



The
Compassionate
Friends

A Mother's Grief

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

A Mother's Grief

When we first become mothers, our lives change for ever. We now have the responsibility of caring for vulnerable little human beings of our own flesh and blood, and we experience powerful feelings of love and protection.

When they are young, they have to be our highest priority. We give up sleep, energy, privacy, time and interests, putting our children's needs ahead of our own. We have possibly left a job, at least temporarily, to become full-time mothers. Motherhood can expand our sense of who we are and what we might become. We have to go through a period of adjustment in our new role as a parent.

When our children die, we lose part of ourselves, because of the way they have become entwined with our identity. We may suffer from an overwhelming sense of failure. After all, we thought that we could protect them, and now we have been shown that this was not possible. Whether we have been through a long all-consuming battle with illness or suffer from the trauma that a sudden death brings, the circumstances in which they died will affect us. We may be struggling to understand the despair that led our son or daughter to suicide, or the events that caused an accidental death.

Whatever age our children are when they die, we feel angry at the unfairness of their death. This is against the natural order: children should not die before their parents.

Our physical loss

Before giving birth to our children, we carried them in our wombs, and our bodies were a source of nourishment. Many of us, at least in the early days of our bereavement, feel the loss of our child as an intense physical pain. The anniversaries of their birthdays can become lonely and difficult times, because these particular memories are special to us; that is something that even close family members or friends may not be able to comprehend.

Some of us, of course, have adopted or fostered our children, cherishing them as any birth children. These mothers often say that their sons and daughters grew in their hearts, as they went through the process of longing and waiting for them. Bereavement can bring back the pain of earlier distress of infertility, before the children joined the families. This is an added sadness.

Caring and losing

As mothers, our care for our young children has been physical, as well as emotional. We have fed them, bathed them, changed and dressed them, cuddled them and carried them in our arms.

When our son or daughter dies, we want to go on caring for them as long as possible. Mothers who are able to hold their dead children, wash and dress them, and perhaps place them in the coffin themselves, may see this as a final act of tender physical care. When a post-mortem is involved, we are prevented from doing this for a while, sometimes even forbidden to touch them. It is hard to be deprived of these opportunities, for whatever reason. Some mothers find the giving up of their child's body an agonising experience, and the hurt remains for a long time.

If our children were adults, we may not have the chance of physically caring for them: they may have lived far away from us, or they were married or had a partner, and we were no longer next of kin. Although we may not see it at the time, the necessary procedures, that follow on the death of our son or daughter in preparing for the funeral, could be looked upon as our continuation of caring. Sadly, a few families have no body to see, touch or bury, and the conventional rituals of mourning are missed.

Our surviving children

If we have surviving children, they continue to need our care, and their ongoing requirements can present us with a structure in our daily routine, which could be helpful to everyone in the household. Older children may need our support now more than ever: their lives too have been changed. Many children look back to the time immediately after the death of their brother or sister, and say that they

felt as if they had lost their parents too - as if the whole family had disintegrated.

We may be aware that this is happening, yet are powerless to prevent it. We can be so disabled by grieving that it is difficult to be a mother to our other children. Sometimes we struggle to protect our children from the full extent of our grief because it seems a burden too heavy for them to bear; this can leave them feeling shut out, and we should not avoid sharing our tears with them. Our children's grief can compound our sense of guilt in failing to be a protector: we could not prevent the death of their brother or sister, and now we have to see them suffering as a consequence. In reality, we can probably help them less with this than any other pain they have experienced in their lives so far.

We may now have an urge to overprotect our surviving children. We can find it difficult to allow them to lead a normal life, and to let them out of our sight. This is true especially if the death of our child was murder, or some terrible accident: we fear that the same thing will happen again. These feelings are illogical, but none the less haunt us. When a brother or sister has died as a result of illness, their siblings may carry their own secret fears that they too will become ill and die. If it was an older brother or sister who died, they may dread that something will happen to them when they reach that same age. It is not unknown for siblings to wonder if their parents would have preferred for them to die instead of their brother or sister – survivor guilt

is very common after all deaths. As mothers we need to try to understand what is going through their minds, and allay their fears.

