



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

The grief of the newly bereaved parent

The death of a child is the most devastating thing that can ever happen to a parent.

We offer you our heartfelt condolences if you are experiencing this tragedy. This leaflet has been written by parents from The Compassionate Friends (TCF) who have also been bereaved of a child. We hope it is some help as you cope with the harrowing early time of your bereavement.

The very early days

"I keep shaking..."

Our first reaction to the death of our child will probably be shock, even if their death was anticipated. We may burst into tears at any moment and in any place. Some of us find ourselves screaming out loud on occasion. We may feel hot or cold, or physically shake.

Numbness is another common reaction in the first days. We may feel as though we are in a dream, not able to believe that our child has really gone. Feelings like this help to cushion us against the full impact of our loss. Gradually the reality and finality hit home.

The strength of our emotions can make us wonder if we are losing control, even going mad. We are struggling on every level.

"I can't get what happened out of my head..."

Our child constantly fills our thoughts. We may keep replaying their last moments or when we found out they had died. We might seem to hear their voice or see their familiar figure in the street. We still expect them to walk through the door. We are in agony. We may experience intense emptiness, loneliness and despair, as well as a deep yearning to see our child again. We feel as if part of us has died too. We may have flashbacks and nightmares.

Feelings of panic are common, and many people experience strong physical symptoms, such as chest pain, panic attacks and a racing heart, amongst others.

"I can't eat. I can't sleep. I can barely think. I can't get anything done..."

We may become forgetful, tired and lack concentration. It might take a huge effort to complete practical tasks and manage things that were previously part of normal daily life. We may feel hopeless and unable to care about things that used to be important. Our lack of concentration can make us more vulnerable to minor accidents, injuries or illness. It is wise to take extra care. Although things may seem overwhelming at this time, it's worth remembering that as time passes, we will feel better able to cope.

There are no short cuts through grief. In the early days we are often searching for a timetable, wanting to know how long it will take for the pain to become more bearable. We want to rewind to a happier time when our child was here, but sadly there is no magic wand to change what has happened.

Grief is tough to cope with

"I realised later that I should have been more patient with myself in those early months."

During our early grief, we are in an extremely fragile state. We are vulnerable, perhaps tearful, and can feel alone and uncomfortable, set apart from the rest of the world. Meeting people can be very stressful. We may have to tell them about our dreadful news. Answering simple questions is difficult and painful. We may have lost our self-confidence. Even a trip to the supermarket may seem too much for us. It will take time to get back on top of things.

"I don't know why, but somehow it seems to help me feel better, even for a moment, if I can have a good cry."

Tears can be an important way of expressing terrible pain and even have a physical purpose in grief – they release "feel good" chemicals and are cathartic. They also signal to others that we need support. Some of us will find ourselves unable to cry, but if the tears do come, it is usually better to let them flow rather than bottling them up. If we find ourselves crying in public, we should not worry about what other people might think.

"People ask me if I'm feeling better! They don't seem to comprehend that my child's death is the most terrible thing that has ever happened to me. I can never be 'better'."

"I was surprised that they didn't get in touch again after the funeral."

The insensitivity of others can often be difficult to cope with. Some people may seem uncomfortable in our company and avoid mentioning our child "for fear of reminding us". If we mention our child, they change the subject. This is hurtful. If we would like others to continue to talk about our child, it may be helpful to say so directly.

We may find at this most critical time in our lives that some family members or friends are unable to give us much emotional support. Not everyone can cope with death. This can be confusing and hurtful, and we may feel badly let down. On the other hand, we may also discover that someone we hardly knew or hadn't considered a friend shows us tremendous kindness and compassion.

"It's like I'm on a rollercoaster. I never know what I'm going to feel next."

Feelings of guilt are very common in bereavement, particularly when a child has died. We may torture ourselves with thoughts of "if only" and "what if". The reality is that we loved our child and would never have done anything intentional to harm them. Many grievers also experience deep-seated anger that can suddenly flare up, sometimes triggered by seemingly trivial events, or directed at the wrong person. We may become less patient and less tolerant of others.

