

# Weekend family gatherings for bereaved after the terror killings in Norway in 2011

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**Through an active outreach effort, Norwegian authorities offered the bereaved after the 2011 Utøya terror attack a collective follow-up program, outlined in this article by Atle Dyregrov and colleagues.**

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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 then went on to a small island situated around 40 km from Oslo. He dressed up as a police officer pretending to come to guard young members of the Labor party after the governmental bombing.

The youths were gathered for their yearly political meeting, taking place at the peaceful small island of Utøya. Around 550 young people were present. He moved systematically around the island, hunting the young people down, and ended up killing 69. Fifty-six were brought to hospital with mild to major injuries. The survivors did everything they could to escape; they fled, hid in buildings or in nature, swam against the shore and were picked up by private boats or finally rescued by the police.

This «hunt» went on for more than an hour. The formal investigation was very critical of the police response as well as of the Norwegian security preparedness to prevent such terror events. The perpetrator was caught alive, and a lengthy trial started nine months after the killing, lasting two months. He was sentenced to 21 years of preventive detention. The event was the main media feature for more than a year in Norway, not a day going by without pictures or stories appearing in newspapers, on the radio or on TV. Also, «the whole» Norwegian population engaged in support concerts, memorials, condolences, social media statements, and so on.

Each year both natural and man-made disasters claim many lives. Disastrous events, especially man-made, rupture human bonds between family, friends, co-workers and within and between communities. The bereaved are at risk of adverse psychological and somatic after-effects, including complicated grief reactions. Traumatic losses are associated with high levels of distress and impaired functioning (Dyregrov, K., Nordanger, & Dyregrov, 2003; Rynearson & McCreery, 1993).

Terror events involving merciless killings of people are especially hard to experience, being the consequence of human acts of malevolence. Pivar and

Prigerson (2004), in a paper about those bereaved after terror, concluded that the risk of complicated bereavement, depression, PTSD and other co-morbid symptomatology was high. However, few studies have followed the bereaved over time.

As of yet there are no well-documented and accepted standards on how to follow up those bereaved having lost a beloved one in a man-made disaster. A few programs have described using group approaches for the bereaved following disasters (Boss, Beaulieu, Wickling, Turner, & LaCruz, 2003; Stubenbort, Donnelly, & Cohen, 2001). As death is integral to life, death is seen as normal, and every society has its own traditions for dealing with death. However, when death happens suddenly, without forewarning as in transport disasters and terror, and many people die at the same time, the situation is extraordinary, and extra attention is needed for guidance, support and follow-up.

The bereaved following such events express a clear wish to be connected with others in the same situation as themselves. Being with others who have lived through the same event as oneself allows for mutual support from fellow sufferers (Dyregrov, K. & Dyregrov, 2008). Possic, Shamai and Sadeh (2013), in a small study of Israeli parents whose children were killed in terror attacks, found that for many of them the new peer group formed by other parents, called the «family of the bereaved», became a primary source of support and belonging. They state that «parents view this subsystem as the most significant in their adjustment and are able to articulate what it is about their being part of the family of the bereaved that they find helpful – ‘identifying and being understood,’ ‘belonging like family,’ ‘sisters,’ ‘common fate,’ ‘expanding the social group,’ ‘togetherness,’ ‘continuity’» (p. 491). The same positive experiences have been reported by bereaved family members after single unnatural and/or violent deaths (Dyregrov, K., & Dyregrov, 2008).

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.

However, 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). Targeting those at risk for developing adverse reactions have been recommended. Bereaved following loss of a child or sibling constitute such risk groups (Keyes et al., 2014; Rostila, Saarela, & Kawachi, 2012a, b). Although we lack methodologically sound studies that compare different types of losses, murder must be regarded as a type of loss that results in a high risk of psychopathology (Denderen, Keijser, Kleen, & Boelen, 2013). The intervention described herein aims to help this group, and although we do not know whether the intervention reduces the risk of complicated grief or other health-debilitating conditions resulting from the terror deaths, it is very much in line with what those bereaved after unnatural deaths emphasize to be helpful (Dyregrov, K., 2002).

