



The
Compassionate
Friends

A photograph of a beach with a large rock formation in the background. The foreground is dominated by a large, intricate maze-like pattern made of small, light-colored stones laid out on the sand. A blue banner is overlaid on the right side of the image, containing white text.

Coping with stigma and other judgmental attitudes

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

Coping with stigma and judgmental attitudes following the death of our child

The death of a child is probably the worst thing that can happen to any parent, whatever the cause. It can be a struggle to carry on with life and to cope with the pain, sorrow and anger that engulf us. To make matters worse, we may also have to deal with judgemental reactions from people who are critical of our child for a variety of reasons.

Feeling that we or our child are being criticised or rejected is difficult even in normal circumstances. Following our bereavement, it can feel almost unbearable. Understanding what may be happening and how we can cope with it is the subject of this leaflet.

“Death with stigma” & “disenfranchised grief”

We may face negative, disapproving reactions if our child died as a result of:

- drug, alcohol or solvent use
- illnesses such as anorexia and bulimia
- dangerous occupational or recreational activities
- accidents for which they may have been responsible
- suicide.

Criticism could also be related to circumstances that may or may not have anything to do with their death, for example:

- their expressions of gender or sexuality
- their choices regarding religion or lack of it
- involvement in crime, gangs or prostitution
- any other matter that is outside the traditions of our family or culture.

As a result, there can be stigma attached to our child’s life and/or death. We may find ourselves enduring “disenfranchised grief”.

“Disenfranchised grief” refers to grief that is seen by society as less important or less valid than a bereavement through other so-called acceptable causes, such as cancer or heart disease. Some people may have the attitude that our grief doesn’t deserve the same level of respect or sympathy that is given to others. We may hear hurtful comments such as, “They brought it on themselves,” or “It was their choice.”

Any stigma around the death of our child is simply wrong. Our grief is valid, no matter how our child lived or how they died. Fortunately, most of us have at least some friends or family that feel this way. However, if other people in our social circle do not see it like this, their lack of support, sensitivity or understanding can worsen and prolong the pain of our bereavement.

The years prior to our child’s death

“Living in a state of constant anxiety for my child’s well-being took its toll on me. Every time the phone rang, I was filled with dread.”

We might have been unaware of any issues that our child was facing, or it might have been obvious to us. If our child had become troubled or unreachable, our grief might have begun long ago. We may have faced repeated traumatic events for years before they died.

Their issues or life choices might have caused us to feel worry, guilt and shame. There may have been lengthy discussions and interactions with schools, police, hospitals or social services, always hoping that the issues would be resolved. We may have had to cope with constant anxiety, asking ourselves “Where are they?”, “What are they doing?” or “Are they safe?” as we waited for the next knock on the door or phone call to summon us to the police station or hospital.

On the other hand, there might not have been anything inherently wrong with how our child chose to live their life. It may simply have been in conflict with the norms of our family or community. Examples might be their choices as far as their cultural, religious or political identity, or personal aspects such as sexuality, gender or relationships. This might have caused them to be viewed negatively, of less worth, or as separate or different from our wider family or community.

The early days following our bereavement

“Looking back at those early days after my child died, I still feel comforted by those who were kind and supportive... but some people’s reactions came as a shock, and still cause me pain.”

The news of a child’s death is always a terrible shock. The circumstances of our child’s death, how and when we found out what had happened to them, and any discoveries of what went before will all have a huge impact upon us.

Shock very often protects us from reality for a while. However, this numbness does not last and feelings flood in, threatening to overwhelm us. Most parents will feel some guilt when their child has died, thinking that if only they had acted differently, they could somehow have prevented what happened. This may be true, no matter what the cause of death was, but for those of us whose child has died in a way that could be considered self-inflicted or as a result of their life choices, our feelings will be especially complicated.

Other people’s attitudes can have a major impact on how we cope with our grief. If they are kind and accepting, it can make it easier for us to bear our tragic loss. But this is not always how people react. In fact, we may be shocked to discover that disapproval towards our child by some members of our family or social circle could continue and even intensify after their death. This could be in person or on social media.

Stigma following the death of a child

“My child was trans. I loved her when she was my daughter, and I loved him when he became my son. But not everyone in my circle knew or understood him like I did, nor recognized his good qualities.”

Disapproval and criticism of our child – and perhaps by extension, ourselves too – may cast a shadow of stigma over our bereavement.

Some people might gossip, seemingly even taking pleasure in passing on a negative observation or story about our child. Such corrosive comments can affect the way others relate to us, perhaps making them less sympathetic.

They may withdraw completely, while others might react with self-righteousness, simply because they have been lucky enough not to share the particular challenges and ultimately the fate of our beloved child.

