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

Every parent who has been confronted with the sudden death of their child has experienced the devastation. The knowledge that our child has died by suicide changes our life in an instant and it will never be the same as it was before. The severe shock we feel is only the beginning of a difficult bereavement journey.

The way that our child died might fill our thoughts. We might be fighting with terrible mental images, whether from our imagination or those we witnessed. We will seek answers where none can be found. We must now face the additional stress of coping with the police, post-mortem, inquest and reactions of others. It is possible that we may have to deal with media intrusion.

At the centre of the turmoil of our emotions is our beloved child. We miss them desperately, no matter what went before.

The early days

No parent is ever prepared for the death of their child. Even for those parents who have lived for years with mental or physical illness, and/or repeated attempts at self-destruction, the actual death 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 of us may not have seen our child for months or even years; for others, our lives were closely entwined and our child lived, and perhaps died, in the family home. Each suicide has its own story, but the common threads are the feelings of numbness, shock and disbelief. Then comes the relentless questioning. The biggest question is often ‘why?’

Most parents are tormented by looking for reasons for their child’s actions, and there is nearly always a huge element of self-blame in the questions that chase around in our minds. We seek convincing
explanations: a broken relationship, inadequate mental health care, bullying, pressure of exams, employment problems, online suicide chatrooms, etc. Any of these might indeed have been a factor in our child’s actions, but many of us will never know for sure exactly what precipitated their death.

Even if a note has been found which attempts to explain this drastic action, our minds will go over and over what we could have done to prevent this tragedy. We might feel a strong sense of guilt, questioning whether something was wrong with our parenting that led to this despair. Had we failed our children in their upbringing? They were our loved children and we still love them. Any message they may have left may raise even more questions and could be very upsetting. We need to remember that our child was in a very difficult place to take the action they did and that the message may not reflect their true feelings for us or others.

Close family and friends will sometimes feel that we are being too harsh on ourselves. On the other hand, sometimes they might blame us or our child. Insensitive statements will only add to our hurt.

If our child died at home, we might be very troubled going into certain rooms or areas of our property. There is no easy answer to managing this. It might depend somewhat on whether we have to keep using that space or can close the door for the time-being.

If our child did not die at home, we may want to visit the place of death if it is accessible. The police may be able to advise and support us with this. Such a visit will be traumatic and it is important to have someone with us. We might choose to mark the place by leaving flowers.

**The funeral and memorial service**

Taking control of elements of our life can help us to find our way forward after the shock of our child’s death.

Some of the first decisions we will need to make are regarding our child’s funeral. No parent expects to organise the funeral of their child, yet this is one of the important tasks we must do soon after their death.
Most of us find it is best for the focus to be on our child’s life rather than the manner of their death. They might have made their funeral wishes known before they died, perhaps even on social media postings, and we can draw some comfort from complying with these. Their friends and siblings can be a good source of help in suggestions for readings and music. Choosing these and crafting the service will be extremely painful but can also be a comfort as time passes.

A memorial service could also be held at a later date which will provide us with more space and time for remembering our child. This might be especially important if the funeral happened before we were able to compose ourselves.

**Practical and legal matters**

As an apparent suicide is a ‘sudden, violent or unnatural’ death, there will be legal procedures.

The police will be involved following our child’s death. We may be assigned a Police Family Liaison Officer to give us support.

There will usually be a post-mortem examination and an inquest (or investigation in Scotland) will be opened within days. The actual inquest hearing might not take place until many months later.

We will have to wait for the Coroner to release our child’s body before we can arrange their funeral. This might happen fairly quickly, but it might also be delayed if the cause of death is not clear, requiring a police investigation.

The Coroner will usually issue an Interim Death Certificate. We need this certificate to arrange the funeral. We can also use this certificate to contact banks and other institutions to advise them of our child’s death.

Waiting for and then taking part in the inquest will not be easy. The Coroner only has to be satisfied that it is ‘more probable than not’ that someone deliberately took their own life, so that a conclusion of suicide is now more common than it was previously. We may or may not agree
with the Coroner’s decision and of course this may well cause us further distress.

An inquest might give us more information about the circumstances of our child’s death. We will probably still have unanswered questions, including the relentless ‘why?’ However, the purpose of the inquest is not to establish the answer to this very difficult question.

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, plus more general advice for coping with legal proceedings. See: [www.tcf.org.uk/content/r-legal-help](http://www.tcf.org.uk/content/r-legal-help)

Suicide is considered newsworthy and we may have to face the press. We should consider how to protect ourselves and other family members, particularly siblings, from press intrusion. A prepared statement with a few sentences may be most useful if and when the press knocks on our door to ask questions. The press may also be present at the inquest and it is not unusual for the story of what happened to appear in local papers as well as on digital media.

