



The
Compassionate
Friends

Grief of the Newly Bereaved

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

Grief of the Newly Bereaved

There is nothing more devastating for a parent than the death of our child, whatever their age or from whatever the cause. Unfortunately, some of us have to face this terrible tragedy. We may feel overwhelmed by our feelings as we face the dreadful task of learning to live without our son or daughter.

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) has a series of leaflets on different aspects of living with loss. In this leaflet we focus on the very early days of our bereavement.

Initial Shock and Numbness

Our first reactions to our loss include shock and numbness. We can even doubt our child is really gone. These feelings help cushion us against the full impact of our loss. Gradually the reality and finality of what has happened hits home. Life seems surreal, everyday activities trivial and meaningless. We may feel we want to join our dead child. Our emotions can be so extreme that it seems we are losing control, even going mad. We are struggling on every level with what has happened. Events around our child's death are with us constantly, we are likely to have flashbacks and nightmares. We can feel so isolated.

Our child is in our thoughts all the time. There are reminders of our child everywhere; we hear our child's voice or see their familiar figure in the street. We still sometimes expect them to walk through the door. We are in agony. We may experience intense emptiness, loneliness and despair and a deep desire to see our child again. We feel as if part of us has died too. Feelings of panic are not uncommon and many people experience acute physical symptoms, such as chest pain, anxiety attacks and palpitations, amongst many other physical symptoms.

We may become forgetful, tired and lack concentration and this can further damage our self-confidence. It is very natural, particularly in the first few days and weeks, to find everyday practical tasks a big effort, and we might struggle with things we previously wouldn't think twice about doing. We should not feel ashamed about asking for help from friends and family. We should also be aware that our lack of concentration and distress can make us more vulnerable to minor accidents, injuries or illness. It is wise to take extra care. This all might be quite discouraging, but we can also remind ourselves that these are temporary responses; eventually we will regain our usual abilities.

There are no short cuts through grief. In the early days we are often searching for a time-table, wanting to know how long it will take for the pain to become more bearable. We want to rewind to a happier time with our child and our old life. Sadly, we have no magic wand, and accepting that this cannot happen is an important step.

Expressing Ourselves

During our early grief, we are in an extremely fragile state; we are vulnerable and ill at ease. Meeting people can be very stressful as they might not know about our awful news, and answering simple questions is difficult and very painful.

Sometimes the insensitivity of others can be difficult to cope with. Others may seem uncomfortable in our company and avoid mentioning our child “for fear of reminding us”, and/ or if we mention our child, they change the subject. This is hurtful. It might be helpful to let others know if we don’t mind them talking about our child or saying their name. Helping our family members, friends and work colleagues understand the importance of us being able to talk freely about our child can help break down barriers to conversation if that’s our wish.

We may also need to talk over the events of our child’s death, trying to make sense of what has happened. Speaking with other bereaved parents can really help, as it is 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.

Tears are an important way of expressing anguish and even have a physical purpose in grief – they release chemicals, they’re cathartic - and they also let others know that we need support. If the tears come, it is good to let them flow; it is usually better to weep than to bottle it up, although some of us find it difficult to cry. If we find ourselves crying in public, we should not worry about what other people might think.

It is not unusual to have feelings of guilt; we torture ourselves with “if only” and “what if”. It can help to remind ourselves that we loved our child, and would never have done anything to harm them. Many people also experience deep-seated anger which can suddenly flare up, sometimes triggered by seemingly trivial events or directed at the wrong person. There is more about coping with these difficult emotions in the TCF Leaflet *Living with Grief*.

Looking After Ourselves

Although we may not feel like it, we do need to take care of ourselves. We may have lost our appetite; small meals and snacks can help us get the nutrition we need.

Physical exhaustion can be an unexpected symptom of bereavement. Extreme emotion is very tiring and takes its toll. We should be kind to ourselves and not be cajoled into doing things we are not ready for. We should learn to put our own feelings first and not worry about offending others in these early days. We can always cancel an agreed event if we don't feel up to it.

Sleep may be elusive in the early weeks and months despite our exhaustion. We may like to try various strategies to help us relax before we go to bed. Failing this, if we continue to find ourselves unable to sleep, we may want to consider visiting our GP for further advice.

It can be helpful to try and get a routine going, even if it is simply leaving the house daily to get the newspaper or walking the dog.

Finding Support

It is important to try not to allow ourselves to become isolated. We may choose to take a temporary break from customary activities, such as participation in an exercise group or a class, and this is understandable. However we should also look for ways to interact with other people. Joining a support group, such as those organised by TCF, can be a good step to take. Some find visiting a counsellor can be helpful. In deciding what we should do, we should proceed at our own pace. There is no right or wrong way to grieve, nor right or wrong

way to continue on our life's path, and we should do what feels right for us at the time. (For more on this, see the TCF Leaflet *Living with Grief*.)

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

We may find comfort from a wide variety of websites with factual information as well as online support forums, such as TCF, Child Bereavement, The Lullaby Trust, and Cruse Bereavement Care. Some of us find books written by other bereaved parents and/or on the subjects of death and bereavement that closely relate to our own child's circumstances are a significant source of help and comfort.

