived experience and your your pain and your. And there's a there's a beauty in the piece of work that you have created as well. And I'm wondering whether on the on the road to this because this... Am I right in thinking that the creative process took 12 months from when you met Mark to last night so I mean that's a really significant chunk of time. You know, lots of artists wouldn't necessarily collaborate with an individual for that length of time. So it's a really significant amount of time. And I'm wondering about these very first conversations that you had with Mark and you know, what was your... Did you have any you know, did you have any questions? [00:19:43][52.5]

Pete Johnson: No I mean, Mark, will tell you to trust the process and I had to. So we did. I mean, we met multiple times and he was good enough to come down to me and to Herefordshire. Um, so again, that it's a sign of commitment to me and a sign of respect. Then there we went. We went through lots of weird stuff together, exercises that that he does with other people to explore feelings and thoughts of the individual. And I didn't, you know, I'd go home at night

after a after session with Mark. And my wife would say, 'What did you do?' And I went, 'I don't really know, to be honest'. But then I gradually, as you build the layers up and as he actually as he introduces more people into it. So it wasn't, and Mark is right when he talks about it isn't all about me. There were 12 of the men there and I call them gentle, not gentlemen, but Gentle Men. They were all creative, brilliant people and they would be slowly introduced. So there's a guy called Jules Maxwell, who's a musician, came down to Hereford. We played about with a song I wrote. Many years ago when I was 20, when I first saw my first ever sighting of a picture of my mother. And I wrote this song, played about with that. And actually, the piece that we the final piece is a bookended song of one verse written 20, 30 years ago and and the final piece in November last year. And, you know, I. I was a little. What's the word? These people are professionals. And Mark told me these they were top of their game and they were the top of the game. And I kind of had my self-doubts. 'What the bloody hell am I doing? Am I going to be able to to be able to pull something out of the bag that will justify these people being involved?' But but it was a gentle building of layers of trust that ended in the final thing.

Angela Samata: And you perform that song as part of the film. You sing and you are alone on stage, and you are there and vulnerable. And I think when Mark introduced the film last night, he said that often the most vulnerable person in the room is also the strongest. And I think that did sum up what the beautiful work that you have created together, and I'm wondering what that took for you as a person, as somebody who has, again, never really done anything like this before. What did it take personally to to do that, to perform that song that you had first started to write when you saw the picture of your mum for the first time and then, you know, you had the courage and the support that you needed to revisit that all those years later. What did that take personally?

Pete Johnson: I think that ...I think it's born. I think there is an element of and this was a big thing for my father. We're bloody minded buggers. And actually why shouldn't I? Actually is is is what I thought, you know, I've written these things and actually nobody's been interested before. I've shared stuff before. And actually there was a bit of interest. And there's this guy who's a professional artist going, 'Oh, that's good, that's good'. And so my confidence was grown. And actually I reflect on... So I work with young people with disabilities and this is connected... Trust me. I did a function once in front of a

business people and I spoke about the work that we do and the lives of young people with disabilities. And then I came off and I thought I'd done a reasonably good job and people said so. And then a young person in a wheelchair who I got on really well with and I worked with said to me, I could have done that. And that that that's happened very recently. And so in that space in that six years and it made me reflect... that actually my experience is valuable and it's my experience. So we go to I mean, we go to conferences. I've been to two conferences that you make me go to. People go to conferences and it often feels like academic land. But the power... And that's me, you know, I was the academic talking about people with disabilities. But the power is actually in the truth. And I think so when I start getting so here's... I think the the nub of the thing for me, when we started talking and you invited me to these weird and wonderful things, I didn't feel I could do it without the blessing of my dad. And so it created a mechanism for me to talk to him.

Angela Samata: Hmm. So I was your excuse to go there. Yeah.

Pete Johnson: Yeah, yeah. Well, actually, I didn't say Angela. I said, 'Look, I'm meeting Prince William. Are you alright about this?' And his words. Which are my words? 'Well, if it helps people, then why not?'

Pete Johnson: And so for the first time, we were absolutely on the same page. Whereas it had never... That discussion that never happened before. And that led... And I am going to blub it in a bit because I can feel it coming on... But that led to conversations. Short conversations throughout the next few years...where we talked about her which I'd never thought would happen. I never thought would happen in my life. And. And then my dad died.

