



The
Compassionate
Friends

Grieving for our baby

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

Grieving for our baby

When we realise that we are to be parents, we are touched by wonder. A new life is being created, and that life that is unique to us. As expectant mothers, we feel and see the changes in our bodies, and technology even lets us see our baby in the womb. There is so much to look forward to.

Sadly, for some of us this dream of parenthood is shattered by the early death of our baby. We are devastated and in shock. We may experience a sense of despair and isolation as we struggle to comprehend the depth of our loss. We suffer the extreme emotions of grief – intense sadness, shock, numbness, memory loss, anger, and low self-confidence. We may feel as if we have somehow failed in our parental role. How can we cope with such heartbreak? This is the topic of this leaflet.

Note: This leaflet discusses the death of a baby after one month of age. For support following stillbirth or neonatal death, please contact SANDS, the Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Charity: **[sands.org.uk](https://www.sands.org.uk)**

The death of our baby

“Every flutter in my belly was a promise that soon I’d meet our baby and we would begin our life together. That he did not live longer than a few months has been a crushing disappointment. I will always cherish the memories of his short time and mourn for what could have been.”

Our bond of love with our child started when we knew we were pregnant. That their life was so short does not detract from that love. Our heart is broken. We are bereaved.

The loss of our baby may have been completely unexpected. However, we may have known even during pregnancy that the

probability of their survival was minimal, or we may have been informed something was the matter after birth. Perhaps we had barely any time to welcome our child into the world before we had to confront the inevitability of their death.

Despite knowing this, we clung on to hope. We may have spent agonising days in intensive care as our child struggled to live and breathe. Sometimes their treatment meant that we could not hold them in our arms as we naturally wanted to do. The medical equipment keeping them alive became a barrier to our physical relationship. Sometimes it might have felt as though we were onlookers rather than parents. We lurched from hope to despair as we watched their struggle, feeling helpless. If we have other children to consider, we felt torn, worrying about them and wanting to be with them, but also knowing the time with our baby was limited and precious.

If our baby was diagnosed with a **life-limiting illness**, we would have been informed that our time together would be short. We knew that our baby would die but not now, not yet! We may have watched as they became weaker and frailer, yet the death was still a terrible shock, an unacceptable fact that we could not change; we clung on to hopes of a miraculous cure. Our minds may have absorbed the facts, but that does not mean our hearts comprehended, let alone accepted, the reality.

Some of us had a **multiple birth**, perhaps after lengthy IVF treatment. Our feelings will be in a tumult if one baby survives and their sibling does not. How can we celebrate bringing home our new baby safely whilst simultaneously mourning their sibling? We may find that some people almost ignore our loss due to the fact that we have come home with one baby. They may think – or even say – that we should be thankful we have at least one.

Perhaps our baby died at home, in what used to be called “cot death” but is now referred to as “sudden infant death syndrome” (SIDS). The shock is devastating. There may be no obvious reason why our baby died, yet as parents we feel somehow responsible, shouldering guilt because of the death and our inability to prevent it. We may torture ourselves, going over and over the last hours and

worrying that we missed something or did something wrong. We may feel it is our fault even when the professionals reassure us otherwise.

If our baby died unexpectedly, whether at home or in hospital, there are certain formal procedures that will be followed to ensure that no one caused deliberate harm to the infant. The police may investigate the circumstances, and this can be very upsetting. Information gathered by the police will be passed on to the Coroner's Office (or the Procurator Fiscal in Scotland). Even when officials are understanding and tactful it still feels like an intrusion into our tragedy.

Coping with what happens next

“When I got back home, I ran my hands over the neat pile of her clothes in disbelief. It did not seem real. It could not be. These are her clothes, ready for her, but she never will wear them. In memory I can still feel the soft fabric between my fingers.”

Whatever the circumstances of our baby's death, even if we had been told to expect it, we will be in a state of shock. We may be numb with disbelief and denial, or we may experience the full force of our emotions.

If our baby had been cared for in hospital, hopefully the staff have been sensitive to our needs. They should have been able to explain things to us as things progressed, although we might not have taken all of the information on board. It may be only later that we will realise that we have unanswered questions and will need to return to understand more of what happened.

Our time with our baby will have been precious, and staff should have helped make it possible for us to hold our baby, if this was an option. If we have other children, we might have brought them to meet their little sibling. Depending upon their ages and level of maturity, they may have limited understanding of what was taking place.

Leaving the hospital where our baby was cared for and died is a painful wrench. When we return home without them, we feel empty and at a loss about what to do next. Home will bear many reminders of their presence, whether or not they ever came there. A physical space will have been prepared; there will be baby supplies, clothes, toys and equipment. We cannot begin to imagine what to do with everything, and we will need time to grasp the reality of our loss.

If it was known that our baby's life was limited and we brought them home, then there will be precious but very difficult memories in this place. Each room will carry an echo of their presence.

Our feelings

It's not surprising that the death of our baby has thrust us into deep mourning. We may experience strong emotions of grief, sadness and despair. We may feel guilty and inadequate as a parent that we could not keep our baby alive, even though we have done our very best for them. We may sometimes feel resentful and jealous of other mothers. We could feel anger towards other people as we need to place blame even when there is none.

As a biological mother, the intensity of our grief could be made worse by natural factors. Our bodies may still be responding as if our baby was alive. It takes time to recover physically from giving birth and this healing is a cruel reminder of what we have lost. Our bodies may be in hormonal turmoil and our breasts aching to feed our baby.

A partner will share some of these emotions of grief, but may deal with them differently. They may feel helpless, desperate to make things right and be a support to us, yet this is not entirely within their control.

