



The
Compassionate
Friends

Living With Grief

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

Living With Grief

The loss of a child is like no other bereavement. At first, we are in a state of shock, numbness, denial and disbelief that could cushion us against the full impact. Gradually this protection against the cruel reality begins to wear off, and we are overtaken by the pain of grief.

Our preoccupation with thoughts of our child can make us think that we are going mad. Sometimes we engage in restless over-activity and suffer from exhaustion. Sleep and appetite routines are disturbed. We may feel helpless, anxious, depressed, confused, and out of control. The ordinary things of life have little meaning for us, and we lack concentration. These are natural responses, and quite normal. Every bereaved parent goes through some, or even all, of these at different times; some feelings may be more troubling than others.

The pain of grief

“Grief is the price we pay for love,” said Colin Murray Parkes, a US writer who specialises in this subject. This quote, very appropriate when we face the loss of one of our elderly relatives or friends, brings little comfort when our child dies. Losing a child is against the natural order. Not only the present, but the future has been changed – our child’s and our own – particularly if this loss has left us childless. It is not surprising that the devastating reality hits us over and over again.

Individuals grieve differently; there is no timetable for grief. Even survival might seem impossible (or undesirable) initially. Grief is not orderly or progressive: it pours in with great turmoil, and is not predictable in its timing or intensity. It comes in waves and often feels overwhelming. Gradually, however, the interval between the waves extends, and very slowly some of the raw pain of grief begins to abate. In time, we will adjust to the thought of life without our child, but even when we have reached a plateau of acceptance, we may be surprised – even many years down the line – to be suddenly overwhelmed with sorrow once again. This is all natural.

Facing the pain of grief takes courage. We need to talk about our child's life and the circumstances of his or her death. There are good memories to be shared, although at first the pain of their passing, the devastation of unfulfilled dreams and shattered hopes, may fill our thoughts. We need to find ways of expressing emotions and coping with them. This may seem easier said than done; grief can often feel unmanageable. Allowing ourselves and others to cry can be helpful, rather than bottling up our feelings. None of us expects that our son or daughter will die before us. The worst thing that any parent can imagine has happened, and grief is our right as well as our burden. It is very reassuring to be able to talk freely to a sympathetic friend.

We may find ourselves turning to Helplines, such as those operated by The Compassionate Friends (TCF), or a national or local bereavement service.

Communicating with other bereaved parents can help us realise that we are not alone in what we are going through. The TCF online forum and private Facebook pages are safe places to express our feelings and listen to others. (See back page for details.)

Coping with the intensity of our feelings

We may be shocked at the intensity of our feelings in comparison with earlier bereavements, such as the loss of elderly relatives. In our worst moments, we may find ourselves depressed or even suicidal. We may want to seek professional counselling. Some of us may find we need medical support to help us cope, even temporarily. Others find comfort in our faith. Our priority now is our own survival. We should not feel obliged to measure up to somebody else's expectations; we are each unique and although we may find ourselves in similar circumstances, they are not the same, and we have to find our own way through.

The trauma of our child's death may create tensions within our marriage or relationship. We may feel too drained to support each other as we would wish; we all grieve in our own way and at our own pace, and we may not understand each other's grief pattern. We should allow our partner to grieve however they choose.

Almost every parent feels a sense of guilt when their child dies, over things they have done or not done, said or not said to their child. We may feel that we should not be alive when our child is dead. We tend to blame ourselves over the cause of death – for example, letting our child have a car, go backpacking or swimming, and so on. Whether the death occurred suddenly or after a long illness, we torture ourselves with thoughts that we should have taken better care of our child, so that their suffering might have been reduced or death averted. No matter how irrational or far-fetched our reasoning, we blame ourselves.

So often we demand more of ourselves than we expect of others. We would not condemn others with the judgement

we cast upon ourselves. Most parents try to do the best they can in a situation where there are no rehearsals or second chances. Later we may think that we should have done something differently, but that is with the benefit of hindsight.

Anger is also part of grief. We may feel angry over the circumstances of our child's death, or with the people involved, whether or not they were to blame. We could possibly resent relatives, friends or colleagues for the things they say, or omit to say. We sense that they are uncomfortable in our company; they avoid mentioning our child's name "for fear of reminding us", and they expect us to function normally within a short time. We may blame God and/or bewail the unfairness of life, asking, "Why did this happen to me?" If our child contributed towards their early death, such as through reckless behaviour or suicide, we could feel quite confused – sorrowing, yet at times angry, upset by the impact of their actions on ourselves and our family. These feelings are natural; the reversal of our expectations is shattering.

Living with grief

We will experience intense sadness immediately after the death of our son or daughter. We find ourselves reliving those days, constantly replaying the events in our minds. For a long time our child is always in the forefront of our thoughts. There are reminders in all we see, hear and touch. We might think that we hear our child's voice or see their familiar figure in the street. We still sometimes expect them to walk through the door; when the phone rings, we think it might be them. Then comes the yearning and the realisation of what "never again" means in our mourning. Some of us feel a suffocating weight in the chest, or a grey fog, an absence of colour in

everyday things. We are lethargic or agitated, or swinging from one state to the other, losing interest in everyday tasks and finding it almost impossible to complete them. We may weep constantly, or be quite unable to cry. We seek refuge or oblivion in sleep, only to lie awake hour after hour. Our rest is sometimes disturbed by vivid dreams about our children, and we wake up unrefreshed. The stress of our child's death can leave us vulnerable to infection and illness. To counteract this we should be aware of our diet and the need for rest.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, changes begin to take place.

