



The
Compassionate
Friends

Bereaved through Drug or Alcohol Use

A nationwide organisation of bereaved parents
and their families offering support after a child dies.

Bereaved through Drug or Alcohol Use

The death of our son or daughter is probably the worst thing that can happen to us as parents, no matter how old they were and no matter how it came about. For each of us, our pain and loss are unique. Sometimes it can feel almost impossible to imagine life without our loved one.

For those of us who go through drug or alcohol related bereavement, there are added complications. We may face social stigma and isolation. It may appear that our child's death is not 'worthy' in the eyes of society, and our grief is not entitled to the same amount of respect or sympathy that is shown to others. Some of us may already feel excluded by society, as our child may have been seen as someone not deserving of support. Consequently, we may have already been in a position of loneliness and secrecy, perhaps pretending to the outside world that everything is okay.

Whatever the background to our child's death, the result is a dreadful tragedy that causes us almost unimaginable pain.

Note: There is a wide range of deaths that relate to the abuse of drink and drugs, including both legal and illegal substances. A person can die as a result of a freak accident when taking a drug for the first time, or having been poisoned during a teenage drinking game, or they may have died following years of drug addiction or heavy drinking. To keep things simple, the term 'substance use' is used throughout this leaflet to include any of these possibilities.

Issues related to substance use

For some of us, our child's death followed years of addiction to drink or drugs. Addiction can have a highly destructive effect on

any family. Valued personal possessions go missing, important family events and festivals are ruined by upsetting or disturbing behaviour, arguments are common and rifts can occur. As parents we sometimes had the sense that the person we knew before addiction took hold has vanished: our loved one had become someone we don't recognise. We mourned the loss of that person, even though he or she was still alive. When the day of their death actually arrives our anguish becomes absolute: the pain of seeing our loved one struggle and suffer through adult life is coupled with the pain of losing them forever.

Our child may have had the added challenge of living with a mental health condition, such as depression or anxiety. It might have been such challenges that led them to feel that the use of substances, illicit or otherwise, would help them cope.

Some of us might have tried to get through to our child, encouraging them to seek help with their substance use problem and mental health. The pain of seeing our child in denial about their problem is likely to have caused us many powerful emotions.

For those of us whose child had sought medical or professional help, we might have had the upset of watching their struggle to access the support they needed, due to lack of resources or long waiting lists. We may feel they were in a way let down by such services.

We might also have had the distress of seeing our child face negative and insensitive attitudes from others, who may not have fully understood the depth of our child's problems.

There is also the possibility that some of us did not discover until our son or daughter died just how they had been living. Their habits or addictions might have come as a shock. The realisation that our child kept this to themselves and did not feel they could confide in us may fill us with deep sadness, as well as cause us many questions.

The early days

No parent is ever prepared for the death of their child. Even for those families who have lived for years with unpredictable behaviour, mental health problems, and the onset of harmful addiction, the death of our loved one is a profound shock.

Sometimes it comes with no warning; the police are at the door telling us something we can hardly begin to believe. Some parents may not have seen their child for months or even years; for others, their lives were closely entwined and their child lived, and perhaps died, in the family home.

Careful preparation and guidance for the funeral and memorial service, from sympathetic family, friends or ministers of religion, can help us to focus on our child's life rather than the manner of his or her death. A memorial service can be held at a later date, which will provide us with enough time to consider an appropriate thanksgiving to honour our child. Some of our children may have made their wishes known before they died, perhaps even on social media postings, and we can draw comfort from complying with these. Their friends and siblings can be a good source of help in suggestions for readings and music.

The impact on the family

Every death leaves a huge gap in a family; someone is missing and can never be replaced. Although attitudes are changing, there can still be elements of fear and shame for families bereaved by drug and alcohol use. Close friends and family may feel uncomfortable about the tragedy, and this can lead to isolation. We may come across people (even amongst other bereaved parents) who believe that our grief is less valid, because our child apparently chose to gamble with his or her own life.