If we are a lone parent, we may be dealing with the emotional and practical consequences of the death of our baby without much support. Perhaps there is nobody to witness the depths of our sadness and grief, although hopefully we have some family members or close friends who stand with us. (For more on this, please see the TCF Leaflet: *The bereaved lone parent*.)



Our baby is a real person, to be remembered

“I sewed a small heart out of my baby’s clothes. Holding it in my arms and hugging it close is a precious, though small, comfort.”

For most parents, it is important to have evidence of their baby’s short life. Photographs are incredibly precious, whether they are scans, snaps taken on phones or high-quality pictures captured on camera. We may have been able to have imprints of their hands or feet made. We may want to keep a memory book or box and include other precious items such as a lock of hair, or the hospital wrist band with our baby’s name on it. We will all have special things that are vital to us to keep. These affirm that our child existed and is part of our life.

Later on, we may want to plan meaningful commemorations of our baby on key dates, such as their birthday or anniversary of their death.

For more ideas of remembrance activities and items you can create in memory of your baby, see the publication by The Compassionate Friends (TCF): *Handbook of ideas for remembering our child*.



What we may need to take care of

“I’ve kept the cards that people sent when my baby was born. I don’t look at them often, but it is comforting to remember our happiness when our baby arrived. I’ve kept the condolence cards as well. They are a silent witness of both the happiest and also the saddest days of my life.”

After our baby died, we will have had to register their death. Coming perhaps quite soon after registering their birth, this can feel unreal and immensely painful. We will also need to arrange a funeral.

We may choose to hold onto nursery equipment and clothing for the time being. This could be in the hope or plan of having another child, or we may find that these items give us a comforting feeling of connection with our baby. Alternatively, we may give these items away. What we do is our own choice, and we should not feel pressured or hurried to make decisions about this.

Some parents continue receiving baby-related mail and shopping offers, which of course will be very painful. Maybe a friend can help us by arranging for this sort of communication to be cancelled if we do not feel up to doing this ourselves.

If we have other children

We will need to inform our children that their sibling has died. We will want to do this in an age-appropriate way, considering their level of maturity and understanding. There is evidence that even very young children experience grief or perhaps sense our pain, even if they lack the words to express it. Older children may surprise us with their honest responses and questions.

The charity Child Bereavement UK (**childbereavementuk.org**) has more information on how to help children cope with the death of a family member.

In decades past, young babies who died were barely acknowledged. Thankfully times have changed, and our baby is recognised as a unique individual, regardless of the brevity of their life. Our baby is still a part of our family, and most of us want them to be remembered. If we have more children in future, we will likely want them to know about their older sibling who died before they were born. Having some pictures or mementoes on display can make this knowledge part of natural conversation.

Coping with our grief

“After our baby first died, I didn’t think I had the strength to keep going. Even when I managed to sleep, I had terrible nightmares. Then the pain somehow softened. I started getting out and about, and eventually went back to work. Life isn’t the same as it was but I’m coping better now.”

It is so important to take care of ourselves in our grief. It can take some effort to get outside for fresh air, to eat and drink healthfully, or even have a shower, but ultimately, we will feel better for it. This includes being kind and patient with ourselves. We are doing the best we can in extraordinarily difficult circumstances. Grief will not always feel so overwhelming and unbearable, yet it does take time to find our way forward.

Having people around who support us, whether friends, family members, a partner, or other bereaved parents, can make a real difference. We need people who will acknowledge the depth of our loss and recognise just how life-changing our bereavement has been.

On the other hand, not everyone will empathise with what we are going through. It is not uncommon to find that established friendships or even some relationships with family members falter as people struggle to know what to say to us, and they may even avoid us. With the best of intentions, things can be said that are insensitive. Unfortunately, some of us will be hurt by well-meaning

comments such as “it is probably for the best” or “never mind, you can try again.” References to our baby being in heaven may hurt us.

Most of the comments we find hurtful are said out of ignorance; there is a genuine wish to help without knowing how. However, others instinctively say and do the right things. We may also find that support comes from unexpected quarters. It is not unusual for new friendships to be forged through the mutual understanding of loss.

You are not alone



Sometimes in grief we feel isolated and that nobody truly understands. This is why speaking with other bereaved parents can be incredibly helpful. We discover that we are not as alone as we thought we were. You may like to participate in the support groups or meetings organised by The Compassionate Friends (TCF), which are held both online and in person. There is also a private Facebook group. There are more details on the back page.

The way forward

At some time in the future some of us may have another child. Our feelings during any future pregnancy will be complicated by our previous loss. Fear that this baby too will die may cause us to be over-anxious and afraid to acknowledge the expected birth. Even when our baby is born strong and healthy, we may find it hard to overcome the sad memories and to bond with our child as we would wish. Hopefully these feelings will pass quickly, and we can all enjoy our new family life. We will never see our new baby as a replacement, whatever others might unthinkingly say to us. We love and celebrate each child in their own right.

Grieving for someone we knew for such a short time is not easy. We will always be sad that our baby was not able to have the long, happy and healthy life we wished for them. Our hearts may keep breaking as we imagine what their life could have been, but was not. Photographs, mementoes and stories will help to keep their memory alive, and so we will continue to speak about them and say their name. We will always love and miss our precious baby, carrying them forever in our heart and thoughts. They live on in us.

Further reading

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) have published a range of leaflets to support parents after a child has died. Helpful titles include:

- *Living with grief*
- *A mother's grief*
- *A father's grief*
- *The bereaved lone parent*
- *Remembering our child*
- *Our surviving children*
- *My child has died, how do I talk about my grief?*

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

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