



The  
Compassionate  
Friends

## The Sudden Death of Our Child

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

# The Sudden Death of Our Child

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When our child dies without warning, the shock and disbelief we suffer is overwhelming. It leaves us reeling, our world rocked to the very core. How can this be true?

**For a child of any age to die before his or her parents is not the expected order of things. This is even more shocking when the death is sudden and/or violent with no time to prepare. There will be no future opportunity to say the things we would want to, no chance to prepare or resolve misunderstandings or say goodbye. All aspects of our life are changed forever.**

Those dreadful moments, when we were told of – or even worse witnessed – the death of our child, are etched in our memory forever. Our world stopped turning in that instant and we feel out of time, out of place. The enormity of what has happened sinks in only gradually; we are in shock.

Shock is often the body's first response to news of sudden death. Everything seems surreal; we operate on auto pilot because normal emotions and responses are paralysed. From the outside we may seem relatively calm and detached – others often assume we are coping well. This is part of our inherent natural defence system and it can take weeks, months and even years for the bereaved to understand what has happened to their family.

As we begin to comprehend that our life has been irrevocably changed, we experience a bewildering array of strong emotions. Feeling guilty about what might have been done to prevent the death is normal. As parents part of our role is to protect, nurture and make things right. Our heads fill with

those questions that begin what if or if only, and we often blame ourselves; but this self questioning is natural. We are tortured with these thoughts, going over and over the same things. It can help to share with someone who understands. Sometimes it is too painful to do this with close family members.

Anger can also surface - sometimes unexpectedly and violently. As the reality of our child's death finally sinks in, we have feelings of intense anger at the injustice, and experience deep anguish as we recognise that the loss is forever. Anger may be directed at God, or someone we hold responsible, or anyone or anything. Often it is triggered by the smallest thing and yet we are consumed with rage. We need safe ways to vent our anger – maybe through counselling or sharing our feelings with people who have been through the same experience.

This is also helpful in terms of countering feelings of isolation commonly felt by newly bereaved parents and their families. It really helps to know that however dreadful this situation is, we do not have to suffer on our own.

Over time the burden of our guilt and blame can move from being a main focus of our grief to a level of realisation and acceptance that many tragedies in life are neither preventable nor foreseeable.

Finding a new normal is a real challenge for families as there is a huge hole in their everyday lives. For many one of the most difficult things is watching the world continue as usual, without our child and our family incomplete. What should be joyous occasions are now overshadowed by sadness. It is therefore particularly important for us to find fitting ways to remember and honour our child. This can be as simple as including our child's name often in conversation, telling stories and sharing

memories, even hosting significant memorial gatherings. Gradually we feel our way, recognise our limits and learn to trust our own intuition.

Writing can be a useful and creative outlet for our conflicting and confusing emotions; a safe way of expressing ourselves. It doesn't matter if we share our writings or they remain personal. Walking or just being somewhere beautiful can also be beneficial.

## The law, funeral arrangements and other formalities

In our time of deep loss we will inevitably have to deal with bureaucracy. An investigation may be needed to establish the cause of death. If the Coroner<sup>1</sup> rules an Inquest is to be held, this may mean that we cannot immediately finalise the preparations for a funeral. In the case of murder or dangerous driving for instance, a criminal trial may have to be held. We will need all of our inner strengths to endure the long, agonising rituals that the law demands, but should remember that however awful this is we have already survived the worst thing. Some officials will be empathetic and supportive, but others will continue with their business, seemingly without thought for our anguish and suffering (see the TCF fact sheets on *Inquests* for more on this).

Some families are confronted with the death of their child whilst abroad and have to arrange for repatriation. This can be fraught with difficulties – coping with different time zones, customs and languages. For some families funeral arrangements cannot be made because no body has been found. In this case we have even greater difficulty in accepting the death. Knowing what to do with our child's possessions is now even harder: it seems like a betrayal, because we cling to the hope that they may yet come home.

Information about where and how our child died can help, as can any written communication or other evidence. This searching for proof may make us feel guilty, as if we were wishing them dead. This is not so: we just want, need, the truth, however painful it may be. If our child has died abroad or far away and we cannot visit, a photograph of the place may be of help (See the TCF fact sheet and leaflet on *Deaths Abroad* for more on this).

Depending on the circumstances of the death, we may be subjected to what we see as intrusions to our family life by the police, the law, the media. Most sudden, accidental or unexplained deaths will entail police investigations, acutely distressing and involving parents, siblings and others. We are struggling to cope with the horror of the sudden death of our loved one whilst the police are investigating a potential crime. Even when the rational part of us recognises that the role of the police and the law is necessary, our emotions still rebel at the intrusion. The extra time which these legal proceedings take can drag on. Media intrusion can be particularly upsetting especially when reporting is inaccurate and ill-informed. In dealing with the media many of us have found it better to issue a short statement and photograph, then requesting privacy in which to grieve. A friend or relative may be able to help with this duty.

Finally, at some point we are given permission to arrange a funeral. Most people's experiences of this have been for elderly relatives, who have most likely expressed their wishes during life. The circumstances of a sudden death mean that there was no chance to discuss them before, either with our dead child, our partner or other family members.

All deaths bring legal tasks that have to be performed, some of them unfamiliar and unexpected. Some of us may have dealt before with these things, but when it is for our own child

it is much more painful. The older the child was, the more likely that there may be more complex matters to deal with. If our child had been living away from home, perhaps with a partner, there may be confusion about who has the legal duties as 'next of kin'.

## How we can cope

As time passes it becomes easier to reflect on things we have done, and sometimes we wish we had acted differently or regret decisions made. We can do nothing about this, and should console ourselves that we did the best we could at the time.

Each person's grief is different; people grieve individually and there are no rights or wrongs, as the family adjusts to coping with the emptiness that the loss of their child brings. Most of us want to live in ways that our child would be proud of, and finding the positives in what we do is important. Some people create memorials or get involved with fundraising initiatives, some sponsor a child in the third world or get involved with charity work, others campaign for changes to correct circumstances that led to the death. These are all constructive and prove that something positive can be borne from the greatest of tragedies.

**Whilst initially the world seems a desolate and dark place, gradually chinks of light and colour edge back in to our daily lives. As the terrible rawness of grief softens, what remains intact is our bond of love with our child.**

<sup>1</sup>The Law and the way it operates differs throughout the UK. Terms in this leaflet are those used in England and Wales. The Scottish Executive, The Northern Ireland Office and The Foreign and Commonwealth Office, amongst others, provide much useful information on their websites. Please also see the TCF website [www.tcf.org.uk](http://www.tcf.org.uk) for fact sheets on *Inquests*, *Deaths Abroad* and other useful information.

# 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](http://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**

UK Helpline:

**0345 123 2304**

Northern Ireland Helpline:

0288 77 88 016

**General Enquiries**

0345 120 3785

E: [info@tcf.org.uk](mailto:info@tcf.org.uk)

**TCF Library**

0345 120 3785

E: [library@tcf.org.uk](mailto:library@tcf.org.uk)

**[www.tcf.org.uk](http://www.tcf.org.uk)**

This leaflet is sponsored by the Hythe (Kent) Group of The Compassionate Friends in loving memory of all our children.

**Founder: The Revd Canon Dr Simon Stephens OBE**

**President: The Countess Mountbatten of Burma**