A nationwide organisation of bereaved parents and their families offering support after a child dies.
Childless Parents
For parents who have no surviving children

This leaflet is for those of us whose only child has died, or who have lost all our children. We have used the word ‘child’ to cover both these situations; not all the emotions and reactions described here will be felt by all parents. Although there may be great differences in the circumstances of the deaths, there are similarities in the emotional impact on us as parents and in the practical aspects of our lives.

Many aspects of grief are common to all bereaved parents, but we childless parents discover early on that some of our feelings, and some of the issues we face, are different from those confronting bereaved parents with surviving children.

Some of us childless parents suffer a double grief: both the loss of our child and, if we have no grandchildren, the loss of our family’s future. We are often deeply pre-occupied with the question “If I have no child, am I still a parent?” We may also have to deal with some of the following problems and anxieties:

• We may withdraw from the company of our family and friends, especially from relationships where children are involved. We may find it difficult to relate to other people’s children, particularly younger ones.

• We may feel ill at ease in our home, now empty and quiet, and devoid of all our previous parental activities. This
feeling may be intensified by the possibility that we grieve in different ways from each other. The Compassionate Friends (TCF) publishes a leaflet, Grieving Couples, which looks at this in more detail.

- We may give up caring for ourselves for a while, because the purpose of life seems to have disappeared.

- We may feel deeply frustrated because we can no longer carry out our parenting role. Looking after our partner, or other people’s children (even those who are closely related), does not compensate.

- We may feel intensely lonely at the idea of a future without the extended family and grandchildren that we hoped our child would add to our family. The years ahead look empty and joyless.

- Old age may also take on a dismal prospect without our child when we have to face failing health. If we are single or widowed, we will miss the possibility of financial and emotional support.

- We may have no one left to benefit from our life’s accomplishments, the physical accumulation of property or savings; the sense of pointlessness can be all-pervading.

- When we ourselves die, there will be no one to look after our own precious trinkets and papers, of no intrinsic value to others, but treasured by ourselves.

Am I still a parent if I have no child?

The death of our only child, or all our children, will change the way we see ourselves, and the way others see us. We have lost our role of parent and may feel a loss of direction in our present life; it can take a long time to discover what our new role will be. There is no one now to call us “Mum” or “Dad”,

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and this deeply emphasises our sense of lost identity. We realise that there is no ‘safeguard’ in having more than one child. Now we are childless.

Other people may ask questions that unintentionally cause us more pain, such as “Why did you have only one child?”, implying a kind of blame. They may try to comfort us by suggesting that we can have more children, or adopt. Perhaps in the future this may come about, but for the time being we are mourning our irreplaceable child. For those of us who are no longer able to have children, this is particularly cruel.

If our child was living at home, we face the abrupt end of our active parenting. Even if our son or daughter had left home we still played a part as the parents of an adult child, with the special pleasures that often accompany this mature relationship. Now we are confronted with the harsh fact of the empty space in our lives, and a loss of purpose and expectations for the future.

Ultimately, after much self-questioning, confusion and pain, we come to acknowledge and understand that we were, are and always will be, the parent of our dear, lost child.

**Loss of the future**

If our child died before having children, we find this loss of their future, and our future with them, a very deep-rooted anguish. We wonder what we have to look forward to; our loss is the more poignant if, for any reason, we cannot have more children. The future looks bleak and our lives barren. We may also feel sad that our children may never have known the joy of a loving, committed relationship.

Later on there are also practical problems for us to deal with in relation to our own future. We wonder who will take care of us in old age, will arrange our funeral, be executor of our Will.
Single and childless

Some bereaved parents are single through divorce, widowhood, choice or other reasons. The loneliness is particularly acute if our lives have revolved completely around our child. If we are divorced or separated, we may feel that our life has been a failure; our marriage or relationship is over, we have no child and we have nothing left except memories. We may feel we are blamed by the other parent for the death of our child.

Negative feelings from the time of separation or divorce may be re-activated by the death of our child, bringing additional pain. If we are widowed, we may feel that we have been left behind, without anyone to call our own. If we are single through choice, our family may only ever have been the two of us, with a specially close relationship because of our dependence upon each other, and so our sense of isolation is profound.

For childless parents, holidays, Christmas and other special occasions can be particularly lonely and painful, and many of us find that we cope better by going away, giving ourselves something different to look forward to when other people are occupied with families.

Loss of companionship

An only child may well have grown to be a close friend and confidante, as well as a practical and emotional support in their adult years. The loss is therefore of an irreplaceable friendship as well as of a beloved son or daughter, especially when we are single or widowed. If our child had been living away from home, we will miss the phone calls and emails, cards and news, even more so when we are elderly and our own life is physically restricted. We may feel acutely
vulnerable if we have depended on an adult child for physical or emotional support.