**If we have other children**

The explanation we give to our surviving children will depend on their age and maturity. While we may not wish to burden them with too many distressing details, it is essential that they hear at least the basic facts from us, rather than finding out in the school playground or on social media. It might be best to let older or adult children know all of the circumstances, no matter how painful.

Whatever their ages, we need to avoid saying things that they will later discover were not true. We will want to ensure that others close to them are given a similar explanation. This may necessitate talking to their teachers, families of their friends and any other leaders of leisure activities which they attend. As the younger children grow older, their understanding of death and suicide will mature and we can talk to them in an age-appropriate way.
With younger children, we should reply sensitively to their questions, reassuring them that they are loved and that we share their grief over the loss of their sibling. Older children may find it very difficult to articulate their thoughts and emotions with us or with other siblings. They may feel angry with their sibling for causing this sadness and disruption for the family, and blame us or themselves for not being able to prevent the death. Sometimes they will fear that they too may come to want to end their lives. Some might find it easier to talk with some trusted people outside the immediate family.

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. The Compassionate Friends has support groups for siblings.
See: [www.tcf.org.uk/content/ftb-siblings](http://www.tcf.org.uk/content/ftb-siblings)

We might feel fearful that once this tragedy of suicide has happened in our family, that it will happen again. This can make us overly protective of our remaining children. While this is a natural reaction, we might find it more helpful instead to maintain good communication channels with them.

**Finding our way forward**

Grief brings a complex mixture of responses including sadness, anger, confusion, despair, eating problems, exhaustion, and/or much more. These reactions are likely to be intensified and prolonged if our child’s death was by suicide. This is generally accepted to be one of the most difficult bereavements to cope with. The sense that a child’s life was not complete and that their death was premature makes their death particularly painful.

The trauma of how we found out or were told about our child’s death will also be a factor. We may feel irrational guilt that we were not able to prevent what happened. We may replay decisions and conversations over and over in our minds. We might even have suicidal thoughts ourselves.
Although none of these responses are unusual, they do illustrate how important it is that we do not try to manage all of this alone.

Support from close friends and/or family members may be very helpful, although we might also want to look outside our immediate circle for others who have gone through similar experiences. Many of us have found that it valuable to meet with other parents who have been bereaved by suicide. This could be through The Compassionate Friends (TCF) or other suicide support groups, and could be in person and/or via a digital forum. TCF has a private forum for those bereaved by suicide, a Facebook page, and holds supportive events for those who have lost children in this way.

See: www.tcf.org.uk/content/ftb-bereaved-by-suicide

Some of us will need further support. If we are unable to eat or sleep or are in any way overwhelmed in our grief, particularly if we are thinking of harming ourselves, it would be a good idea to speak with our GP for assistance. Medication or counselling could possibly help us through the most acute time of our grief or we may benefit from them at a later stage.

We may also notice a deterioration in our physical health. It is well known that grief and the related stress affects our bodies. Our GP should be able to help. Poor physical health tends to make mental health worse and grief less manageable.

Coping with the turmoil of our grief

Our new reality includes accepting any mixed feelings towards our child. It is not unusual to be angry on occasion. We might feel frustrated that they had not opened up to us beforehand or did not take our advice. Their death has had a devastating impact on ourselves and others, and there may be moments when we deeply resent or blame our child for their actions. This might be even more acute if we have now been left childless.

It might help to realise that according to research, those who die by suicide rarely have any idea or thought of the consequences for others. Their mental state at that moment, a kind of tunnel vision – whether or
not they were suffering from a mental health condition – did not allow for any wider consideration. This is held to be true, whether it was a planned act or on the spur of the moment.

Another target of our anger might be mental health services, if our child was under their care. We might have issues about the quality of care which might even lead us to make an official complaint against the establishments we deem to have been at fault.

Exercising caution about what we read, listen to and watch can be a wise strategy. There is a steady stream of news about suicide. It might be described as a sudden death ‘with no suspicious circumstances’ or it might be more explicit. (The Samaritans and others have guidelines for reporting about suicides which unfortunately the media do not always comply with.)

Depictions of suicide on TV or in films can also be triggers, particularly if they show similarities with how our child died.