**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, and 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.

This model implied that the municipalities gave active follow-up, where the service system initiated contact with the victims (bereaved and survivors) and offered various kinds of support and care. The Norwegian Directorate of Health (NDH) asked the Center for Crisis Psychology (CCP) to develop a plan and a program for providing collective support to the bereaved after the terror killings, and then later to head the professional work during these gatherings for the Utøya-bereaved. In all, four weekend gatherings were held, four, eight, 12 and 18 months after the mass killing.

This article describes the follow-up program in some detail to provide ideas and a template for planning follow-up after future mass events. A tentative evaluation based on feedback from the participants is also presented.

## **Weekend gatherings**

**Purpose of the gatherings.** 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.

**Context of the gatherings.** The gatherings took place at a hotel close to the capital Oslo, usually from Friday to Sunday. Every bereaved family travelled to the hotel or flew in from all over Norway. Travel and accommodation were covered by the Norwegian government. The hotel offered facilities that we deemed important for the

overall climate for the gatherings: it had excellent recreation facilities inside and outside, including good tour terrain, was close to Norway's main airport, had a dedicated and flexible staff, and many group rooms.

**Who took part?** Parents and siblings (including stepparents, stepsiblings and partners of adult children) were included, as were 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.

Among these between 50 and 60 were below the age of 18.

**Structure of the gatherings.** The gatherings were organized as a temporary organization with the NDH as the host responsible for all the practical arrangements. While CCP had the main responsibility for setting up and designing the professional content of the program, several other institutions participated in discussing the content and providing group leaders to make the program possible. In addition, Red Cross established an activity program for children and adolescents outside of the hours the young spent devoted to the program. Figure 1 outlines this organization.

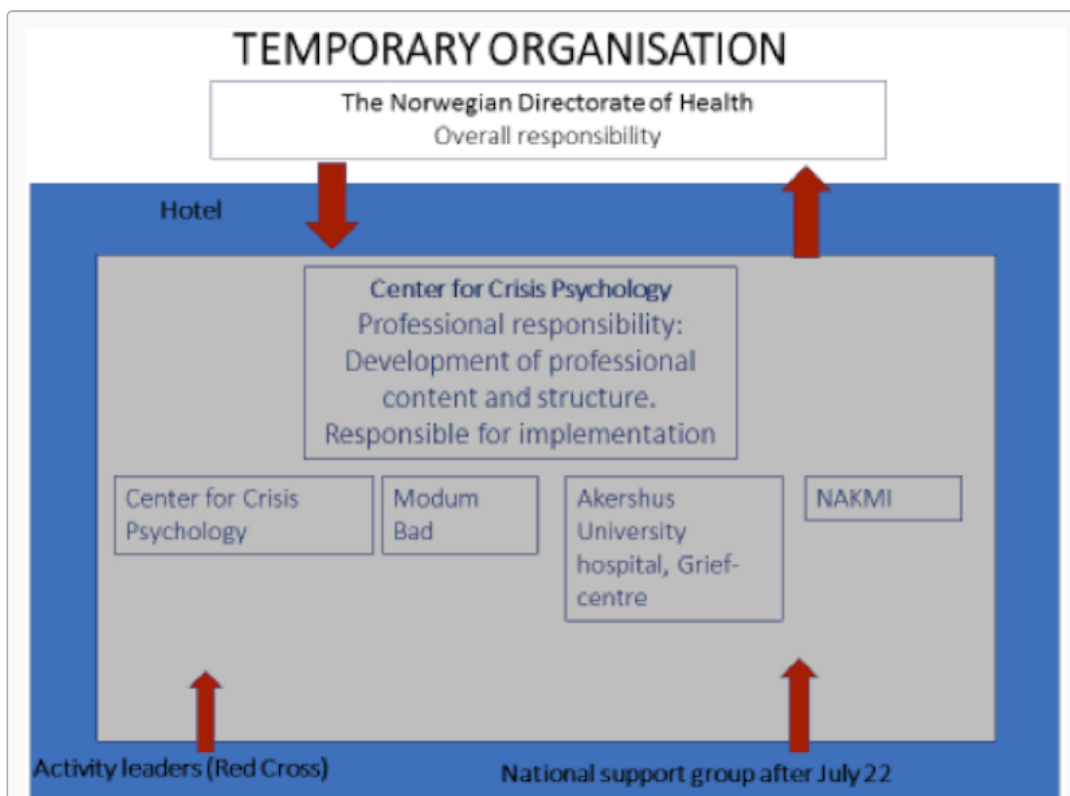


FIGURE 1: Structure for the temporary organization of the weekend gatherings.