Angela Samata: But he gave you that because those those conversations that you had with your dad, I can totally see them in the work that we saw last night. Yeah. You know, the fact that at the end of the film, you. Thank your mum, but you also thank your dad. And I'm wondering whether through the process of of working with Mark and working with the other 12 men who supported you through this process, do you feel as if as a father yourself and you go going through what it's like to to have a newborn baby in your hands and what it's like to worry about them every second of the day. I'm wondering whether the process of working with Mark, plus those amazing conversations that you had with your dad towards the end of his life, I'm wondering whether

that's brought you to a place where you have a deeper understanding of what he went through as a single parent, dealing with the stigma of losing his wife to suicide in the 1960s?

Pete Johnson: Absolutely. I mean, I think... So the piece, so there's there's an important part of the piece and it kind of sits in the middle, which is quite interesting, where we say... Because he did always used to tell me that life is circular. And actually, the work that has been created I could tell you truthfully that the conversation is with myself, is with my father, is to my mother, is to my daughter, to my wife, is to my brother and my sister. And also to... completely to myself and the circular nature. And then even the stuff that Jules brought in with them where he speaks about mother and father and grandmother and it's all connected to breath is a circular and life is circular...you know, we go we go through this thing. And I think more... this is this is not only about... Suicide is obviously my mother's suicide is obviously central. But this is about grief more than anything, I think. And none of us can get away with that unless and well, the majority of us cannot get away without experiencing grief. And, you know, I look at I look at the facebook group of adults bereaved as children. And I would never have found that group without the conversations we had in the presentations the I did and this piece of work. And there are so many people going through the same things. You know.. and that traumatic, you know, particularly losing somebody as.. a parent as a child. You know that traumatic effect on your subconscious. Makes things quite difficult.

Angela Samata: There's a there's a moment in the film where I can hear your breath.

Pete Johnson: Yeah.

Angela Samata: And it's very deliberate. And it's the type of breathing that I've seen in a toddler when a child is crying and they trying to stop crying is like, you know, that it's that, you know, when you're when they're trying to go to sleep after they've cried, and you're you soothing them and and it felt for a moment almost like you were connecting with a part of your childhood that you hadn't necessarily gone to before. And it was also the breath that sometimes people can experience after they are experiencing a panic attack. And I'm wondering whether... Have I picked up on that correctly? Is that

something that was deliberately chosen by you and Mark to to bring that into the piece?

Pete Johnson: Yeah, I mean, that's some of the writing... So after I've done. What's been amazing for me is that I found writing as a as a bit of a self therapy to myself and just started writing things down and felt better after them. And part of the, the circular thing that came out was about breathing in all the stuff that we were doing. Breathing is circular, isn't it? What I would say is that thing I hadn't gone back to before, I actually have never got away from from that. You know, I experienced I think that's the feeling I had as a child. I was a very tearful child, that breathing would be familiar...that carried on throughout my adult life. You know, that's something I've never escaped from. Even now, I think I get to a point where I go 'I just need to to breathe'. Yeah. Um. And it was a theme within all of the stuff that we explored when we were going through everything. Erm, with Mark and, and in fact, and there's that, there's an element. So my daughter was 18 a few weeks ago. Part of the piece is a is a love letter to anybody who wants it. And I wrote my love letter to my daughter and part of it is ends with don't forget to breathe. Which you can interpret in all the different ways that it can be interpreted in. But yeah no... It was a really important, important part of it I think.

Angela Samata: So now the work is out in the world. We had an audience there last night. And it was wonderful to to see that there were people who'd been bereaved by suicide in that audience. And I'm wondering how you felt this morning when you woke up and it was there. And it's a thing and it's out in the world and... You've done it. You know? And I'm wondering how you how you felt this morning when you woke up?

Pete Johnson: It it does feel like a full stop, actually, to me. So I've explored all this stuff. And I can now if I choose to, not to do it again. I've expressed it. And as I said, I've expressed it to myself more than more, you know, than to anybody else. This this when I was doing the whole thing, I was not aware of anybody else in the room. And, you know, there were quite a few people in in the space. It felt like... and there was no acting in it, you know, this is real and the emotion was real. I've done it. I've expressed it. I can.. when I go... There were times when I take my dog for a walk where it sits with me and it feels... like it's there holding my hand. And if it turns into something else, then that's cool. And if it doesn't, that's cool. So. So, yeah, I guess what I struggle with is...

my my worries are: the value of it? How can we use it to help people? But that your bag.

Angela Samata: Thank you.

Pete Johnson: You can do that, I've done my bit.

Angela Samata: Absolutely no pressure there then!

Pete Johnson: Does that makes sense?

Angela Samata: It abosolutly makes sense. And I think whenever... And I think we reach the same point, but it's taken me twice as long to get there. Yeah, you've kind of like fast tracked to that point. I think for me, you know, even recording this podcast with you it it.. You know, the last thing I say to myself internally, whenever I'm frightened or whenever I'm nervous about doing something, whenever I step foot on stage or in front of a camera in front of a microphone like we are now, my one constant is: 'if it helps one person'.

