



The
Compassionate
Friends

A Father's Grief

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

A Father's Grief

The death of our son or daughter affects us as no other death can. However deeply we have loved anyone else who has died, we now face a loss which seems to contravene the laws of nature. Sons and daughters are supposed to bury their parents, not the other way around.

We are devastated. The unthinkable has happened: our child is dead, and we are still alive. How can such a thing be? Fathers and mothers alike face this difficult rollercoaster ride of grief after their child's death, but how we as fathers deal with our feelings can differ from how mothers grieve.

How grief affects us

Grief affects everyone in many ways; we may experience shock, despair, anger and guilt. These emotions do not appear in any set order; sometimes one feeling dominates the others. Our emotions may swing between numbness and agony, and we can feel so mixed up. For a while at least, it can be almost impossible to summon up any real interest in concerns other than our loss. Nothing else seems to matter. Yet at other times we may feel guilty because we have not thought of our grief for a brief while, or have laughed at a funny situation. We can suffer from lethargy, sleeplessness and illness, making it a struggle to face the obligations of each day.

Traditionally, expectations of behaviour differed for women and men; women could cry in public, but men were expected to restrain themselves. As adult males facing this maelstrom of emotions, we may feel that we are expected to keep a lid on our sorrow, to protect those around us. Yet we too need the space and time to sob our hearts out or simply recognise the tremendous sorrow we carry. We should not let what others think influence us.

Relationships

A relationship includes giving comfort to one's partner when he or she is experiencing a difficulty, such as illness or some problem at work. The death of a child, however, can mean that both partners are so overwhelmed by grief, it becomes almost impossible for either of us to lessen the pain and sorrow felt by our loved one. Additionally, a father and a mother will not always be in the same emotional state, experiencing the same intensity of grief, at the same time. These fluctuations can cause one partner to feel that the other is being insensitive to their feelings. Such misunderstandings can drive a wedge between us. We have to remember that our child's mother is the closest ally that we have in surviving the death of our child, as she is living through the same terrible loss. It is important to accept that we are both entitled to deal with grief in our own way.

Our relationship with our child may have been a little different to his or her mother's. A mother has a physical bond through pregnancy and childbirth that we do not share in the same direct way. We may not have spent as much time together with our child, particularly if they died in infancy. Yet our grief as a father is just as valid, and needs time and space to work through, in the way that suits our own personality. If we tend to remain silent, or if we immerse ourselves in activity to occupy our time, our partner may not realise just how much we are grieving. Unfortunately, some marriages and relationships are

broken by a child's death, and part of this may be due to lack of communication. We should try to prevent this, because separation would bring the loss of the only other person who can share all of our grief. Opening up to our partner about how we are feeling can be difficult but it is worthwhile.

If we have surviving children, they have lost a sibling, and need special care from us. We need to support and guide them in any way we can, according to their age, and try to include them when we talk about their dead brother or sister. Children may show their grief in less obvious ways to adults, but their suffering will be just as deep. (See the TCF leaflet, *Our Surviving Children*, for more on this.)

Some of us are part of blended families where two partners, each with our own children, are living together in one household. This can add a layer of complexity following the death of our child in this situation. (See the TCF leaflet, *Grief in Blended Families*, for more on this.)

If we are on our own for any reason, we often face additional worries, and may have no close adult with whom to share our pain. If in these circumstances we have children to look after, our everyday challenges could include running the home as well as holding down a job. (See the TCF leaflet, *Lone Parents*, for more on this.)

Coping with special occasions

Birthdays, anniversaries, Christmas and other days of celebration will be difficult for us. The first year or two can be particularly painful. In fact, whenever there is a family gathering of any kind, there will always be a member of the family missing, and we will have an underlying feeling of sadness at these events. Planning ahead can help us cope. (See the TCF leaflet, *Living with Grief*, for more on this.)

Returning to work

We may have to return to work soon after the funeral of our son or daughter. It is likely that we must continue to provide for the family, and some of us may be afraid of losing our jobs. Sometimes the workplace can seem a relief from the pressures at home. At other times, we may feel that it is impossible to go back to the same job. If we are fortunate, our employer will allow us to ease back into our job on a part- or flexi- time arrangement if that will suit us better. We may need to move to a different area of work if, for instance, we are dealing face-to-face with members of the public, and are finding this too painful.

Amongst our colleagues, there will be those who find it difficult to deal with us. We will be greeted with expressions of sympathy, but also embarrassment, anxiety and even avoidance. Thankfully, there are likely to be those who show kindness, even when we are not easy to be with; they are willing to listen when we feel a need to talk about our child, both in the early days of our return to work and after much time has passed.

Avoiding isolation

Some of us do not go out to work. We may work from home, for all or some of our employment. We may be unemployed, disabled or retired. Whatever the reason, we will be around the house for much of the day, and this can bring other problems. There will be less opportunity to interact with other people. It may be helpful to make arrangements to see friends, and try to accept invitations to social events, so that we do not become isolated in our grief.

Contact with friends who are prepared to accept that we will not be very good company at times can be extremely helpful. We may lose some friends who cannot cope with the situation,

but this we have to accept. Over time we find that our circle of friends is changing. Sometimes support comes from unexpected quarters.

Taking care of ourselves

Our physical wellbeing is a great asset in helping us manage the emotional and mental aspects of grief. It can be beneficial to engage in some form of light exercise which will leave us tired and ready for sleep. At times we can think that we have no energy to participate in activities, but if we push ourselves, we can find relief from stress, and feel better afterwards.

We should feel no guilt about resuming some enjoyable leisure pastimes. We may also derive benefit from developing some different interests, to help us achieve a new normality in a life without our child.

Many of us are helped by writing down our feelings, in whatever form suits us. It does not matter if we do this just for ourselves or for others to read.

We may also seek for ways to memorialise our child. This can bring us comfort, yet there will always be occasions when we will become choked with emotion and our eyes will fill with tears. Our child is gone from our daily life, and we miss them.

Each of us finds our own way through grief. We will gradually get back to times when we can involve ourselves in activities, in spite of our loss. It does not mean that we are minimising the life of our child; finding joy in our present and future is not a sign that we no longer value or miss them. We will remember him or her with love, always.

Where can I go from here?

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.



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My daughter, my one true friend.

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