Managing the intense rollercoaster of emotions and thoughts that follow our child’s death is never easy, but it is possible. We will not always feel our grief so acutely; it will not always feel so raw. It might seem surprising to us in the early months, but eventually most of us find that we do adjust to this new reality. We find strategies and activities that keep us occupied and are beneficial to our state of mind. We might do relaxation exercises or get out into green spaces; maybe we will take up new hobbies or volunteer for a charity. Taking up a non-demanding, repetitive activity can help calm our minds, or we might find solace in music or in our faith. Days become weeks become months become years, and we find ourselves living a life which we had not expected, yet a life with meaning in which we can honour our child.
Our interactions with other people

Despite the fact that suicide is the tenth leading cause of death worldwide, people’s reactions on discovering that this was how our child died might still surprise us.

Suicide used to be a taboo subject. Until 1961, it was a crime in the UK. This is the origin of the phrase ‘committed suicide’ which is better replaced with ‘died by suicide.’ Although attitudes have changed, there can still be elements of fear and shame for families bereaved by suicide. Close friends and family may feel uncomfortable about the tragedy and this can lead to isolation. We may encounter people (even amongst other bereaved parents) who believe that our grief is less valid, because our child apparently chose to die. This is not the case. Our grief is valid no matter how our child died. It is never lessened by difficult circumstances.

People can sometimes be quite insensitive and even intrusive. We should never feel pressured to tell the details of how our child died, unless we wish to, nor should we feel defensive. We will probably find it easier to avoid the company of those who make implied or explicit criticism of our child. This type of reaction is not helpful to us. We may experience understanding and comfort from unexpected people. Conversely it may be that some of our oldest and closest friends avoid us and seem unable to give the support we need. Friends may be lost but new ones may also be found through new activities we take up or support groups we join.

We each grieve individually, and there can also be differences within our immediate family. Misunderstandings may arise and estrangement can occur between partners who thought themselves to be close. It takes a great deal of determination to remain positive during this challenging time, and have respect for each other’s point of view. We all have to make our own journey through grief and we should allow other members of the family to do the same.
The life we have now

As the weeks and months pass, and the inquest has taken place, we will try to pick up the threads of life again. We may 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. It may be a good idea to write down our thoughts at this time, even if we do not show anyone the results. This can be in the form of a diary, articles or poems. Writing a letter to our child, expressing our feelings, can also help us.

Many of us find some comfort in remembrance activities, such as arranging a photo album or visiting a place that our child loved. Such activities can be bittersweet but rewarding too. Some ideas can be found in the TCF *Remembering our Child Handbook*.

Some of us find fulfilment in doing something to honour the memory of our child. This may be volunteering or working with a charity. We may feel the need to do something to leave a legacy. Sometimes a physical memorial is helpful for us and any surviving siblings. We can have a bench or a tree in their memory, particularly if they had a special place. All these things create a future and a connection for us and others.

If our child has died in the family home, we may be given advice by well-meaning relatives or friends to move house. 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 filled with memories of happier times may help sustain us in our grief journey.

At first, and often for some time, it may seem impossible to imagine finding peace of mind again. Suicide bereavement is noted for the length of time that grieving takes. We are never the same after the event, nor would we want to be. We may struggle with why it happened until we accept that we will never have more than partial answers. Still, we begin to make adjustments and re-build our lives, carrying with us the love for our child. Thinking about our child and all they mean to us, reflecting on their life, is more important than the manner of their death. It is love that will endure and sustain us.
Further Reading

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) have published a range of leaflets to support parents who have experienced the death of their child. The following titles could be helpful at this time:

- Living with Grief
- The Sudden Death of Our Child
- Preparing Our Child’s Funeral
- Coping with Judgemental Attitudes
- Prolonged and Intense Grief
- Remembering Our Child (Leaflet and Handbook)

TCF leaflets can be read and downloaded at this link: [www.tcf.org.uk/leaflets](http://www.tcf.org.uk/leaflets)

Printed copies are available from the office, free of charge for bereaved parents (see contact details on the back page).

Further Support

In addition to the support offered by TCF, these other links might also be useful:

Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide (SOBS)
[www.uk-sobs.org.uk](http://www.uk-sobs.org.uk) | 0300 111 5065

Samaritans
[www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org) | 116 123

Help is at Hand: support after someone may have died by suicide is a free booklet by the Department of Health. It can be ordered from here: [www.orderline.dh.gov.uk](http://www.orderline.dh.gov.uk)
UK Helpline: 0345 123 2304

General Enquiries
0345 120 3785
E: info@tcf.org.uk

TCF Library
0345 120 3785
E: library@tcf.org.uk

To find out more about TCF visit
www.tcf.org.uk | @tcf.org.uk  @TCFcharityUK

Remembering Ed Surfleet (1998-2020) - much loved and much missed son, big brother, grandson and boyfriend. His energy and love lives on through us all.

Sponsored by Ed’s Memorial Fund with contributions from family, friends and members of our Community.

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