Eventually we will find ways to manage the rollercoaster of difficult emotions and random thoughts, but this will not be easy nor quick. Some of us discover later on that it can help to look for a safe space to try to make sense of our intense feelings and troubled thoughts, such as with a counsellor.

Looking after yourself

Although you may not feel like it, you do need to take care of yourself. Here are a few ideas to consider.

- Lost appetite? Smaller meals or snacks may feel more manageable than a full meal, and can still provide necessary nutrition
- **No energy?** Perhaps try getting outside for at least a few minutes in the fresh air
- **Don't know what to do next?** It can help to start a routine, even if it is simply leaving the house daily to get a newspaper or walk the dog
- Physically exhausted? This is normal; the extreme emotions of grief are very tiring and can wear us out. You need to give yourself time to recover
- Can't sleep? The exhaustion of grief can be due to lack of sleep. Getting fresh air during the day and unwinding before bed might help, but if you continue to find yourself unable to get enough sleep, perhaps visit your GP for advice
- **Not ready to socialise?** Try not to feel pressed into doing anything you do not feel is helpful. It is okay to refuse invitations or leave early if you are not feeling up to an event
- Can't manage? Friends or family might not realise you need help. It doesn't hurt to ask for help with specific tasks. Accepting help can give you the time and space you need to get back on your feet
- Don't understand why you feel the way you do? Books written by other bereaved parents or on the subjects of death and bereavement can be a significant source of help and comfort. The Compassionate Friends (TCF) has a library of such books to borrow

There is no right or wrong way to grieve, nor a right or wrong way to continue on your life's path. You can only do what feels right for you at the time.

Remembering our children

"I don't want to forget my child's voice, so I have collected their voicemail recordings."

Keeping the connection with our child through our memories is one of the most powerful ways of adjusting and coping with our very deep grief. It is up to us how much time and effort we put into this. It can be very painful, but somehow also comforting.

We may want to create special spaces and rituals for remembering. Some of us visit our child's grave, plant a tree in their memory, set up a corner of the home with their photographs or light candles. We may decide to make new traditions to mark important days like birthdays. Sometimes just talking to our child is enough.

"I bury my face in her jacket. The scent is precious. There's no way I'm parting with it."

We should not be in a rush to sort out our child's belongings unless it is truly unavoidable. It may be better to wait until after the initial shock of grief has subsided. Even then, it is up to us. There are no rules or "bereavement timetable" about what to do with their clothes and belongings, even random small items. Their belongings might bring us comfort yet also bring pain, and quite likely we will feel a mix of emotions. We may eventually give away or dispose of some items, but others we will keep.

For more on this subject, see TCF publications:

- Remembering our child (leaflet and handbook)
- Coping with special occasions

Finding support

"I felt like I was on an island all by myself, even with my family surrounding me, until I came across TCF!"

Many parents find they need to talk over the events of their child's death in order to start making sense of what has happened. Speaking with other bereaved parents can really help, as it can be easier to relate to someone who has lost a child themselves, and through this we can discover that our feelings and reactions are quite normal.

Joining a support group, such as those organised by The Compassionate Friends (TCF), can be a good step. Support groups, whether in person or online, can help us feel less alone, particularly when we are able to connect with other parents who have been bereaved in similar ways. The TCF online forum, support groups and private Facebook pages are safe places to express our feelings and listen to the experiences of others. (See back page for details.)

We may also turn to telephone helplines, such as those run by TCF, or other national or local bereavement services. Some of us may find counselling sessions can help; others may find this unhelpful at first, but may come to welcome this form of support in the future.

"I love it when other people post pictures of my child on my timeline."

Social media can be a useful tool. We can post pictures and stories of our child. We may also choose to share some bereavement articles on our own pages to help our friends and family better understand the grief process and what might help us.

"It's been a struggle to get out of the house, but it seems to help my mood when I do."

It is important not to become isolated, although this might be easier said than done. We may choose to take a temporary break from customary activities, such as participation in an exercise group or a class. However, most of us discover that it helps to spend at least a little time with other people, in whatever ways we can manage.

