

EXPERIENCES AND OUTCOMES OF PEOPLE ATTENDING SUICIDE BEREAVEMENT PEER SUPPORT

Findings from a study of members of the HUGG Peer Support Groups



Eve Griffin, Selena O'Connell, Eimear Ruane McAteer, Niall Seymour, M. Isabela Troya, Paul Corcoran, Ella Arensman
School of Public Health,
University College Cork
and National Suicide
Research Foundation, Cork

This research was funded by the Irish Research Council's New Foundations Award Scheme 2020 (NF/2020/20965640) and the Health Research Board's Summer Scholarship Scheme 2021 (SS-2021-066).

Report design:
Abigale Owens

PROJECT SUMMARY

People bereaved by suicide, family members as well as other bereaved individuals, may experience a lasting impact on their emotional, physical and mental health. Support groups are commonly sought by those bereaved by suicide and become an understanding community that can help ease the pain of their grief (Cerel et al, 2009).

HUGG (Healing Untold Grief Groups) was established in 2017 to provide community-based peer-support groups to adults, aged 18 years and older, who have been bereaved by suicide.

The aim of this project was to explore the experiences and outcomes of adults attending the HUGG peer support groups in terms of psychological wellbeing and grief experiences, using survey and interview methods.

The specific objectives were to:

1. Examine the profile and outcomes of group members across a number of measures, specifically levels of depression and suicidality, social adjustment, stigma, somatic symptoms and traumatic grief.
2. For new members of the groups, assess changes in these outcomes at baseline, up to six months follow-up.
3. Explore members' experiences with the peer support groups, particularly in a virtual setting.
4. Explore, via focus groups, group facilitators' experiences of holding groups in a virtual setting.

PROFILE OF GROUP MEMBERS

METHOD

- We asked all group members to complete an anonymous survey (T1). The survey gathered information on demographics, along with mental and physical wellbeing.
- In total, 75 participants completed the survey between August 2020 and May 2021.

MEASURES USED

- **Overall mental wellbeing** was measured by the WHO Wellbeing Index (WHO-5).
- **Depressive symptoms** and **active suicidal ideation** were measured by the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9).
- **Social adjustment** was measured using the Work and Social Adjustment Scale (WSAS).
- **Traumatic grief** was measured using the Traumatic Grief Inventory-Self-Report (TGI-SR).
- **Somatic (physical) symptoms** and **perceived stigma** were measured by the Grief Experience Questionnaire (GEQ).

EXPERIENCES OF SUPPORT

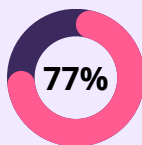
- For the vast majority, it was their first time attending a peer support group (85%).
- All participants were previously/currently engaged in other supports, including counselling (77%).
- The average time attending the HUGG groups was nine months.

KEY FINDINGS

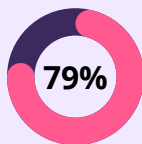
- Most participants were female (85%) and the average age was 46 years.
- Most were bereaved in the past three years (60%) and one in five (20%) had experienced multiple bereavements.
- 93% had lost a family member or spouse to suicide.
- Approximately half (53%) of participants were currently in a relationship or married, with one quarter (25%) separated, divorced or widowed.

REPORTED WELLBEING

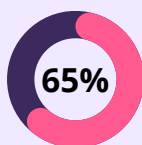
Compared with the general population, participants reported negative outcomes in terms of mental and physical wellbeing, which were more pronounced for **those recently bereaved** (in past three years).



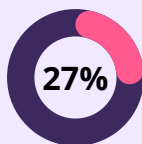
reported significant levels of poor mental wellbeing



reported some depressive symptoms; 48% reported moderate-severe symptoms



reported moderate-severe impairment in terms of social adjustment



reported high levels of perceived stigma

1 in 4



reported some thoughts of self-harm or suicide in the **previous two weeks**



[**CLICK HERE TO
READ THE FULL
STUDY**](#)

PSYCHOSOCIAL OUTCOMES OF GROUP MEMBERS

METHOD

All **new members** who completed a survey before their first group session (T1) were also asked to complete two follow-up surveys, after three (T2) and six months (T3). In total, 28 participants provided at least one follow-up survey.

