



When our grandchild dies

A nationwide organisation of bereaved parents and their families



WHEN OUR GRANDCHILD DIES

The death of a grandchild is a double burden for us: at the same time as grieving as a grandparent, we are also a parent who feels unable to protect our child from the pain and desolation of bereavement. This has a profound and complex effect on us. We have to cope with our own grief, and find the strength to support our son or daughter. We feel great sorrow, not only at the loss of our grandchild, but also at the impact of the gap it has left in our family.

Over the years, there have been radical changes in the structure of the nuclear family in the UK. The nature of many family relationships, including those between grandparents and grandchildren, has been affected. We now have a society of many working mothers; a more mobile population; increased divorce rates; a higher number of single parents; blended families, with new spouses or partners; and civil partnerships. The intensity of our grief may be influenced by how close we were to our grandchild and his or her parents. Sometimes, because of distance or circumstances, contact will have been limited, but we still mourn deeply. There can also be the added stress of others not realising how much we are grieving and our need to talk about our loss.

Following the initial shock, which can leave us numb, some of our physical reactions may be weariness and changes to appetite and sleep patterns. Anxiety, lack of concentration and depression are common, but not everyone will experience all of these. Grief tends to come in waves without any predictability. If we have a partner, he or she may not share

our down moments at the same time, and this can cause friction. We must be aware of each other's emotions, and make allowances for them: differences in grieving patterns can cause a rift.

Many grandparents suffer from feelings of guilt. One of the most powerful is survival guilt: we are alive when someone, much younger than us, has died. We may wish that we had died in their place: the death of a child, let alone a grandchild, is against the natural order. We feel guilty about the things we did or did not do for our grandchildren. Talking about these worries can help us to realise that nobody is perfect, and we all do the best that we can in the circumstances with which we are presented.

Anger is another feeling that we experience. It is not always rational, but needs to be faced. Anger is a strong emotion and may be directed at life in general, God or any individual person or authority that we consider responsible for the death of our grandchild. It will help if this anger is expressed safely, perhaps through physical activity or exercise, talking to an understanding friend or writing. Such writing could be in the form of a letter in which we pour out all our frustration; once written, the letter can be destroyed.

Helping our child

The way our son or daughter shows grief may be different from our own, and should be respected. We may not always be in agreement with their choices as they struggle to adapt. It will not help them to be told what they should or should not, be doing, feeling or thinking. The best support is often being available to listen and empathise while they share their anger, anguish and despair with us. We may have a good relationship with our child's partner, and we can be a sympathetic listener for him or her too, and perhaps take some of the stress away from the couple.

If possible, grandparents can offer to help with the practical demands of family life, such as in the care of other grandchildren who will be grieving also, and may be feeling very left out. Looking after any family pets, or perhaps doing a little work around the house, can relieve some of the pressures on our daughter or son; this could be especially so if our child is a single parent. Some people, especially men who feel more comfortable in the traditional role with the “stiff upper lip” approach, have problems expressing their emotions, and sometimes find shared activities more helpful. Whatever the circumstances, it is important to pace ourselves so that we do not get overtired. We need to cope with our own grief and find time to replenish our energies.

When the relationship between ourselves and our child has been difficult, it may not be easy for them to talk to us about their thoughts and fears. Sometimes bereaved parents can find someone outside the family, perhaps a trusted friend, in whom to confide. They may find comfort speaking to others in the same situation.

If our son or daughter is now childless, it may be helpful to know of the Childless Parents Group within *The Compassionate Friends* (TCF). Through this organisation, it might be possible to make contact with others who have lost their only grandchild. This could perhaps bring some support, especially if there is little or no prospect of another child being born into that generation.

Helping our other grandchildren

If there are surviving grandchildren in the bereaved family, we may find that we are able to offer them much needed stability, comfort and support, especially while the usual patterns of

family life are disrupted. For both grandparents and grandchildren, this will be a significant time, and new bonds will be formed that can last a lifetime. It is important to recognise that we and our grandchildren can gain great strength and companionship through being with each other, sharing time together even if not talking about our grief directly.

Brothers and sisters of the dead child will have many fears and worries at this time. It is common for them to dread that they too might die, especially if their sibling died of an illness. We must try to answer their questions as simply and honestly as possible, even though this is painful and difficult for them and us. TCF publishes leaflets and articles on children's grief and their changing understanding of death as they grow older. The Postal Library has a range of literature that may be helpful.

Grandparents living at a distance will be able to help and reassure their child and grandchildren with letters, cards, phone calls and social networks. It is important that the surviving grandchildren feel special, loved and valued at this time; grandparents are well placed to help in this way with messages that are personal to each child.

Family occasions

In the early years after the death of their child, our daughter or son will need our understanding at family occasions, when the absence of a much-loved child is felt especially acutely. There is always going to be a missing member of the family. In later years, on birthdays, anniversaries, weddings, births and other deaths, recognition of the pain and loss will be appreciated. (TCF's leaflet *Coping with special occasions*

includes a number of suggestions to help a grieving family.) Seemingly ordinary days, such as when the child might have started school, college or work, can be significant. Of course, as grandparents, we too can find our thoughts at these times painful, and, perhaps, a reminder of the sad "if only" that could change our lives. Wherever possible and appropriate, there can be much to gain from sharing our feelings with each other.

Hope

Over the years, the pain and problems of our early grief as grandparents will hopefully lessen in intensity. The support and understanding of others, who have endured similar experiences and are further along the journey of grief, can be of comfort to us. Eventually, we will be able to look back and remember the happy times we spent with our grandchildren and be glad that they lived, albeit that their lives were cut short.

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## **Where can I go from here?**

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 you could ring our Helpline on **0345 1 23 23 04** 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, Facebook page, and support forum where bereaved parents can 'talk' online. A quarterly journal, **Compassion**, is also produced, containing articles and poems written by our members about their own experiences. Those who wish for further reading can borrow from our **Postal Library** .

For general enquiries, and details of how to become a member of TCF, please contact the office (details overleaf).

The Compassionate Friends

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**www.tcf.org.uk**

**UK Helpline 0345 1 23 23 04**

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### **TCF Postal Library**

Tel: 0345 120 3785      Email: library@tcf.org.uk

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