There can be differences within the immediate family too, in the way each person reacts to the death. Misunderstandings may arise and the anger that comes with grief can result in family members falling out, sometimes for months or even years. It is important, if we can, to see each other's point of view. There are often differences in the way we grieve. We each have to find our own way through grief, and hopefully we can allow other members of the family to do the same. Support from close friends or counsellors may be very helpful as we struggle with our emotional pain. For a single parent, coping on his or her own, this is a particularly lonely time. There are added difficulties, also, for parents who are left childless or for blended families. (For more on this, see TCF leaflets on *Childless*

Parents, The Bereaved Lone Parent, and Grieving Child Loss in Blended and Step Families.)

Guilt and blame

Death through a fatal overdose may have been a horrible accident. If, however, we believe that our son or daughter intended to take their own life, we may find it helpful to read the TCF leaflet *After Suicide*.

Even if we know our son or daughter's death was a complete accident, we are still likely to feel guilty, turning over in our minds the things we could have said or done that might have saved them. If our son or daughter had spent years struggling and suffering through alcohol or drug addiction, we may at moments feel relieved that the long nightmare is over. Such fleeting thoughts cause us still more guilt, as deep down we truly wish that our adult child is still alive. To feel relief that we no longer have to cope with the almost constant chaos caused by addiction, or to feel glad that someone we love is no longer suffering, are normal reactions that many of us parents will experience alongside our grief.

As if we needed any extra pain, our suffering can however be increased by the judgement of some thoughtless people who never even knew our loved one. When this happens, we must remind ourselves of the wonderful and unique person our child had been in life. Their death will never change this fact. (See TCF leaflet, *Coping With Judgemental Attitudes*.)

Many people, particularly younger people, are drawn to thrills and danger. Mountain climbing, skydiving, motor-biking, white water rafting and drug-taking -- all of these are available to our children, all carry risk, and each of these claim the lives of people in their prime. We can draw a tiny crumb of comfort from knowing that risk-taking is a normal human activity, and that in some cases no-one, including ourselves and our child, should be to blame when tragedy strikes.

Close family and friends will sometimes feel that we are being too harsh on ourselves, and they do not understand our grief. On the other hand, sometimes we may feel that they are blaming us.

We are filled with anger and we look for explanations – a broken relationship, inadequate addiction treatment, the dangerous influence of friends or acquaintances. At times we may feel angry with our child for dying: how could they have done something so reckless, so unwise, so dangerous? How could they have allowed this to happen to themselves and to us? What am I to do now? We feel a continuing need to search for reasons. Questions run endlessly through our minds, but answers rarely come.

Inquests and publicity

As families of children who have died as a result of substance use, we often have the additional stress of coping with the police, a post-mortem, an inquest, and publicity.

The law in England and Wales requires that a Coroner opens an inquest into a death if there is reasonable cause to suspect that the death was due to anything other than natural causes. Deaths from substance use, particularly sudden deaths, often result in an inquest. Usually the proceedings are opened immediately, but the actual hearing may not take place until many months after the death. Waiting for and then taking part in the inquest will stir up strong emotions and vivid memories. We may not agree with the verdict, which adds to our distress.

There is often interest from the media, as the Coroner's Court is open to the press and public. It is a good idea to have a brief statement ready for release, so that accurate information is available. We may be asked for a photograph of our child, which not every parent would wish to provide. However, the press may find photographs of our child on social media, so it may be best to offer a photograph of our choice. We should ask the media to respect our need for privacy in our grief. We may be assigned a Police Liaison Officer to give us support.

For those of us who receive attention from the media, we may find that our child is written about in a dehumanising way, or in a way that does not accurately reflect the child we knew and still love very much. This can be incredibly hurtful, causing us much pain.

TCF has produced a series of factsheets with detailed advice about preparation for and coping with inquests in England and Wales, as well as the Investigation of Sudden Deaths in Scotland.

