National gatherings after the Utøya terror
Gathering for the bereaved families

National gatherings for the bereaved

• Three gatherings the first year:
  • 11.-13. Nov. 2011
  • 9 -11. March 2012
  • 20.-22. July 2012 (the year day)
Sermonies

19 to 21 of August
• Return to Utøya – bereaved
• Return to Utøya – survivors
• Meeting between survivors and bereaved
• Memorial sermoni

30 sept til 1 okt
• Return to Utøya – bereaved
• Return to Utøya – survivors
On July 22, 2011, Anders Behring Breivik set off explosives in the governmental quarter of the capital of Norway, Oslo, killing eight and wounding many.

He went on to a small island situated around 40 km from Oslo. Dressed up as a police officer pretending to come to guard young members of the Labor party after the governmental bombing.
• Around 550 young people were gathered for their yearly political meeting at Utøya
• The killer moved systematically around the island, hunting the young people down, and ended up killing 69.
• 56 were brought to hospital with mild to major injuries
• Survivors fled, hid in buildings or in nature, swam against the shore and were picked up by private boats or finally rescued by the police.
A national trauma
• Terror events involving merciless killings of people are especially hard to experience, being the consequence of human acts of malevolence.

• Studies of bereaved after terror shows that the risk of complicated bereavement, depression, PTSD and other co-morbid symptomatology are high (Pivar and Prigerson 2004). However, few studies have followed the bereaved over time.
What is known about interventions?

• Weekend gatherings for the bereaved have previously been used as a follow-up strategy following several Scandinavian transport disasters. The aim has been to stimulate mutual support, while in parallel providing the bereaved with information and coping methods from professionals (Dyregrov, A., Straume, & Sari, 2008).

• The rationale is that enhanced support by other bereaved people makes it easier for families to cope with their new life situation.

• So far interventions for the bereaved have not been found to be very effective in reducing rates of post-death distress in all those bereaved (Currier, Neimeyer, & Berman, 2008).
Public help initiative.

- Following the tsunami in East Asia in 2004, where many Norwegians lost their lives, a «Comprehensive national health and social preparedness plan» was agreed on in 2007.

- In August 2011 a «Guideline for psychosocial interventions in crises, accidents and disasters» was launched (Norwegian Directorate of Health, 2011).

- In line with this guideline and previous research, and experiences with follow-up after disasters, the health authorities enacted a pro-active model for follow-up after the terror event of July 22, 2011.
Weekend gatherings

Purpose

The collective follow-up was planned according to a family perspective in order to:

• Signal society’s (and public authority’s) care and concern for those involved.
• Help many at the same time.
• Mobilize mutual support and help, within and between families.
• Normalize and validate people’s experiences and reactions (a psychoeducative component).
• Provide access to important information related to the event and its consequences.
• Help to integrate the loss into their future lives by supporting family members’ own coping mechanisms, and inform/teach them self-help methods.
• Secure early identification and referral of those in need of individual assistance.
• Provide positive experiences and hope for the bereaved.
Participants

• Parents and siblings (including stepparents, stepsiblings and partners of adult children)

• Close relatives of the few adults killed on the island. Because of the numbers involved, grandparents and close friends could not be invited. The amount of people who participated was 182, 224, 232 and 217 for the four gatherings

• 50 - 60 were below the age of 18
TEMPORARY ORGANISATION

The Norwegian Directorate of Health
Overall responsibility

Center for Crisis Psychology
Professional responsibility: Development of professional content and structure. Responsible for implementation

Center for Crisis Psychology
Modum Bad
Akershus University hospital, Grief centre

Hotel
Program

- Plenary and parallel sessions
- Small group meetings
- Activities for children and adolescents
- Informal meeting points
- The weekends usually started on a Friday afternoon with a welcome session and introductions
  - On each occasion, this followed the same sequence: a welcome address from the organizers (NHD), a welcome from a representative from the national support group for those affected by the terror, and an introduction to the professional content by CCP.
  - The first small group session followed suit. The next two days had a mixture of plenary speeches and meetings, parallel workshops with different professional content, and small group sessions. Room was left in the program for informal meetings between the bereaved.
Gathering 1 (4 months following the killings):