There are brief moments of enjoyment, but these are often followed by overwhelming guilt. We need not feel disloyal to our child when we begin to laugh again. Living with grief involves discovering how to handle our constantly changing feelings, finding ways to channel them into activities which release the tension they create.

Helping ourselves

So what can we do to help ourselves? We could choose to do something familiar, or take up a new activity. Some suggestions which others have found useful include physical activities such as walking, swimming, cycling, dancing, and gardening, as well as organised sports. These can aid our general health and well-being, and will make us tired so that we can, perhaps, get a better night's sleep. Joining classes or study groups can be mentally absorbing. Yoga, t'ai chi, aromatherapy, massage and reflexology are relaxing and nurturing. Our concentration can be improved by reading and solving crosswords or other puzzles. Listening to music, at home or at a concert or folk club, can offer a much-needed respite. Some of us draw comfort from a community of faith.

Outings to the theatre or cinema can occupy the mind, but it is best to check the subject matter of the plays or films beforehand to avoid anything that could distress us more, though we can still be caught unawares. Finding part-time or voluntary work, campaigning or fund-raising for charity can help us to adjust to life after the death of our child.

Creative activity can be very therapeutic. Many of us fear that we will forget the small details of our child's life. We can make a book or digital record, using photos, schoolwork, drawings, letters and family memories. This could be a good opportunity for grief to be shared with any surviving children or other family members. A memory box can serve much the same purpose, and could be more suitable for a baby or small child, for whom there are fewer physical reminders. This could contain photos, toys, small garments, a lock of hair, a hospital name-band, or a toddler's first drawings.

Keeping a diary, where we express our grief, can later provide us with a yardstick of our journey through despair to a time when we can write from a calmer standpoint. Some of us start blogs. Many people write poems and articles for Compassion, the quarterly journal published by TCF. Writing is an excellent outlet for our feelings, even if we show no one the results, or tear the pages up afterwards.

Music has the power to bring emotion to the surface. If we can play an instrument or sing in a choir, we can share with others in the making and appreciation of it, and it helps to connect us to the wider world. Dancing in its many forms combines exercise and the enjoyment of music. Painting, sewing, crafts, cooking and DIY jobs can also be absorbing. In fact, any hobby can give us a much-needed break from our grief.

We should be prepared for key dates like our child's birthday and anniversary, and find meaningful ways to commemorate. Some of us mark these dates with a new tradition, such as visiting a place our child loved. There is no reason why we cannot bring a birthday card or small memento to their grave or another special place. Christmas and other religious celebrations, Mother's and Father's Days, even our own birthday can also be difficult, particularly if we have no surviving children. Some of us try our best to ignore these special dates; others find new and creative ways to get through these most painful times.

Family, friends and others

In the early days of our bereavement, we might find chance meetings difficult. We may not be ready to explain what has happened, and deal with the reactions of those we tell. We could try changing our routines for a while, so that we are less likely to encounter people who know us – shopping at a supermarket further away from home, or attending different classes or clubs, for example. We should not feel obliged to go to social occasions, such as parties at work or family gatherings, where the conversation often revolves around children, which may be difficult to deal with at the moment. Even strangers casually ask us how many children we have. For us, this is a question without an easy answer.

If we are employed, we may be able to take extended leave, or circumstances may require us to return to work quite soon. When we are consumed with grief it can be difficult to manage our responsibilities and interactions with our colleagues, who may not always know how to respond to us. On the other hand, some find going back to work helpful, as it opens up social contact and/or give us a focus for our days. (See the TCF leaflet *Back at Work*.)

Family and friends generally rally round at first to help us. However, as time passes, they might not be able to continue their support; they may feel it is time we “got over it.” We have to take care of ourselves. We will never be the same again; some friends will be lost to us, and new ones will be made. It is here that TCF serves its unique purpose – to provide a safe place for bereaved parents to talk about their child, of their life and death, without feeling pressured to “move on”.

The loss of our child also impacts upon other members of the family, and this can be difficult to deal with. Surviving children will be coping with their own grief and will need our support, which may not be easy for us to give. TCF publishes leaflets to help in the understanding of these situations, for example, for grieving couples, siblings, step-parents and grandparents. (See the TCF website for the full list.)

Going forward

When we first lose our child, we count the time in hours and days. Then there are weeks, months and years. As time passes, we observe their friends moving on. The children who were at school with our child grow up; if they went to university or had a job, their friends are progressing in their careers. Perhaps most difficult of all, our child’s partner finds someone else. It is hard not to feel resentful, to imagine “what might have been,” to compare our child’s shortened life with the lives of their peers. He or she is frozen in time; there are no new photographs, no new stories to tell. There is not an easy answer to the pain of our loss, but the raw agony of the early months and years will eventually dissipate.

Adjustment means gradual integration of our child’s absence into our lives. We will always love and remember our son or

daughter, but the memories and photographs that so upset us in the early days will, hopefully, become a comfort, and make us smile as well as weep. Some of us have a religious faith which can be of immeasurable support; others now find that we question long-held beliefs. Some discover a faith and others of us work out our own philosophy.

Our life will never be the same after the loss of our beloved child. It will take many months, or probably years, to weave the experience into our lives so that we find our “new normal”. We will have changed, our lives will have changed, and we may now find that we have a different perspective on what we feel is important to ourselves and our families. We will learn to live again, but the ache of loss will never be quite forgotten. We will treasure our child’s memory as long as we have breath.

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
**Compassionate
Friends**

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This leaflet is sponsored by the Exeter Group
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memory of all our precious children.

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