Pete Johnson: Yeah.

Angela Samata: And I think that you going through the process you went through with Mark saying yes to a situation that you had absolutely no idea where it was going to go, but you had belief in the professionals around you. The fact that last night we sat in a cinema and we we watched it together. It's you know, you've been on a huge journey. And I just think that if it helps one person, then, of course, it was worth it. But that doesn't mean it wasn't scary along the way. That doesn't mean that it wasn't an enormous deal for you to go from somebody who had not talked openly, honestly, in a way that gave you some... a chance to explore what you had been through and what you continue to go through. You know, the fact that you you you went from that to to what we saw last night, I think is an absolutely incredible achievement. And I hope that it's been it's been positive for you.

Pete Johnson: Yeah, I think it has. I've I've got no doubt in my mind that there'll be times where I begin to struggle again because. Because it's so complex. But where I'm confident and the reason that I stopped taking the medicine is that I have some control. I have control over it now. I own it. It doesn't own me. It will whatever the the the the effect on me is... will always be

there because it's so deep rooted. But. But it is mine. And I have... I am able to relate to it, if that makes sense? I mean, I'm allowed to ask you a question?

Angela Samata: Yep.

Pete Johnson: My my my biggest thing with all of this and, you know, is that 'Is this too self-indulgent?' Because there will be people who feel uncomfortable within it and sitting next to it and that... I don't know, I worry about everything anyway. But that concerns me that the... I don't know.. that self-indulgence thing. Did you ever feel the some of the stuff? Because. Because you sit there talking about yourself all the time.

Angela Samata: You do. And it is about your experience. And I think there is an element, certainly. You know, it's one of these things, isn't it, that comes to you at like 4:00 in the morning. You know, should I be doing this? Should be talking about my lived experience?

Pete Johnson: Yeah.

Angela Samata: But actually it's other people talking about their lived experience that gave me permission to do it.

Pete Johnson: Yes. And that's and that's the word, 'the permission', you know, that is the critical bit, you've given me permission. And I've... And hopefully this will allow other people, other people to.

Angela Samata: And I think that's the beauty of the process that you've been through with Mark, because he has also enabled you, you know, giving you permission to explore your losing your mum in a different way again, you know, in a creative way, in a way that is beautiful and, you know, you know, is totally relatable. And I think anybody who hasn't been briefed by suicide, if they see that that piece of work, will also be able to relate to somebody, you know, it's a human condition. You know, you make it so that actually it's not just about your lived experience solely. It's about the human condition. And I think that's the piece almost transcends that. I mean, if you know about the other layers, if you know about the journey that you've been on, then obviously it has a resonance that's different. But even if you didn't, if you walked into that room and saw on the big screen a man performing the way you do, of course you can... Any anybody could relate to that and anybody could bring

their own struggles to that. Do you know what I mean? So I think by... I don't know. You know, you say that I gave you permission to talk about your lived experience, but that's exactly what you've just done for a whole load of other people. Other people who are listening to us having a conversation now, or people who are lucky enough to see the work, or people who read about you or people who read your blog, you know, it's about lifting people up. It's about saying to people, actually, it's okay to talk about this. And you now are part of the group of people that do that for others. And I'm going to say thank you for all of the people that you are also giving permission to, because that's exactly what you've now done.

Pete Johnson: Yeah. Good. Well, I hope so. And I think I think also, you know, if you think about the professional, you know, medical world and, I've seen lots of GP's in my time. And we always started the things the physically wrong. And actually that bits of 'well let's just go back to the beginning shall we?' Never tend to happen. I think, I think I hope if people within the professional world see that they're able to reflect on the complexity and and the what's happened to you rather than what's wrong with you kind of thing. Yeah. I hope it does encourage people.

Angela Samata: I think there's no doubt about that at all. Thank you so much, Pete. Thank you so much for speaking to me today. And I think we've both managed to fighter are tears back but only just! But thank you so much and yeah I'm sure people will find this uhm yeah. Yeah. I don't need to say any more.

Pete Johnson: Thank you.

Angela Samata: Thanks for listening to this conversation. You can find out more information about the Suicide Chronicles in the show notes. Within the show notes, we have also included a list of helplines that you can contact to access support anytime, anywhere. The Suicide Chronicles is produced by Heart of Glass, the beautiful music you heard especially composed for this project by Andrew PM Hunt and sound design and audio production all by George Maund.