We looked at changes in the key outcomes measures over time.

KEY FINDINGS

Taking into account time since bereavement, we found a significant improvement in:

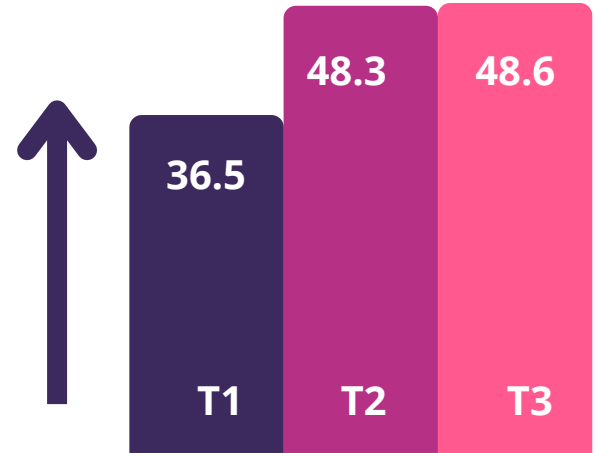
- Overall wellbeing
- Symptoms of traumatic grief
- Physical (somatic) symptoms of grief

Those more recently bereaved (in past three years) reported improvements in grief symptoms more so than overall wellbeing.

All reported improvements held after six months.

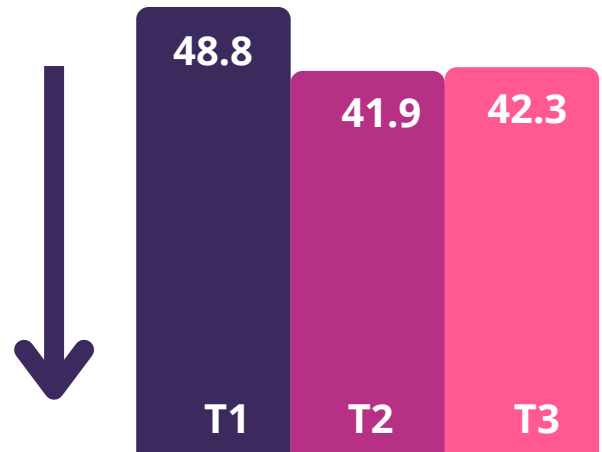
OVERALL WELLBEING

On average, participants reported a significant improvement in overall mental wellbeing after participating in the groups.



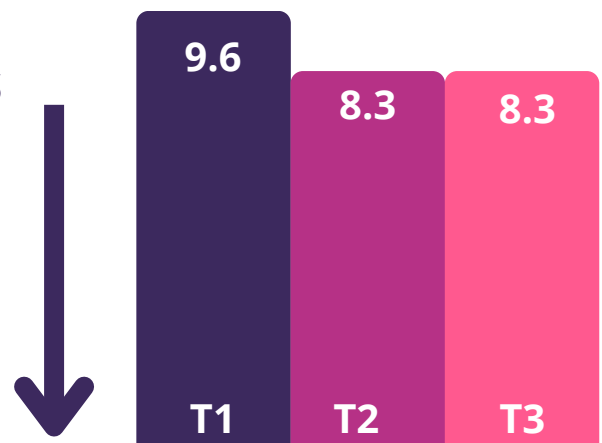
TRAUMATIC GRIEF

On average, participants reported a significant reduction in reported symptoms of traumatic grief.



SOMATIC SYMPTOMS

Somatic (physical) symptoms of grief were measured by the subscale of the Grief Experience Questionnaire (GEQ) (ref). On average, participants reported a significant reduction in reported somatic symptoms of grief.