TCF and others also have "closed" groups on social media websites (such as Facebook) and our own online forum which allow us to interact in a protected environment. These can be safe areas where we can read and interact as little or as much as we choose. In addition to child bereavement, some groups are for specific topics such as parents with no surviving children, those whose children have died through suicide, etc.

We may find social media to be a useful tool when it comes to supporting ourselves. We may also choose to share some specific bereavement articles on our own social media pages, which can help our friends and family understand what may help us.

It is often the case that those around us want to help, but are just not sure how to go about it, so having specific requests can be a real benefit. We could write down a list of things

we need help with, such as various housework chores or the weekly shopping, and let others know how they can help. Some of us may worry about being a burden on others, but if we imagine the tables were turned, and we knew someone who had lost a child, we wouldn't expect them to single-handedly manage on their own. Neither should we.

Grief and relationships

The shattering experience of our child's death may create tensions within our marriage or partnership. All the understanding developed over the years will be put to a severe test. We feel that we should be able to help each other, and many do, 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.

We may also find it difficult to understand our partner's grief pattern, wondering why they seem to be burying themselves in their work, why they don't wish to talk, or even why they find it necessary to talk so much. There can be differences as far as men and women in terms of how we react and respond to grief, as well as different expectations on us. Communication, tolerance, affection and patience are essential in helping each other through this devastating experience.

Please see the TCF leaflets *Grieving Couples*, *A Mother's Grief* and *A Father's Grief* for more on these topics.

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. Some helpful advice can be found in the TCF Leaflet, *Grieving Child Loss in Blended and Step Families*.

For those of us who are lone parents, the awful pain of our loss cannot be easily shared, and our isolation can be very hard to bear. We may no longer be in touch with the other parent, and so this sense that no one else will understand what we are going through may feel magnified. If the other parent has previously died, the loss of our child can cause us to relive previous painful memories. The TCF leaflet, *The Bereaved Lone Parent* can provide some advice and words of comfort.

Other children

Surviving siblings are also grieving, and they can sometimes be the forgotten mourners within a family. They may be given burdens and responsibilities at a time when they too are very fragile: "You'll need to be strong for your Mum and Dad." They need their parents' love, most especially at this time, and recognition of their own feelings. It's important for children to see and understand that it is okay to be sad and to cry. They don't have to be strong for anyone. Grief will put a severe strain on family life but it can also strengthen relationships. (See the TCF leaflet *Our Surviving Children* for more on this topic.)

If our children are of an appropriate age, we may want to make them aware of support that exists. A good starting point can be giving them the TCF leaflet *A Siblings Grief*. TCF has a website and Facebook page for grieving siblings 18 years old and over (www.tcf.org.uk/siblings) as well as a newsletter *Support In Bereavement for Brothers and Sisters*.

If we have lost more than one child, or if we have no remaining children

There are those of us who face the heartbreak of losing more than one child. This may be at the same time, or may be subsequent losses. Our emotions will be intensified, and the coping strategies we developed on earlier occasions may or may not help us at the moment, as our present grief is compounded by our past losses. Everything that has been written above about the need to take care of ourselves as well as to seek and receive support most certainly applies.

If our current loss means that we now have no surviving children, we may struggle to see a way forward. See the TCF Leaflet, *Childless Parents* and the dedicated TCF Forum for Parents with No Surviving Children for more on this.

Remembering

Sometimes we fear we shall forget what our child looked like or the sound of their voice. We may draw comfort from their clothes and belongings but at the same time these can be a painful reminder. We should not be in a rush to make decisions about personal items, whether to give them away or keep them. No one else should tell us what should be done – we will know when the time is right to make a decision. Some of our child's belongings may have special meaning and we may want to give them to someone who was close to our child, but these decisions should be made at a later stage after the initial shock of grief has subsided.

Some dates are going to be particularly difficult, such as birthdays, anniversaries, festive occasions, Mothers' and Fathers' Days and other important milestones. Suggestions for dealing with these events can be found in the TCF leaflet *Coping with Special Occasions*.

We may 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. There are many ways to grieve and just as many ways to honour the memory of our children; we should do what feels right to us.

After the initial period of grieving

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. As time goes on we can adapt to this very unpredictable path, and we will find the intensity of it will lessen. The immediate effects of grief such as tiredness, loss of short-term memory, lack of concentration and diminished self-confidence will all improve gradually, as will our energy levels and the ability to organise daily life.

Life continues, and our responsibilities to home and family do not lessen. It might also not be very long before some of us return to work. Whilst some find the routine a welcome relief, if we have a choice in the matter it is best not to be rushed into returning before we are ready. Some helpful advice can be found in the TCF leaflet, Back at Work.

As we struggle in this early period of our loss, it can be helpful to focus on the moment, and not so much on the future. Our task is to get through today. Slowly, with the passing of the days, weeks, months, we will begin to feel a little stronger and a little less anguished. This does not mean that our love for our child will become any less. It is simply that we become more able to live with that love and the loss that we carry. Our life can never be the same after the death of our child, but time, 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, and all the while, our love for our child will remain intact and strong.

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.



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In loving memory of our children.

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