A member of staff from CCP coordinated the professional, the hotel and the NHD staff to ensure good interaction and joint mental models over the weekends. Attention was given to the ways in which this temporary organization could provide containment for the levels of emotion involved. This included ensuring good communication with the hotel, the Red Cross volunteers, and the support group for the bereaved. «Buzz groups» were held to give staff members an opportunity to reflect upon their expectations about their work. This enabled them to take up their

roles as fully as possible during the weekend ahead. In this context «helpers» were not representing the organizations they came from, but were instead part of the team for this temporary organization, whose goal was to make it possible to work with the grief process. In order to take up their roles effectively, they therefore had to understand and adhere to the goals, methods, time limits, and other features of the temporary organization.

The family gatherings consisted of plenary and parallel sessions, small group meetings, activities for children and adolescents and 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. In Table 1 an outline of the structure and major themes for the weekends are outlined.

**TABLE 1:** Structure and major themes covered in the four weekend gatherings (adults).

<b>Gathering 1 (4 months following the killings):</b>	
Day 1	o Professional team meets 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: 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: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on the body: relaxation exercise</li> <li>• Self-help methods to reduce bothersome intrusive memories and thoughts</li> <li>• Young people and the school system (advice to parents)</li> <li>• To be a parent / caring capacities</li> </ul>
	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

<b>Gathering 1 (4 months following the killings):</b>	
	o Plenary: Grief over time, social network support, coping advice (CCP)
	o Formal ending of the gathering with short speeches
<b>Gathering 2 (8 months following the killings):</b>	
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? – differences between parents and siblings; How to optimize the social network support; How do parents cope with their children’s grief?; Normalization of daily life
	o Formal ending of the gathering with short speeches
<b>Gathering 3 (12 months following the killings):</b>	
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?

<b>Gathering 1 (4 months following the killings):</b>	
	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	
Gathering 4 (18 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; The verdict and commission report; How do the bereaved now live with the loss?
Day 2	o Plenary 1: «Being uplifted» – A mother whose child were brutally killed in year 2000, describes her mastery journey. Plenary 2: Aspects of grief in a long-term perspective (CCP)
	o Parallel small groups with themes: Discussion of plenary sessions; Integrating the loss in one’s life; finding new meaning; How have the bereaved changed and what have they learned?
	o Parallel plenary speeches with question and discussions. Themes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interaction with social network – Experiences from the group</li> <li>• What to do to heal psychological pain – The solitude of grief</li> <li>• When life becomes meaningless – Existential and spiritual challenges</li> <li>• For adult siblings: When loss occurs when entering adult life</li> <li>• How to improve concentration and sleep</li> <li>• Grief and the parental relationship</li> </ul>
	o Dinner with cultural event
Day 3	o Repetition of parallel plenary speeches from Day 2
	o Parallel small groups with themes: Reporting from attended parallel sessions; Family interaction: How have we supported each other?; What is the greatest difference in family form before death?; What wishes do I have for changes in the family? How had the bereaved experienced taking part in family gatherings? Themes were parallel in sibling and parent groups
	o Plenary: Grief in the family. Feedback from small groups – interactive discussions between adults and children/adolescents (CCP and collaborating professionals)
	o Formal ending of the gathering with short speeches

An overall aim for presentations was to increase understanding between family members and promote communication in the family. How to understand and support bereaved children and adolescents was discussed in plenary and parallel sessions. Small groups consisting of bereaved with the same status as oneself (i.e., other



bereaved parents or other bereaved siblings) was the major activity. The topics of discussions were the same in all the small groups during the four weekend gatherings, so that family members could share their experiences afterwards. Group leaders for children and youth invited parents into the groups at specific times to brief them on the work that was done.

