



The
Compassionate
Friends

Grieving Couples

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

Grieving Couples

In a loving relationship, we try to support and care for each other, through good times and bad. Usually, when one of us is down, the other can try to help. However, when our child dies, we are both faced with previously unimaginable grief and despair which are liable to engulf us.

We are there together, yet we may also feel we are there alone. We may experience and express our grief so differently that we fear our relationship is falling apart, just at the time we need it most. Perhaps the greater danger is that the isolation caused by the tragedy blinds us to the needs of others in the family. Where the relationship has been strained, the death of our child may exacerbate the difficulties.

For some of us couples, the opposite may happen and we become closer than we have been for many months or years, as we struggle together to survive our family tragedy.

How we grieve

Men and women can grieve differently from each other; this may cause them to grow apart and open up an irreconcilable rift. Traditionally, men felt constrained from weeping and talking about their suffering, while women were allowed to do so. This attitude has softened over the last few years; men are now expected to show their feelings. Two aspects of grief are to cry and to talk, and this is as true for men as it is for women. It is hard when our reactions are not in step, and we find ourselves feeling unsupported at our time of greatest need. When one of us wants to talk, the other

may be fighting to hold herself or himself together and simply be unable to respond. We need other people to be there for us, to be our support. Other family members and friends can help, although they too may be struggling to cope. We can sometimes slip into an attitude of blame and resentment towards our partner. Grief can make all of us more extreme in our reactions and so it is not surprising that it can exaggerate our differences too. Each of us carries our past history of earlier losses and bereavements, but the death of a child introduces a new dimension of grief. Some people's grief turns strongly inwards, whereas others are more inclined to sublimate their grief through activity. This again can cause a rift to grow.

Sexual issues

Our sexual relationship can also become more difficult, with one of us in desperate need of closeness and the release which sex can bring, while the other feels that this is totally inappropriate, almost an insult to our dead child. For some, sex may bring comfort whilst for others it may feel totally wrong, a source of guilt and distress manifesting itself when it should be a time of pleasure. There may be a temptation to seek solace elsewhere. We should not expect too much of each other, or of ourselves, but understanding and a common ground can be very hard to achieve, and may take a considerable time.

Spiritual issues

Our religious viewpoints may now be different, even if before we thought we shared common beliefs. One seeks support and strength in a long-held faith; the other may find his or her beliefs falling apart, at least in the short term. The death can become a focus for rage at a god who could allow our child to die. One or both of us may have been sure that this life is all

that there is, only to find that we are now drawn to spirituality in our search for answers. If one of us changes radically, it could drive a wedge between us.

Blame

Blame and guilt are often an integral part of our feelings as bereaved parents; we blame ourselves for our child's death, for not having been able to keep him or her alive. Some of us need scapegoats for the insupportable tragedy and the damage to our family. Each of us may have quite different concerns, and find it very difficult to accommodate the feelings of our partner.

Time span

Feelings of grief do not have an allotted time span and how we deal with them will differ as we ourselves are different. As the days, weeks, months and years pass by, we will experience many aspects of grief. Although it is likely that we shall share the raw devastation of our grief immediately after our child's death, how we react subsequently will vary, as individually we struggle to bear our loss.

Siblings

Any surviving children can be a source of shared strength and focus, or a strain and a tension. The desire to continue to function as a normal family can bring us all together, but it can also seem impossible to sustain. The isolation of bereavement may not allow us to see the grief siblings are experiencing. In turn siblings may not comprehend the suffering of the parents. The children rely on us to help them in their loss, just as we rely on them. That does not mean that they are always easy to help (see *The Compassionate Friends'*

(TCF) leaflets *Our Surviving Children* and *A Sibling's Grief* - for young adults for more discussion of family issues). One of us may be unable to cope with the children, leaving the other to do it all. Additional difficulties may arise where step-parents and stepchildren are concerned (see TCF leaflet *The Death of a Stepchild*) or in what we now term as “blended” families (See the TCF leaflet *Grieving Child Loss in Blended and Step Families*).

It helps if we can talk with our children about their feelings and include them in deciding what to do about their brother's or sister's clothes, books, sports equipment, bedroom etc. We should try to avoid making hurried decisions about his or her belongings, and take as much time as we need, not being influenced too much by what other people think we should be doing.

Surviving

Each of us had our own special relationship with our child. If we can avoid competition in our grief, and record the story of our son's or daughter's life and death in a way that acknowledges the role each of us played, then we have a real basis for conversation, for shared memories.

It helps too if we can avoid judging a partner or making assumptions. Silent withdrawal is a valid means of coping with our grief, even though it may be hard for our partner to bear. We need to be aware of each other's moods; we may feel we are on an emotional see-saw - when one is up, the other is down. We need time and privacy to grieve as individuals, and also time together as a couple. Equally we have to respect their needs in grieving.

All of us have to come back to daily routines at some point: we have to go back to work, restart our social life, go on

holiday, etc. We are allowed to enjoy ourselves again, however unimaginable this may seem at first. External circumstances dictate some of these activities, as do the needs of our surviving children, but our inclinations may not be in harmony. This may not be easy. We can cope only with what we feel ready to do, but should try to avoid upsetting our partner, who may seem to be making hasty suggestions.

We need to have realistic expectations of what we can achieve, together and separately. We may need to look closely at our partnership, to give each other space, and to pursue different paths without being afraid that this will drive us apart.

Some families help each other by talking openly; in others it is difficult to be totally frank. Support from outside the family can be vital – from professionals like GPs or bereavement counsellors, or from friends.

The way forward

Our grieving will probably have intensified our awareness of each other and our sense of 'together yet alone'. Our lives do continue, and the insights into our relationship, that have been so painfully discovered as we grieve, may enrich our partnership in the years ahead. We are inevitably different people after the death of our child, but the need to remember our child and to share memories will always be there.

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.



The
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