See: www.tcf.org.uk/legalhelp

Talking to our children

It will depend on the age of any surviving children as to how we explain to them about the death of their sibling through substance use. While we may not wish to burden them with too many distressing details, it is essential that they hear the truth from us, rather than finding out in the school playground, in the newspaper, on television or on social media. We need to avoid saying something that they will later discover was a lie or pretence. We will want to ensure that others close to them give a similar explanation. This might mean that we, or someone we trust, talk to their teachers, families of their friends, and any leaders of leisure activities that they attend. As the children grow older, their understanding of death will mature and we can explain more, in an age-appropriate way.

We should not try to explain too much to younger children, but reply sensitively to their questions, reassuring them that they are loved, and we share their grief over the loss of their brother or sister. Older children may find it very difficult to share their thoughts and emotions with us or with other brothers and sisters. They may feel angry with their dead sibling for causing all this sadness and disruption for the family and blame us, or themselves, for not being able to prevent the death. We parents can have a dread that this could happen again, and we anxiously watch our surviving children. It is sometimes better if they are able to talk to some trusted people outside the immediate family, as they may not want to add to our grief by talking to us about their worries.

Adult children sometimes feel that they cannot or should not feel as much grief as their parents. Their reaction may be to avoid mentioning their sibling, for fear of upsetting us. This can be hurtful, but we have to realise that they are trying to protect us. It can be helpful if they are able to meet siblings from other families who have suffered a similar tragedy.

Overall, it is easier said than done, but it can be so helpful for us as a family to try to be open about each other's needs. For example, there might be days where one of our surviving children wants time by his or herself, while another really seeks company. We are likely to have different needs at different times, and trying to understand and respect this in each other can be a huge step forward and also help us avoid misunderstandings and wrong assumptions.

If we have or have had problems with drugs or alcohol ourselves

Some of us may have had our own problems with drugs or alcohol, or may even be still struggling with them. We may feel guilty or responsible for exposing our child to this world. It is really worth us reminding ourselves that while guilt and blame are very natural emotions, they are also very damaging ones.

Grief can tempt those of us who have previously overcome a substance use problem to slide back into it as a way of coping. It is important that we take care of ourselves, and seek help if we sense ourselves going down such a path. In fact, the experience of losing our child under such circumstances could even prompt us to try to beat our problem, not just for ourselves but in memory of our child as well.

Finding support

Meeting other parents through TCF, or other bereavement support groups, who have suffered a loss through substance use can give us strength to carry on; we will be able to talk freely to others in a safe environment. This could be in person and/or via a digital forum. For those of us who are not yet comfortable in talking to others and sharing our story, even just reading about other parents' experiences, be it on a forum or through comments left on a Facebook group, can be incredibly comforting. It can give us a reassuring reminder that although every parent's experience of grief is different, we are not alone.

TCF has a private and closed "Parents bereaved by addiction" Facebook group, and holds supportive events for those who have lost children in this way.

Other helpful organisations

Adfam: Information and support for the families of drug and alcohol users. Has listings of local groups and services for people affected by someone else's substance use, most of which are not exclusively for bereavement. www.adfam.org.uk

BEAD (Bereaved Through Alcohol and Drugs): Website with information and support for anyone bereaved through drug or alcohol use. www.beadproject.org.uk

Bereavement Through Addiction: Provides support groups, a helpline and an annual memorial service in Bristol. www.bdp.org.uk/bereavement

DrugFAM: Offers support to families and friends who are coping with a loved one's addiction to drugs or alcohol and to those who have been bereaved by addiction or related causes. www.drugfam.co.uk

Death through substance use is often sudden – one day we are speaking to our adult child, then hours later the doorbell rings and our world collapses. For those of us who have lost a child suddenly in traumatic circumstances and/or after ongoing difficulties, we may find that the intensity of grief continues on and on; we remain in a heightened state of mourning. Please see the TCF leaflet on *Prolonged and Intense Grief* for more on this.