On each weekend all group and activity leaders, as well as staff from the NDH, met for several hours to «team build» and calibrate their minds towards the work ahead and review the content and rationale behind the manuals for the group leaders. The psychologist in charge of the temporary organization led this meeting. In addition, all staff met each morning and evening to uphold common aims for the work, share lessons learned, and to ensure the quality of the services for the bereaved. Each morning the coordinating psychologist also met with the hotel and NDH to plan for the day and be notified about issues that might have arisen during the night. A physician (psychiatrist) had a free role during the day if there was a need for individual consultations, and he was also on call during the night if an emergency should develop (with physicians from the local area as backup). No nighttime emergencies occurred, but some consultations were conducted during daytime, and referrals were made to local mental health professionals in the community where the family lived.

The weekend gatherings included a multicultural focus. A representative from The Norwegian Centre for Minority Health Research (NAKMI) was involved in the planning of the program and was part of the professional team at the gatherings. This was to ensure that we - as far as possible - included and supported the bereaved with different cultural backgrounds. Some had been exposed to previous traumatic experiences and losses and had their closest network in their country of origin.

**The professional program.** The professional program was planned in detail in the months preceding the weekends. It was outlined in manuals for group leaders for each weekend. The manual for the first weekend contained the philosophy behind our thinking, outlined how to structure the small groups, and described important aspects for running the groups. All small group leaders were selected from institutions familiar with working with bereaved in groups (CCP, Modum Bad and Ahus hospital). Regardless of their previous experience with groups, we deemed it important to outline the special perspectives that were at the core of this work. It was stressed that the group work would be different to usual grief groups as the killings and magnitude of the event were unprecedented in Norway. At each gathering four group meetings were conducted, each lasting for one and a half hours, with a total number of 16 group sessions in all four gatherings.

The group leader's role was to introduce the group members, the group rules, steer the conversation, and allow everyone time to speak. Moreover, the leader was to take initiative and actively invite conversations, introduce themes, and structure the conversation around preplanned themes and themes that participants brought up (see major themes in Table 1). Since most of the group leaders were experienced therapists, they encouraged participants in a respectful manner to reflect upon their



own coping strategies when, e.g., rumination, avoidance or grief sustaining rituals were very dominant.

Group rules were introduced in the first session and gently reminded at each of the weekends. Here we stressed the importance of respect for each other, not having to say anything, not leaving the group without informing the group leaders, and room for disagreement. 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 – depending on the total number participating at each gathering. In the manuals for the later gatherings we made short summaries of previous information to «tune» participants in to the work ahead, as well as securing that the groups had a similar structure and content. The professions of the group leaders were psychologists, psychiatrists, psychiatric nurses, social workers, priests, sociologists and a teacher.

A special program was in place for children and adolescents, similar in content to the adult program, but adjusted to age. A separate manual was developed for group leaders for the young bereaved, one for each of the gatherings. Besides discussing with other bereaved youngsters, the program contained many activities, including both art and sport features. The program had more concrete activities than the adult program, i.e., cards for identifying feelings and recognizing grief, use of drawings (smaller children) and writing tasks (older children/adolescents). The themes covered in the group sessions included: how they learned about what happened and thoughts and feelings about the killings, the funeral, the media coverage, what had helped them, how best to cope with everyday life, family and social network, grief in parents, school issues, what they had learned, and hopes for the future. Meetings with parents were an integral part of this program.

**Theme progress over the gatherings.** Most of the themes for the group gatherings changed over time. The themes for each gathering reflected CCP's extensive experience with bereaved and traumatized people over 25 years, including previous weekend gatherings following Norwegian disasters. Research and clinical experience with bereaved from previous «single» murder situations and other violent/unnatural deaths also informed the themes selected and so did knowledge and experience with regard to factors that may contribute to the development of complicated grief reactions or lack of integration of the incident and the loss.

New themes were introduced as the bereaved obtained more distance in time to their loss. Because of the special nature of the deaths, certain themes had to reflect what was going on regarding the court case, i.e., meeting representatives of the investigation commission and the court to help towards establishing understanding and trust in the system that investigated the event, and create coherence and a better understanding of what took place. As the third gathering took place in connection with the passing of the first anniversary, this was reflected in the themes chosen. Importantly, most of the themes that were discussed in the groups were introduced in plenary sessions prior to the groups or summed up after a group session in plenary. However, the bereaved also took part in deciding what themes

they wanted to prioritize.

In Table 1, the major themes of the small groups during the first weekend gathering are listed. They covered 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.

