



The
Compassionate
Friends

Back to Work

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

Back to Work

After the death of our son or daughter our whole life changes, radically and forever.

The rhythm of our life is altered; relationships with a partner and/or family members have been affected; and we might find we are unable or unwilling to perform routine chores. However, as much as life around us might have changed in our home environment, our experience in the workplace can be different because it has carried on without us and regardless of our loss. When we return to work, we will have to re-join that world and try to immerse ourselves in it, although our hearts are broken. If we are self-employed, we may soon have to focus back on our work whether we feel ready or not.

Going back to work

Some of us return to work very soon after the death of our child, some of us after months or even years away. There is no “right” time in this context. Our return can depend on a number of factors: our need to pick up the threads of normal life; responsibilities at work; money worries and financial necessity; the demands of our employer; fear of losing our job or business; and concerns we might have about the extra workload on colleagues who are covering for us.

Any of these might make us feel we must return swiftly.

On the other hand, some of us want to return to work; it can give us some relief from the deep sorrow we feel at home, and in concentrating on our work matters we might gain some temporary release from our grief.

The first day back can be nerve-racking. The longer the time that has elapsed between our child's death and our return, the more frightening it may be to leave the security of home

and face our colleagues. No matter how much time has passed, we may be acutely anxious as to how we might be received, and how we will cope with the day and with the different people around us.

As we struggle to adjust to a life without our son or daughter, we naturally turn to those closest to us, such as family and friends for emotional support and understanding, but we may well find that our workmates and managers cannot help us in this way. We will need to manage our expectations.

Before we return

Before we return to the workplace, we might find it helpful to talk about these concerns - how we will be received and how we will cope - with our manager, or the Human Resources department if we work for a larger firm. We can agree on exactly what other employees are to be told about the death of our child, and whether we would prefer for them to mention our tragedy, or to simply and respectfully leave us be. It may be possible for us to make a short visit to work, perhaps to do some undemanding job, before we make a full return. Part-time or flexible hours can also help to ease us back into work, although this may not be a possibility for everyone. It is hoped that employers would be supportive if we need time off to attend an inquest, or to keep counselling or medical appointments.

Under UK law we are entitled to “reasonable time off” to recover following the death of a child, irrespective of how old or young a child was when she or he died, although at this time there is no statutory right to paid bereavement leave. We should be aware that the loss of a small child who was our dependant may be seen differently by our employers than if our child was an adult, although we will still be just as devastated.

Here are some links for information on legal rights for compassionate leave. Please be aware that this area of employment law does change periodically. (Please see the TCF website for updates.)

<https://www.gov.uk/time-off-for-dependants/your-rights>

<http://www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=3963>

<https://www.theguardian.com/money/work-blog/2014/jan/10/bereavement-leave-your-rights-support-work>

How our colleagues may react

It helps if those we work with have been told of our child's death; it can be deeply upsetting if someone who is completely unaware of our terrible loss casually asks if life is going well for us. That said, talking about our tragedy is important: we may want people to acknowledge our child's death. If the death is ignored, we could feel resentful or angry: our whole life has been devastated and it could seem as if no one is really interested. Our workmates may struggle to find words, perhaps because the mere thought of losing a son or daughter is too terrible to contemplate. It is hard when our colleagues retreat into silence, and it may be up to us to make the first move in opening the subject, so that we can gradually get back to good communications.

The way our son or daughter died can also affect people's reactions. Our child may have died as a result of suicide, or through alcohol or drugs misuse. If there has been media coverage about the death, there may be curiosity as well as embarrassment, with everybody feeling uncomfortable. Again, perhaps a lead from us, or from a sympathetic colleague, can help to lessen the awkwardness. Hopefully this subject has already been discussed with our manager or Human Resources department.

As time goes by, we hope others will take their cues from us. If we manage to smile and chat again (although we may be putting on a pretence for a while), they will feel more comfortable and will react in a more natural way than when we first returned. Tolerance and understanding shown to us can lessen the stress considerably.

