



The
Compassionate
Friends

The Death of an Adult Child



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

The Death of an Adult Child

We do not expect to outlive our children: it seems to contradict the laws of nature. As bereaved parents we suffer a jumble of emotions, including intense sorrow. The sense of loss is one of the most profound; many of our expectations, hopes and dreams for the future are ended, and our world has changed for ever. Our family unit will never be complete again, and every relationship within it has changed. As parents, we may have the double problem of trying to cope with our own grief as well as supporting each other and any surviving siblings.

Our role

Those of us whose adult child has died have to contend with some unexpected responses. One of these is that many people believe that, because the child was adult, the pain of losing them is therefore much less. They do not appreciate that the **role of a parent** lasts for all of our lives, and the death of our child, regardless of age, makes us feel that we have failed to protect and support them. In addition, our relationship with them could have matured from parent/child to equality as adults. We will miss the friendship that has grown from knowing and loving them over the years.

Some deaths of adult children are sudden and unexpected. These deaths often require a post mortem, sometimes followed by an Inquest (or Fatal Accident Inquiry in Scotland).

Even when officials are striving to be sympathetic, the **legal proceedings** can seem like a cruel nightmare (See the TCF fact sheets on *Inquests*). Complications can arise if the death occurred some distance away, perhaps even abroad. (See TCF leaflet and fact sheet *Deaths Abroad*). Others lose their lives following a long illness. Perhaps we have watched their decline in hospital, or we have cared for them at home.

The tendency nowadays is for children to stay longer in the family home. Many of us who lose an adult child have not experienced their leading an **independent life**. We may have been supporting one who was physically or mentally ill, disabled or having difficulties with misuse of substances, alcohol or drugs. Their death will have left a huge void in our daily routine, adding further to our grief. A sense of purpose may have sustained us while we cared for them; now they are gone, we struggle to find meaning in our life. Some children could have led unconventional lives, been involved in prostitution, living rough, or serving a prison sentence. We may then suffer a complex grief, with shame, guilt and regret mixed with our other emotions. We may feel isolated, even amongst other bereaved parents. (Reading TCF's leaflet *Coping with Judgemental Attitudes* may help us here.)

We might not have seen our child much. Perhaps they left home and broke off contact with us, for whatever reasons; perhaps they moved overseas. Now that they are gone, we are bound to regret missing opportunities to be with them.

Our son or daughter may have settled in their own accommodation. We will have already adjusted to their **daily absence**, the changed routine and the empty bedroom. The sad task of clearing out their new home may fall to us, as well as notifying everyone of the death and arranging the funeral.

Relationships

If our child was married or in a civil partnership, then the bereaved spouse will normally be **next of kin**, and he or she will have the responsibility for planning the funeral, and all the legal matters dealing with the estate. We will wish to express our views, and help wherever possible, but must accept that they have the legal right to have their decisions carried out, however hard that may be for us to bear.

If our child was not married or in a civil partnership there will be doubt about who is next of kin, and, in particular cases, disputes could start, at the very time when we are least able to cope with them. When we have to deal with our son's or daughter's **estate**, this may be the first time we have to deal with the complications of executorship or administration. It is at this point that we may meet officials from financial institutions who do not appreciate that "the deceased" is not some elderly relative, but is our child. We will have to search through their personal papers to establish their assets and any debts. It could be helpful to seek the advice of a solicitor.

Further problems may arise in arranging the **funeral** (see TCF's *Arranging Our Child's Funeral*). If our child died abroad (or even in a distant part of the UK), we will face the practical problems of arranging for repatriation and the funeral, where to lay them to rest and dealing with their possessions. We will need help in understanding the different legal jurisdictions.

For those of us who are elderly, we may have become **dependent** on our son or daughter for companionship, support and security. Our child may have been relied upon as a driver, for example; now we are faced with the practical difficulties of day-to-day chores without their help. If our partner is still alive, we may have felt assured that, when one

of us died, our child would be there to care for the one who was left behind. Most parents say they would have willingly died in their child's place. Older parents may have intense feelings of survival guilt, wondering why, after a long and full life, they should be alive when their child has died.

We may be lucky in being able to keep in touch with our **child's friends**. Some of them have been well known to us, some of them are new. We can discover extra dimensions of our child's life through sharing memories and photos with them. This will be mutually comforting because they, too, will have been affected by the death.

Many of us will have had a good relationship with our child's partner, and will wish to sustain it. It may be that, after a time, the widowed spouse wishes to live with a **new partner** or to remarry, perhaps moving to a new home further away from us. It can be painful to hear grandchildren call a step-parent "Mummy" or "Daddy", but we have to accept this as a natural progression. In some circumstances, our child's partner may break off all contact with us. This is extremely hurtful. However, contact may well be resumed when the grandchildren are older and can make their own decisions.

Some of us are **grandparents** who have to take on the care of our grandchildren, temporarily or permanently. The children will need extra special comfort and understanding; this may be difficult for us in our own grief, and can be very tiring. Whatever our relationship with our grandchildren, it is best to answer their questions as simply and honestly as possible. When a grandchild's world has been shattered by the death of a parent (our child), the stability and security of their relationship with us will be a great strength to both them and us. They may feel that they can speak more easily to their grandparents than to their surviving parent.

Some children die before they have started their own family. This can leave us without the possibility of ever having grandchildren. The years ahead seem bleak and lonely. There will be no one to inherit our treasured possessions. Our family's name may die with us (See TCF's leaflet *Childless Parents*).

The loss of a child of any age is devastating. In time, however, the pain ceases to be constant, and we are gradually more aware of the happy memories that our child has left. Although life will never be the same again, we can pick up the pieces, helped by the knowledge that there are still other people who need us. In the future, we will be able to have times of happiness and laughter again - impossible to imagine when we are newly bereaved.

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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This leaflet is sponsored by the Newcastle Group of The Compassionate Friends in loving memory of all our precious children.

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