The group work was used in the plenary session where all participants were present. Some important aspects of how children and adolescents experience parental grief when they listened to this with their parents were brought up, i.e., how siblings of the deceased often want to alleviate their parents' despair and perceive them to be less available to attend to their needs because grief occupies so much of the parent's mental and emotional energy. In the very last group meeting the focus was on how to create meaning in one's future life, how they had changed as people, their views on life, values, and so on, and how it had been to be part of the group during all the gatherings.

In addition to leaving ample time to talk about grief, sorrow and longing, the focus through all four gatherings was very much on how they could develop and learn coping methods to have the best foundation to handle their daily function.

An important part of the program was empowerment; i.e., emphasizing what the bereaved could do themselves to cope with grief and alleviate psychological pain. Through presentations and written material examples of good coping strategies and specific advice was given. Concrete suggestions were provided on how to deal with sleep difficulties, intrusive memories or fantasies, or fear of certain activities. Among the self-help advice they received were how to:

- 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.

**Participant's evaluation of the usefulness of the gatherings.** A brief evaluation was carried out by the NDH. The NHD handed out evaluation forms at the end of the weekends. Table 2 provides information on the adult participants' view of these gatherings. It is evident that the adult bereaved found the gatherings very helpful. In fact, the response from participants was almost overwhelming, with more than 90% reporting that they were extremely or very helpful and none who thought them counterproductive or unnecessary. The small group sessions were found to be especially helpful. They trusted the professional leaders and felt safe to share thoughts and feelings. Those under 18 years of age found the gatherings a little less useful, but still more than 80% ticked off the very or extremely useful categories.

**TABLE 2:** How useful did adult participants perceive the collective gatherings?

Do you perceive that the gathering	Was counterproductive	Unnecessary	To some extent helpful	Very helpful	Extremely helpful
1st gathering (N = 140)	0	0	6%	64%	30%
2nd gathering (N = 157)	0	0	10%	45%	45%
3rd gathering (N = 157)	0	0	8%	25%	67%
4th gathering (N = 136)	0	0	7%	32%	61%

Having had contact with many family members since the event we have heard many statements such as: «If it wasn't for the gatherings, we would not know what our situation would have been»; or «The gatherings have definitely been the most important help after our loss». In the final group meeting, the weekend gatherings were reviewed. Participants particularly emphasized the usefulness of being with others who had experienced the same as themselves, having their experience validated. One participant expressed this in a note to the NHD:

*It is intense to go so deeply into one's feelings and experiences related to what happened on July 22, but so good to experience that I am taken seriously and that I can be with others who lost their loved ones in the same manner as me. I really experience that these gatherings help me in my grief process. I feel stronger and better prepared to handle the future.*

## Discussion

We found, in line with Possick et al. (2013), that families found themselves together in a new «family of bereaved» that served as an important source of belonging, mutual support and togetherness. They highly appreciated the gatherings and their time together. We do not have any means of knowing whether such gatherings lead to less health deterioration. Future studies with designs involving control groups are needed for this. However, in our ongoing research on the bereaved after July 22 we will explore the importance of gatherings as predictors for different health measures. Similar views about the importance of the mutual help and support received from other bereaved as voiced herein has been documented in research (Feigelman & Feigelman, 2011).

The gatherings pose many challenges and need thorough planning. Having the central government taking responsibility for the gatherings signaled that this was society's responsibility and freed up the professional staff for their tasks. Although the participants have been very pleased with the content and structure, some

experienced the meetings with some of the official representatives as difficult. Others found the professional agenda too tight, and asked for more space between activities.

Gathering so many people at a hotel over four weekends is costly, and it may not be feasible in less affluent countries. However, we believe that the intervention approach could be adjusted to less costly alternatives and still function well. The challenge after the terror in Norway was that those bereaved lived all over the country, and that Norwegian topography makes for a very long journey to get from one part of Norway to another. Although staying overnight together has obvious benefits in creating possibilities for social connections, in countries where distances are shorter and those bereaved live geographically closer, a similar program can be used with people coming in every day from their own homes.

These gatherings cannot replace good local follow-up. Many struggle with general psychological distress, complicated grief reactions as well as posttraumatic stress reactions over time ([Dyregrov, K., Dyregrov, & Kristensen, in press](#)) and need good specialty services for the family and family members.