Relationships

For those of us in a relationship, the shattering experience of our child's death may create tensions within our marriage or partnership. The understanding developed over the years will be put to a severe test. We feel that we should be able to help each other, but we are individuals who need to grieve in our own way, at our own pace. Being in so much pain, we may not have the emotional strength to comfort each other as we would wish.

Our partner's grief pattern may be difficult to understand. Some people express their grief openly, sharing their emotions and talking it through. Others are more silent. They might bury themselves in their work or other activities, and not appear able to confront their grief head on. Communication, tolerance, affection and patience are essential in helping each other through this devastating experience.

In addition, many of us live in blended families, and the ways in which a biological parent and a step-parent grieve the loss of their child may, quite naturally, be different.

For those of us who are lone parents, it may be difficult to bear the pain of our grief without someone to share it with. If the other parent has previously died, the loss of our child can cause us to relive those painful memories, too. Finding friendship with other bereaved parents through organisations such as TCF could help us avoid becoming isolated in our grief.

Other children

If there are surviving siblings, they will of course be suffering greatly too. They need their parents' love along with recognition of their own feelings. It's important for children to understand that it is okay to be sad and to cry.

TCF has a website, newsletter and Facebook page for grieving siblings who are 18 years old and over. See: tcf.org.uk/siblings

If we have been bereaved of more than one child

Some of us endure the heartbreak of losing more than one child. If we are now facing a further bereavement, our emotions will be intensified. The coping strategies we used in the past may no longer be enough, as our present grief is compounded by our past losses. The advice above about the need to take care of ourselves, as well as to seek and receive support, will be all the more applicable if we have suffered multiple losses.

If we have been bereaved of all of our children

If our current bereavement means that we now have no surviving children, we may struggle to see a way forward. The sense of loss may fill every part of our lives, and we may have practical concerns as well. TCF runs a forum and support events specifically for parents bereaved of all of their children.

Next steps

We often expect or wish for there to be a straightforward path after bereavement, but this is rarely the case. We will face ups and downs. Eventually, we will adapt to this very unpredictable path, and the intensity of the pain will lessen. The immediate effects of grief such as tiredness, loss of short-term memory, lack of concentration and reduced self-confidence will all improve gradually, as will our energy levels and the ability to manage our daily life.

Life continues, and our responsibilities to home and family do not lessen. There may soon be pressure to return to work. The routine and structure of work can be reassuring and even give us a temporary reprieve from the intensity of our feelings. However, if we do have a choice in the matter, it is best not to be rushed into returning before we feel we are ready.

As we struggle in this early period of our loss, it may be helpful to focus on the present moment, and not so much on the future. Our main task is getting through today. Slowly, with the passing of the days, weeks and months, we will begin to feel a little stronger and a little less unable to cope. This does not mean that our love for our child will be reduced. It is simply that we become more able to live with that love and the pain of loss that we carry. Our life can never be the same after the death of our child, but our own efforts and the support we receive will help us to find ways to honour our child's life and to rebuild our own. We will adapt to a "new normal" as we begin to take up the threads of life again. All the while, our love for our child will remain intact and strong.

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
- Coping with friends, family and social situations
- The grieving parent and their health
- Back at work
- Grieving couples
- Grieving child loss in blended and step families
- The bereaved lone parent
- Parents bereaved of one or all of their children
- Our surviving children

TCF leaflets can be downloaded from 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).



Call our National Helpline **0345 123 2304**

The helpline is open as often as possible between 10am – 4pm and 7pm - 10pm every day. Calls are answered by a volunteer who is a bereaved parent.

Email our National Helpline helpline@tcf.org.uk

For more information and support visit **tcf.org.uk**

Find us on social media

ff @tcf.org.uk

■ @TCFcharityUK

@thecompassionatefriendsuk

in @compassionate-friends-uk

General enquiries TCF library

info@tcf.org.uk library@tcf.org.uk

Sponsored by Kelly's family in her memory, Kelly's Heroes was established to provide vital support, inspire hope, and promote mental health awareness. Founded to ensure no one faces their darkest moments alone, the charity works tirelessly to make a difference in the lives of those who need it most.