Day 1
- Professional team meets to plan and coordinate
- Opening of the gathering: speeches and presentation of the aims and content of the weekend
- Parallel small groups with themes: Getting to know each other: Who have they lost? – Short account of their loss experience – Learning about their loss; The media exposure; Common experiences
• Day 2
• o Keynote: Orientation/information by the leader for the Independent commission mandated to review and learn from the terrorist attacks
• o Parallel small groups with themes: How was the group yesterday; Discussion of the plenary information; Time from the funeral until the present; Changes over the first months; What has helped the most?; Support from social networks; Challenges in everyday life
• o Parallel plenary speeches with question and discussions. Themes:
  • Focus on the body: relaxation exercise
  • Self-help methods to reduce bothersome intrusive memories and thoughts
  • Young people and the school system (advice to parents)
  • To be a parent / caring capacities
• o Dinner with cultural event
• Day 3
• o Parallel small groups with themes: Follow-up on themes from the second day; Preparing for upcoming holidays (Christmas & New Year); Challenges until the next gathering (social networks, work and school, family communication); Experiences from the small groups
• o Plenary: Grief over time, social network support, coping advice (CCP)
• o Formal ending of the gathering with short speeches
Gathering 2 (8 months following the killings):

• Day 1
  o Professional team meet to plan and coordinate
  o Opening of the gathering: speeches and presentation of the aims and content of the weekend
  o Parallel small groups with themes: Time since last gathering; Changes in grief intensity: What have they done to re-establish routines?; What is most difficult now?; Relationship to the lost one; What coping methods function?

• Day 2
  o Keynote: Preparing for the court case. The prosecutors present how the court case will proceed and answer questions
  o Parallel small groups with themes: How was the group yesterday?; Discussion of the keynote presentation; What do they fear most concerning the court case and media coverage?; How to regulate exposure; Preparing children; How to communicate about this in the family
  o Joint meeting for parent and child groups – report from children’s activities
  o Dinner with cultural event
• Day 3
  • o Parallel plenary speeches: 1) Grief in the family, family interaction and communication (parents), 2) Grief and coping over time (adult siblings) (CCP)
  • o Parallel small groups with themes: Family interaction: What functions and what is challenging? –
Gathering 3 (12 months following the killings):

• Day 1
  • o Professional team meet to plan and coordinate
  • o Opening of the gathering with speeches and presentation of the aims and content of the weekend
  • o Parallel small groups with themes: Time since last gathering; The court case: How much have they followed and been present?; How has it affected them and how have they coped?; Differences in the family; Support during the case

• Day 2
  • o Parallel small groups with themes: Changes in grief and daily function over time; How has the court case impacted their grief?; Grief-upholding rituals; Anger and anger suppression
  • o Plenary: A review of the court case and its consequences by a lawyer from Norwegian Red Cross
  • o Parallel small groups with themes: Passing a whole year without one’s loved one; Passing the anniversary; How will they commemorate?; How have they planned commemoration within the family?
  • o Joint meeting for parent and child groups – report from children’s activities
  • o Dinner with cultural event
• Day 3
• o Parallel plenary speeches: 1) The trauma within grief; The upcoming memorial; Living with grief over time (parents), 2) Same theme for adult siblings (CCP)
• o Formal ending of the gathering with short speeches
• On Day 4 (one year anniversary date): Most families travelled to Utøya to commemorate their lost family member
Group rules and manuals

- Group rules were introduced in the first session and gently reminded at each of the weekends.
- Two group leaders led each group that varied somewhat in size.
- Between 35 and 40 group leaders were used in each gathering to lead four to five groups of children and adolescents and up to 15 groups of adults – including adult siblings.
- Manuals were developed for the group leaders.
- The professions of the group leaders were psychologists, psychiatrists, psychiatric nurses, social workers, priests, sociologists and a teacher.
Themes in the small groups

- The first gathering focus on covering the event, support received, their major challenges in their everyday life, and their efforts at coping. Preparation for upcoming anniversaries (Christmas, New Year), and family rituals and challenges until the next gathering (network, school and work, family interaction) was also included.