Evidence suggests that positive emotions are an important source of resilience, protect psychological health and have the ability to undo or downregulate the negative health effects of stress ([Garland et al., 2010](#)). For adults, the introduction of meditation and mindfulness-based approaches aimed at this, as well as the physical surroundings of the gatherings. Children and adults could enjoy music and good meals and other activities directed at creating positive experiences alongside the «hard» group work.

Moreover, the psychoeducation (e.g., about normality of reactions, self-help methods, etc.), recognition of others with similar reactions, installing belief and hope for the future, hopefully contributed to this downregulation. The hotel provided a «warm climate» for participants and a special dinner with performances by musicians or magicians at each gathering were events that added to the positive emotions. It should be said that it is important to know the songs chosen by the artists to make sure they are not too «emotional».

People can become more resilient by experiencing a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives ([Rutten et al., 2013](#)). This purpose is often shattered by terror events like the Utøya murders. Being with the other bereaved, establishing new ties and discussing their future challenges, have hopefully assisted them in the process of establishing new life goals. By not being alone and experiencing the comfort of being with others in a similar situation, people could take steps towards a new future.

Other purposes of the gatherings were also achieved: by having these gatherings sponsored by the government, the larger society showed its care for those most affected by the terror events. Many family members could be reached at once, their experiences and reactions could be validated and normalized, they could access information, including self-help methods, and acquire help with integrating their loss.

A professional challenge when working with large groups of those bereaved is to create a climate that recognizes the loss they have suffered so that the bereaved can accept and tolerate our strong focus on adaptation to a «new life» and integrate the loss. Right from the opening of the first gathering, we focused on recognizing the enormous loss they had suffered and the need to maintain some form of relationship and belonging to their loved ones. In the small groups the participants got the opportunity to express their love and share memories e.g., by showing photographs that they were encouraged to bring along. When such a platform is established, it is our experience that we can be very clear in our focus to reclaim their life, regulate their affects and focus on life here and now as well as their loss.

At the evaluation session at the end of all gatherings, staff members noted how important it had been that the temporary organization had been run in a structured and predictable way. This had offered a secure frame for the work that had to be done, and had given the staff the courage to face difficult questions and complex tasks. Especially in the face of enormous emotional pressure, it is very important to provide structure and to understand that it has an essential containing function. This means that frustrations and pain are not free floating, since they can be handled within the structured frame. More from this work is described elsewhere ([Bugge, 2014](#)).

Lessons learned from the gatherings were:

- 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.

## **Conclusion**

When many people experience the loss of a loved one in the same disaster, there is

an opportunity to capitalize on their mutual support, as well as reaching out to the group in unison. Through an active outreach effort, Norwegian authorities offered the bereaved after a major terror attack collective follow-up at various time points following the disaster.

The bereaved found this approach very helpful. The user perspective is deemed very important by Norwegian health authorities. Through the described approach, the user perspective has been safeguarded and combined with providing professional guidance on how best to cope with loss over time.

Health benefits from the gatherings are hard to measure due to the special nature of disasters and the research ethics involved. However, we think that the opportunity to meet and discuss with others has social support effects for the group that go well beyond measurable health effects. This involves deep feelings of community with others in the same situation and a sense that society cares through its dedicated efforts to care and follow-up over time.

The present model/program for bereaved gatherings should be refined when adapted for future disasters in Norway. Hopefully, some aspects and ideas may also be useful for similar populations outside Norway.

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## **Weekend family gatherings for bereaved after the terror killings in Norway in 2011**

This article describes a program to help bereaved families who all lost a close family member during the Utøya terror where 69 people, mostly of young age, were shot and killed. The bereaved gathered over four weekends to process and learn about grief in a program organized by the Norwegian Directorate of Health (NDH). This proactive follow-up included bereaved parents and siblings who took part in group sessions, plenary lectures, workshops, and social activities over four weekends following the terror killings. The same structure was used in each gathering. The themes, both in groups and plenary, changed over time and reflected important events (e.g., the trial, verdict, commission report) and the grief process over time. A tentative evaluation by the NDH indicated that the bereaved found this approach very helpful. The description provides a «blueprint» that can be a starting point for organizing future follow-up for bereaved after disasters.

**Keywords:** bereaved, group measure, terror killings, weekend gatherings.

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