We might ask ourselves why anyone would want to be unkind about the death of a child. The real problem usually lies with the person offering the criticism. Perhaps they lack empathy, or are driven to conceal their own personal issues by taking what they believe to be the moral high ground. By making us feel worse, they seek to make themselves feel better.

Judgemental attitudes may come from a place of prejudice, ignorance or a narrow worldview. There may be resentment towards those who express their gender or sexuality in ways that are different to their own. They may not be able to see beyond a chosen lifestyle to the person underneath.

If we are part of a small, tight-knit community, such as one based around a traditional culture or religion, we may find ourselves isolated. Even kinder-hearted members of our community, who are not personally critical of us, may feel obliged to keep their distance. At times we may even feel angry towards our child for living or dying in a way that has left us exposed to the judgement of others.

In addition, some people may criticise us for our own lifestyle or the type of upbringing we gave our child. This can bring pain and confusion, as outwardly we defend ourselves and our child, but inwardly we may be struggling with self-blame.

Stigma can make us defensive and sensitive to any potential risk of rejection. This in turn can increase our isolation. We do not want to be left alone, but we dread the sideways looks or the insensitive things that people might say. If some people do react critically or try to avoid us, it will not be surprising if we end up feeling lonelier in our grief or angry with others.

On the other hand, some people may not know what to say. Remaining silent does not necessarily mean that they are passing judgement on us or our child. Perhaps they are simply lost for words. Most people will feel genuinely upset about our bereavement, and will be kind and empathetic, trying the best they can to console us.

Our child was a whole person, with flaws, just like every other human being. They made their own decisions as an individual. We can accept and love them for who they were. Hopefully we have some people in our social and family circle who feel the same. There is solace in good memories, and it can be truly comforting when other people join us in remembering the happy times we shared.

Our immediate family and close friends

“I did not feel that my siblings were critical of my child’s choices, and they remained supportive after she died, but I can’t say the same for my parents. Their disapproval has made my grief harder to cope with.”

Close friends and family members will hopefully be supportive of us, and speak of our child with kindness and understanding. However, even with those closest to us, this is not always the case.

People can fail to fully understand the issues that have led up to a death. Generational differences can sometimes make the situation even harder. They may see things in an overly simplistic or blinkered way, e.g. “Drug use is bad and it’s their fault”, or “They took their own life because they didn’t care about us”, or “You never kept them in line when they were younger.”

Comments like these can be very difficult to hear. We can perhaps ease some of our pain by recognising that our parent, friend or adult child is probably not trying to hurt us, but attempting to manage their own grief. When a tragedy occurs, everyone tries to make sense of it, sometimes seeking for simple explanations or someone to blame.

Although we will want to be supportive of our other family members, we also need to take care of our own well-being. If individuals are judging our child or us, we may need to limit how much time we spend with them, if this is an option. Some of us find that we instinctively push away anyone who makes us feel more vulnerable at a time in our life when we are close to despair. Later on, we may feel strong enough to let them back into our lives. It may take months or even years, but we will know when we, and our grief, have reached this point.

“I found some relief by distancing myself from some negative family members. I realised that I had to care for myself at this time and not tie myself up in knots listening to them.”

Reactions to our child’s death beyond close family and friends

Many people will have heard the news: friends, neighbours, and staff in our child’s school, college or workplace. The police, and sometimes the media, may be involved. There may be discussions on social media. Some of these conversations may be uplifting, but we may also feel frustrated by inaccuracies or incomplete information that is shared, or deeply hurt by unkind comments.

Later on, the publicity following an inquest might bring negative – or even false – reporting of stories about our child. We may also find that the media resurrect our child’s story many times, even years later, when deaths in similar circumstances occur.

It may be useful to decide early on how we want to deal with all of this. There is no reason to feel obliged to share details about our child’s death or their previous life circumstances with anyone that we do not wish to. However, some of us find that it works out best if we do give at least some basic information to people we see often, such as work colleagues, immediate neighbours, members of the gym or classes we attend, and so on. Not only can this prevent the spread of unfounded rumours, but it also usually leads to us being shown additional kindness and support.

Social media

“After seeing some distressing and wildly inaccurate comments on social media, I decided to have a complete break for a while. It brought a sense of relief.”

Social media can be a wonderful tool for communication amongst friends or family, but it can also be a source of deep pain. It is now a world of its own, where even the most private pain can become a topic of public discussion and speculation. There is very little control over what is posted, and rumours can multiple rapidly.