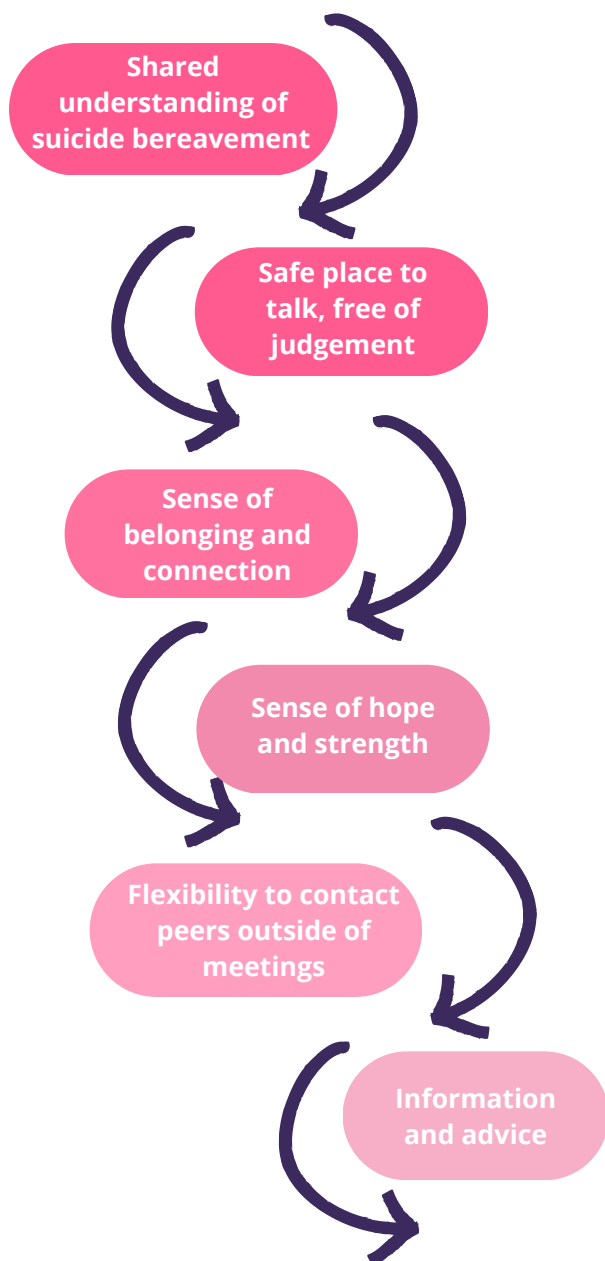
EXPERIENCES OF PEER SUPPORT: SURVEYS

METHOD

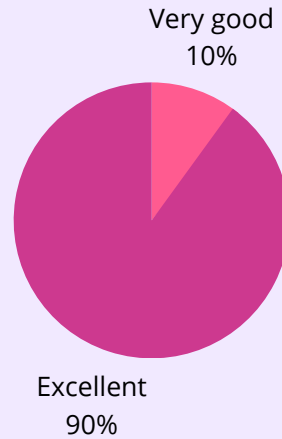
We included questions on experiences of the groups in the surveys described above. We asked participants to rate specific aspects of the groups and provided space for comments on their experiences. In total we had data from 51 participants with experience of participating in the groups.

KEY FINDINGS

The following were the main benefits of HUGG peer support groups identified through open-ended survey responses.



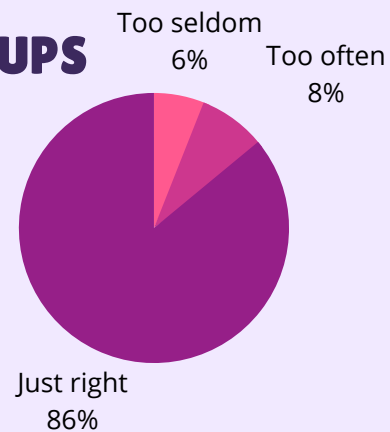
QUALITY OF FACILITATOR SUPPORT



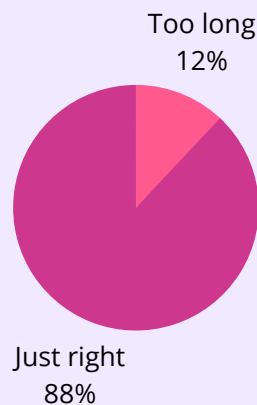
Most participants rated the quality of facilitator support as excellent. Facilitators were valued for being caring, professional, facilitating participation in the group and being a reliable source of information.