Social media

We may also find ourselves turning to platforms such as Twitter and Facebook to express ourselves or read messages from friends and family. This can be very comforting, especially if these friends and family live far away from us and this is one of the few ways we can communicate with them.

However, such platforms also have their potential downsides. There are sadly individuals out there who take advantage of the anonymity of social media, and may use it to say unkind things about us or our child, particularly with substance use being such a sensitive area.

There is no right or wrong way to deal with this. Some of us may find that we can simply ignore such comments and focus on the ones full of love and support. We may also find it helpful to learn about features such as privacy settings, blocking/muting options, as well as being aware of who we can contact if we feel there is an issue that needs to be taken further.

Survival and going forward

As the weeks and months pass, and the inquest has taken place, our family will try to pick up the threads of life again. Things will never be the same, but we will arrive at a new normality without our child. We continue to feel the need to tell our story, and we have to discover which family members and close friends are able to support us in the longer term. We are often surprised at people's responses, and help can come from unexpected quarters. We have to be prepared to lose some friends who are unable to cope with our situation. We will make new friends who can accept us in our grieving state; we may seek out other parents who have faced a similar tragedy, and they will be able to empathise with us. It may be a good idea to write down our thoughts at this time, even if we show no-one the results; this can be in the form of a diary, an article or a poem. Writing a letter to our child, expressing our feelings, can also be part of the healing process.

If our son or daughter has died in the family home, we may be given advice by well-meaning relatives or friends to move home. We must think very carefully before making any major changes. A move may not stop the flashbacks that we endure after that dreadful event, and sometimes familiar surroundings may help sustain us through our grief. If we can be patient and avoid a snap decision, in time we will come to know if a move will help us.

At first, and often for some time, it may seem impossible to imagine finding peace of mind. We may struggle with why it happened until we accept that we will never have more than partial answers. However, with time passing and other happier events occurring, we begin to make adjustments and re-build our lives, carrying with us the love for our child. There is no set time-scale for how long this will take, and we have to find our own survival strategies.

Who are the Compassionate Friends?

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) was founded in 1969 by a hospital chaplain and a group of bereaved parents who recognised the lack of support and understanding they were receiving from those who had not suffered in this way. This leaflet aims to share the experiences of all of us bereaved parents and most especially those aspects which came upon us so suddenly and, sometimes, with no warning.

The reading of this leaflet may be your first real contact with TCF. We hope it has given you a little comfort, perhaps showing you that your pain and worries are shared by others. TCF publishes over 30 leaflets, on different aspects of grief which follow the death of a child. All of them are available at no charge to bereaved parents and siblings (but a small donation is, of course, always welcome).

If you would like to hear more about our work and access further support, you could ring our Helpline number on the back page of this leaflet, and you will be able to talk to one of our volunteers, all of them bereaved parents. He or she could give you the number of a Local Contact and details of any Local Group which may meet regularly in your area. You could also find out from them details of our occasional retreats, when a small number of bereaved parents meet and talk in peaceful surroundings. Most years there is a weekend gathering, to which all members are invited.

Our website at www.tcf.org.uk has more information about our services, how to join TCF as a donating member, private Facebook groups, and support forum where bereaved parents can 'talk' online. We also publish a quarterly journal, *Compassion*, containing articles and poems written by our members about their own experiences. And, if you would also like further reading, please contact our Library for details and recommendations of books on all aspects of bereavement.



The
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UK Helpline:

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Northern Ireland Helpline:

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General Enquiries

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TCF Library

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This leaflet has been sponsored in memory of Michael Carroll, son of Sue and Glyn and brother to Rebecca and Paul, who sadly lost his battle, aged 28 in 2010.

Founder: The Revd Canon Dr Simon Stephens OBE

President: The Countess Mountbatten of Burma