- For the second gathering, the major theme was “grief over time”. It started with a short summary of aims and rules. As the court case was approaching and focused upon in plenary sessions, this was also discussed in the small groups (see Table 1 for other themes). Various concrete methods, i.e., drawing a grief diagram or grief circle indicating how grief changed over time and how much of the day was sad and how much was happy, were available to use for concretization of discussions in this and later gatherings.
The third gathering centered on the court case that they had lived through and the passing of the first anniversary that coincided with the gathering. The participants were asked how much they had followed the court proceedings and in what way (personal presence, following internet, TV, newspapers), what had made the strongest impression, and whether new information or facts had come up about their loved ones. Other themes are listed in Table 1. Passing the anniversary was a central discussion subject, both the preparation for this and their plans for visiting the island or the grave. As several family members had wanted more focus on the trauma aspects of the terror, more room was made for discussing this issue, including traumatic reminders.
• A fourth gathering was highly desired by the bereaved, but was not decided by the government until late 2012. Taking place 19 months after the killings (i.e., February 2013), this gathering posed more of a challenge since people varied widely in their situation and adaptation to their loss. Important themes in this gathering were integrating the loss, and adaptation to a «new life».

• The last plenary session focused on family interaction. Everyone participated and every family was placed together. Both the adult and child/adolescent small groups worked on tasks such as «What is the most helpful thing someone in the family has done to support me?», «What is the biggest difference I notice in my family since he/she died?», and «What should I wish could be different in my family now?» prior to the plenary session.
Self help methods

- Restrict the time they think about their dead family member - set aside a specific time to approach the loss.
- Make use of imaginary techniques to reduce intrusive memories and fantasies.
- Make use of distraction and behavioral activation methods to control attention and improve daily functioning.
- Make use of thought stopping techniques coupled with setting aside time to approach their grief. Learn to monitor and control their internal dialogue.
- Take part in social activities to regain their social capacity even though it takes a lot of energy.
- Use «therapeutic rituals» to limit or end parts of their grief.
- Write letters to their lost loved one where they expressed everything they never had a chance to say or do, asking for forgiveness for things said or done that they regretted.
- «Ask» the dead person for advice or think about what he or she would have said.
- Give themselves permission to grieve less.
- Seek help if there is no increase in the hours and days where things seem a little better.
- Use sleep techniques and sleep hygiene to sleep better.
### Evaluation

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Do you perceive that the gathering</th>
<th>Was counter-productive</th>
<th>Unnecessary</th>
<th>To some extent helpful</th>
<th>Very helpful</th>
<th>Extremely helpful</th>
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<tr>
<td>1st gathering (N = 140)</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>6%</td>
<td>64%</td>
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<td>2nd gathering (N = 157)</td>
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<td>4th gathering (N = 136)</td>
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<td>32%</td>
<td>61%</td>
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Lessons learned from the gatherings

- With so many people involved, there must be careful planning, clear descriptions of aims and how to achieve them, and a firm structure for all days.
- One person with organizational competency should be in charge of organizational issues and secure solid links between all operating agencies and helpers and every part of the gathering.
- Group leaders must be empathic, knowledgeable, well prepared and have similar mental models of how the work is to be done. Time must be used on group formation, getting to know each other, agreement on goals and how to reach them. Time for discussions and plenty of room for participants to meet informally throughout the process is needed.
- The participants must be allowed to give feedback to influence the program along the way.
- There must be a readiness to assist those bereaved from other cultures and have interpreters present when needed.
- Written feedback from all group leaders must be given to the staff in charge of upcoming gatherings.
Reference