Childless mothers

Some of us may have no living children. Our hopes and dreams for future generations are ended. When we have lost our only child or all our children, our new life is suddenly empty and frightening; it takes time to adapt to our altered circumstances. Over the years our memories, though bittersweet at times, will become sources of comfort.

Others in the family

We may be trying to support other members of our family in their grief. Our own parents have lost their grandchild and will be grieving; and as they see their daughter suffering, there is what can seem like a double burden. This is also the case, of course, for the parents of our partner. We might want to shield them from seeing the depths of our grief, but most of us are helped by sharing rather than by pretending. We might feel, like our own children, that we have lost our own mother – that she is unavailable to us because of her grief. This increases our desolation.

Coping alone

Some of us are single parents. Not only have we to be mother and father to our surviving children, but also we have no partner to be with us in our lowest moments. We may find that this death reminds us of earlier losses, perhaps even the loss of our child's father, and we may feel doubly bereaved. In this situation, we urgently need the support of other adults, whether relatives, friends or professionals. If we are now childless, the isolation is almost unbearable, and we may question our continuing identity as a mother.

Difficulties in grieving together

We may be shocked to find that we experience difficulties in our marriage or partnership. Even when we have been close, the pain of grief can drive a wedge between us. We think that we can share our loss and support each other, but it is often not like that. We grieve in different ways, one needing words while the other needs silence, or perhaps action. We may feel that our partner's tears hurt us so much that we are unable to hold their pain as well as our own. As mothers, we are used to being the person who makes things better and sorts things out. Fathers, too, may feel that they have failed in their role of provider and protector. We should cling together and let ourselves grieve rather than trying to solve each other's problems. If our relationship was difficult before, it may get worse, at least in the short term. It is to be hoped that our shared suffering will bring us to a growing understanding of each other's grief.

Children born after the death of their brother or sister

Some of us may give birth to more children after our child has died. We may be surprised by how our feelings are interwoven, and how the past death is also part of the new birth. Some mothers experience vivid flashbacks during pregnancy or labour. Although we are looking forward to the birth of our new baby, we may find ourselves suffering extremes of anxiety and fear, and a loss of confidence. This can make the early weeks and months fraught and bonding with the new baby may be affected. Lack of sleep following the birth can add to the weariness which the earlier bereavement brought, but we can be helped by settling into a new routine.

Sometimes relatives or friends – however well-meaning - can be extraordinarily insensitive in thinking, and even saying, that the new baby will somehow wipe out the earlier loss and that everything will be all right when we have a replacement. It is hard to explain that this baby can never replace the child who has died. Each child is a unique individual, and not a substitute for his or her dead sibling, who will be missed for ever by us.

The way forward

We need to survive – to be there for everyone around us, and indeed for ourselves. If we are in the horrific position of being the only survivor, then we need to persevere in order to bear witness to the fact that our child did live, and that he or she was special, precious and loved. Perhaps the most important thing to help us is that we recognise that the loss of our child is not something we are expected to bear alone.

We must be open to offers of support, which may come from unexpected quarters. A family member or friend who is prepared to listen as we talk about our dead child can ease our pain. At least in the early days of our bereavement, if we give ourselves space by letting other people help, then we will gradually become stronger and more able to carry on. Surviving children will benefit from the company of others, whether they are playing a game with friends or talking with someone they trust about what has happened.

Our partner needs space too – spending time alone, pursuing leisure activities, or meeting friends. They may temporarily spend more time at work hoping to escape the grief at home. It is hard to recognise each individual's needs at this time, especially when they are so different. One of us may seek professional advice while the other does not. Usually help can come from several sources.

We all have to find our own way through grief. Learning to live with loss is not the same as minimising the life of our child. Finding joy in our present and future is not a sign that we no longer value or miss our child, who was such a great part of our past.

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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in loving memory of all our sons and daughters.

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