FREQUENCY OF GROUPS

Most participants felt fortnightly meetings were just right. This allowed time to reflect and continuity of relationships without becoming too burdensome.



DURATION OF GROUPS



Most participants felt the approximate 2-hour duration of groups was just right. The remaining small number of participants felt two hours was too long due to draining energy or creating practical challenges in availability.

IMPROVEMENTS

When asked about negatives of the HUGG peer support groups, many participants responded "nothing". The main improvement suggested was greater availability and awareness of the HUGG peer support groups.

EXPERIENCES OF PEER SUPPORT: INTERVIEWS

METHOD

In-depth interviews were conducted individually with 12 members of HUGG groups to provide further information on experiences of the groups and how this helps people in the context of their unique experiences and other supports.

KEY FINDINGS

Helpful features of the groups:

1 Flexibility in communicating with peers

2 Shared understanding of suicide

3 Sharing and validating experiences

4 Connection and belonging

5 Comparing oneself with peers at different stages of their grief

6 Collectively processing grief

The groups were sometimes experienced as emotionally challenging though this did not overshadow the perceived benefit of the group for participants.

[CLICK HERE TO ACCESS THE FULL STUDY](#)

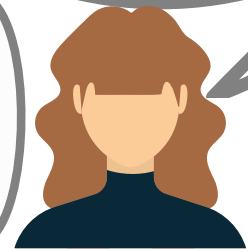


You don't have to put everything into the perfect words to make somebody understand because **they already understand. So that is the best part**, is that they do.



I think the thing I felt the most was **I felt really alone in my grief**, like I felt no-one else understood [...]. That's what I get in [peer-support group] and **that's the only place I have had that** and have since, so it's really important to me.

It's really helpful for people early on to **see someone sitting there breathing, alive, after four or five years** of this and saying 'It does get better'.



It has been a different order to the help that I received in one-on-one counselling, which feels like more about your **rational take on your bereavement**, but there's **just a beautiful empathy with being in the same space as people who have suffered the same grievous loss** and somehow it just lightens the load.

I suppose in the early days you're hardly able to hear anything or anyone, but I suppose somebody **telling you that there is help out there**, there are people who care, there is support out there.



EXPERIENCES OF VIRTUAL GROUP MEETINGS

METHOD

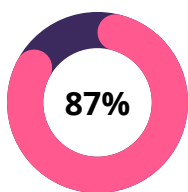
Surveys of HUGG participants included specific questions concerning experiences of participating in online groups.

A semi-structured focus group was conducted with three HUGG facilitators to understand experiences of facilitating the groups in a virtual format.



KEY FINDINGS

Group members and facilitators were satisfied with participating in online groups.



87% reported being “extremely confident” at using the computer and internet

A messaging platform that enabled communication between meetings was valued.

KEY FINDINGS



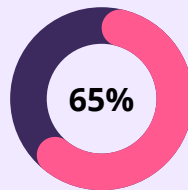
Reported benefits of online format

- Ability to continue supportive peer group meetings during the pandemic
- Greater flexibility to participate with less time and travel requirements
- Increased access to those who may not have otherwise accessed a group (due to location, hesitance about attending an in-person group)



Reported drawbacks of online format

- Lack of body language and physical contact
- Potential challenge for facilitators to support a group member who becomes distressed
- Concern about a breach of privacy on online platforms/in the home environment
- Technical difficulties/loss of some members with move online



65% would prefer a blended approach to future peer-support groups (with both in-person and online options).

To find out more about HUGG peer support groups visit www.hugg.ie

For more information on this research, you can contact Dr Eve Griffin (evegriffin@ucc.ie) or visit www.nsrif.ie