The loss of more than one child

If we have lost all our children, either at one time or over a number of years, we often feel our world has ended, that we are cut off from life. Simultaneous deaths bring an overwhelming feeling of vulnerability and we discover that it can be bewildering to grieve for more than one person at a time. In multiple tragedies, ‘survivor guilt’ can be very strong. We will mourn each child in a different way, because each relationship is unique; this can be very distressing when we are mourning more than one child. In life, we would have thought of each child at separate times; in death we will do the same and should not feel guilty if we think of one more than another at different times.

Where there have been consecutive deaths, we may find that the more recent loss brings earlier tragedies back to the surface. We can feel confused as to which child we are grieving for. We may feel a profound dread of going through it all again, and of a pattern being repeated if illness has been involved. The second grief journey can follow a different route altogether. Loss can be even harder to bear the second time, and we can feel particularly insecure in our parenting. Some parents take comfort in a belief that their children are now together.

Physical and mental restlessness

While many of us suffer from apathy and overwhelming exhaustion, or find it difficult to concentrate for any length of time, others may choose to focus on a particular and demanding project. Trapped emotional pressures, tension and stress often result in a frenetic restlessness, with an
overpowering need to do something. We may feel a compulsion to walk, whether aimlessly or vigorously, and many of us feel this to be part of our ‘searching’. Weeping, writing, gardening, physical exercise - any of these can help us to liberate tensions safely and constructively.

We may feel that we cannot expect friends to listen and support us again in our grief, and that we desperately need another outlet for our innermost thoughts. Writing can be a valuable way to ease pain; some people use a diary to express anger, resentment, envy or longing, emotions that are difficult to voice at the best of times. As with letters, poems, music, painting and drawing, the significance is in the doing, and in the release of our emotions, even if no one else ever sees our work. Writing a detailed, loving account of our child’s life and death can be both emotionally liberating, and a lasting tribute.

Some people may say to us that we are now ‘free’ to pursue our own interests - a career, further study, holidays, community commitments, etc. This is a very hurtful comment since it may be a long time before we can find pleasure in any of these ‘freedoms’.

Holidays, birthdays, anniversaries and other occasions

As all bereaved parents know, the anxiety and pain of special occasions during the year can threaten to overwhelm our precarious hold on daily life. Even if our child had been living away from home and was not always present at family celebrations and holidays, we feel the anguish of knowing that he or she will now be forever absent. It may be possible, however, to look at other ways of coping - such as going away for the day and not having to force ourselves through painful rituals for the sake of others. In responding to our own
needs, we can find a degree of necessary self-protection, and in due course new patterns will emerge for holidays, birthdays and other difficult occasions.

Wills and finance

One of the practical changes that many of us have to make after the death of our child is to our Will. A new executor may have to be chosen, and more thought given to the question of inheritance. Some of us leave a legacy to a charity or cause with which our child was closely connected, or which may be working to prevent further deaths of the sort that has taken our child. These decisions may feel urgent in the aftermath of our son’s or daughter’s death, but it is worth remembering that they can be amended later on.

Looking to the future

When we face some of the complex suffering involved in the loss of an only child, or all our children, we may perhaps discover new strengths within ourselves. In the search for a life of renewed meaning, we may find some comfort through involvement in the lives of others - perhaps working to achieve some of the dreams which our child held dear. In this way we may reconcile the past with the present, giving ourselves a positive commitment to the future.

New interests also help us to regain some of our lost self-esteem and self-confidence. Some of us find that practical arrangements, for example creating an award or scholarship, involve us again in young lives in a positive way, and our child’s name lives on.

Some childless parents feel a great longing to fill the home once again. We may be able to have further children ourselves, although the decision to have another child is often accompanied by anxieties as well as rejoicing during
the pregnancy. These fears will, however, be countered by the great joy and love that a new child brings to a bereaved family. Or, later on, we may consider fostering or adoption.

As they grow up, children who were born after the death of their sibling often suffer a grief they find difficult to put into words - they never knew their elder brother or sister. To help them have a sense of the continuing family, we might put together a book or album about our older child’s life, and this sharing of stories can support the younger child in an imaginative way and help them feel they are part of the wider family story.

Some parents, especially those who cannot have more children of their own, have taken an informal but long-lasting interest in other children, who may be disadvantaged, third world or refugee children. These options need a great deal of careful thought, but the commitment to such a child can bring great joy and benefit to everyone involved.

Continuing support

Childless parents can find support through TCF and especially its ‘Childless Parents Group’. This holds occasional meetings throughout the country and circulates its own newsletter. The quarterly TCF publication Compassion offers comfort and support to parents, in both reading and writing about shared experiences. The Postal Library has many books on grief in general, and some specifically for those who have no surviving children. TCF has its own website.

Our child or children will most probably have been the centre of our lives. Now they are gone, we will need to re-establish ourselves and try to rescue some meaning to put back into our existence. It will be a long and painful struggle and we will need our own inner resources and those of our family and
friends (some of them whom we have found through TCF) to help us through it. As bereaved parents we have all struggled towards our new ‘normality’. Every day survived and every person touched by the smallest amount of friendship and compassion is a testament to the love of our child(ren) which follows us wherever we go, and gives us strength to help one another tread this difficult path.
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.