To protect our social media feeds, we may want to set the settings on our social media accounts to “private”. This means our posts and pages will only be visible to friends. Nobody, including media outlets, will be able to access our pictures. If we have access to the administration settings on our child’s social media accounts, we may want to do this for their accounts as well. It can be a good idea to do this as soon as possible. We can make further decisions, later on, on whether to close their accounts. (See the TCF leaflet *Our child’s digital legacy*.)

Some of us find that we need to take a temporary break from social media if aspects of our child’s death or life become a topic of discussion by strangers. While even well-meaning comments could distress us or cause tension, nasty comments, innuendo and outright lies are deeply disturbing. Responding and engaging in a conversation with the authors of such posts rarely brings any resolution. Sometimes the best answer is to step away, at least for a time.

- Additional measures may be needed if unkindness crosses over into online bullying, hate and abuse. For advice and suggestions for dealing with harmful content, see: **reportharmfulcontent.com**
- Online abuse may be a criminal offence if it relates to sexual orientation, religion or race. Spreading false information, harassment and hate speech can be crimes. There is more information at this link: **report-it.org.uk** (Search for “internet hate crime”)

Taking action about offensive social media posts may be too much to think about when we are in the midst of coping with our grief, but a trusted friend may be able to help on our behalf.

Surviving children

If we have surviving children, we will want to protect them from any stigma that has been attached to our child or their death.

Some young people will receive good support, perhaps from their school, and their peer group may be less judgmental than adults. On the other hand, children can say things without understanding the impact of their words. Our surviving child may become known as “the sibling of the person who did...”. They may need to talk through how best to respond to unkind comments.

We might also want to consider how much our surviving children are accessing social media, and the impact this may be having on them. Bullying and trolling (unwelcome comments that are intended to upset or anger) are unfortunately too common. This will be a particular concern if our child’s death has featured in the media.

Siblings themselves may also be judgmental. No matter what their age is, other children may be angry with their deceased sibling for the chaos that has been caused within the family or if years of anxiety have overshadowed their lives. They may feel that we have not been honest in the past or that their sibling’s behaviour has caused them problems. We will need to find ways of continuing to talk about their sibling, both their life and their death, in terms that are appropriate to their age and maturity. We will want to reassure our surviving children how much we value and love them, and also share positive memories from when their sibling was still here.



For more on support in helping children cope following the death of their sibling, see:

TCF leaflets: *Our surviving children (under the age of 18)* and *Our surviving adult children*

Online safety and other issues:

visit **reportharmfulcontent.com** and search for “Advice for Parents”

Child Bereavement UK offers support for all ages of children:
childbereavementuk.org

Winston’s Wish is another helpful charity: **winstonswish.org**

Finding companions in our grief

Coping with stigma in our grief is a challenge. Being in the company of those who value our child is vital in counteracting the negative attitudes of other people. We need to be surrounded with kindness, not criticism. Hopefully at least some of our closest friends and family will offer this safe space.

Interacting with other bereaved parents who have had similar experiences can also be tremendously helpful. It is comforting to realise that we are not alone, and others have had to deal with similar situations.

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) runs support groups, both online and in person. These are safe, supportive spaces. Some of these events are for specific age groups or circumstances.

- Facebook group for Parents Bereaved by Suicide.
See [tcf.org.uk/facebook-groups](https://www.facebook.com/tcf.org.uk/facebook-groups)
- Facebook group for Parents Bereaved by Drug or Alcohol Use.
See [tcf.org.uk/facebook-groups](https://www.facebook.com/tcf.org.uk/facebook-groups)

Visit the TCF website for more details and further support. (See back page)

The future

The pain of our bereavement is intense. We miss our child and always will. Other people's critical attitudes may make our lifelong journey through grief more difficult, but we will find our own ways of living with our loss. We will find comfort remembering the special qualities that made our child the unique individual they were. Hopefully other people will join us in celebrating memories of our child, but even if they choose not to, it does not diminish our child or ourselves. The love we have shared will endure forever in our hearts.

Further reading

Other TCF leaflets that could be helpful at this time:

- *Living with grief*
- *Coping with friends, family and social situations*
- *Coping with overwhelming grief*
- *The sudden death of our child*
- *Bereaved through drug or alcohol use*
- *After suicide*
- *Grieving for our child who experienced mental health problems*
- *Remembering our child (leaflet and handbook)*

TCF leaflets can be read and downloaded at this link: **tcf.org.uk/leaflets**

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



The Compassionate Friends

Call our National Helpline
0345 123 2304

*The helpline is open from 10am - 4pm and 7pm - 11pm every day.
Calls are always answered by a parent whose child has died.*

Email our National Helpline
helpline@tcf.org.uk

For more information and support visit
tcf.org.uk

Find us on social media

 **@tcf.org.uk**

 **@TCFcharityUK**

 **@thecompassionatefriendsuk**

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