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) leaflet *Helping a Bereaved Employee* shows a number of ways in which we can be supported at this difficult time. Perhaps a copy could be passed amongst our workmates for them to get a better understanding.

Work relationships

Most of us find that relationships with our work colleagues change when we first return to work. We feel alienated and they feel awkward. The usual trivial conversations which are part of most workplaces irritate or distress us, and we have trouble relating to what seems important to others. We may not wish to join them for social occasions outside work; if we are asked and refuse too often, they may stop asking. It is not easy for anyone.

It is also difficult for us if people unthinkingly make insensitive remarks, perhaps unfortunate comparisons with the death of a pet or other loss that feels insignificant compared to the loss of our child. We feel annoyed by this thoughtlessness but have no easy way to show how hurt we are without making everyone even more uncomfortable. This means that we can carry a burden of resentment against people for their insensitivity. Hopefully, we will find a way to deal with these problems even though our work colleagues may not understand the way our grief is affecting us.

Sadly, our weakened condition may make us a target for workplace bullying, such as an attempt to undermine our position in the organisation, and we may then have to seek help, possibly internally at first, and then from outside, for example, the Citizens' Advice Bureau or a Trades Union representative.

Fortunately, for some of us the warmth of companionship, the building of friendships and the encouragement to keep going that we have found in our place of work have been crucial in helping us back on our feet again.

Working alone

Much of the above applies to those of us who are employed in organisations large enough to supply back-up support and alternative part-time work. Many of us, however, work alone or run our own small companies, employing a few people. If we work for ourselves, "bereavement leave" can mean that our income ceases. Our customers may be sympathetic, but they will take their business elsewhere if made to wait too long. Those of us with small businesses will have suppliers and employees to be paid. We know that years of hard work can be destroyed by a few weeks of neglect. This can mean that whether we feel ready or not, we may need to start work sooner rather than later.

If we work alone, we may want to be careful about the amount of new work we take on during the weeks and months that follow the death of our child. Without a supervisor to oversee us, we can become swamped by a build-up of unfinished work.

It is important, therefore, that we act as our own managers, protecting ourselves from being overwhelmed.

Some of the other challenges we face when working alone can include: lack of concentration, loss of focus, memory lapses, indecision or rash decision-making, and/or inability to bring projects to completion. Isolation can also be a problem for those of us who work alone, so it is important to find ways of interacting with other people regularly, such as through voluntary work, clubs, online forums or support groups.

How grief affects us

Some of us find some relief in getting back to work, in the feeling that our life has structure again and that we are settling back into some kind of routine. Sometimes, just putting on our usual work clothes, the semblance of normality, can give us enough impetus to start each day. 'Putting on the uniform' or 'playing the role' help to give our emotions a sort of camouflage, where we can put everything on hold for a few hours. We may leave our grief at the door of our workplace, shutting down on everything to do with our child's death and wishing no comment or sympathy from others. This way can work for some of us, for a time anyway. But we should always be aware of the dangers of bottling up our feelings.

It is not easy to put our grief on hold, and sometimes it impacts on our work, however hard we try. Grief affects our concentration, and often we find ourselves spending time at work on automatic pilot, waiting until we get into the car or back home so that we can be ourselves.

Often, routine work is easier to handle; we can keep going for a while, relying on our skills to get us through. If we work with the public, we may have more difficulty because they are unlikely to know about our tragedy. A sympathetic employer may be able to find us work that doesn't involve

direct contact with the public. Under UK law, such a change should not result in any reduction in wages or opportunities for training and career development. If for some of us, being back at work proves to be too much too soon, then the answer may be to take a break and to look at some other kind of work when we feel ready. If after a break we feel we really can't go back to work, we should consider talking to our doctor.

We need to recognise our limitations. As bereaved parents, we often suffer from fatigue, loss of concentration, a lack of self-confidence when making decisions. If we work in a position of responsibility, this can be particularly challenging. In some workplaces, showing emotion can be seen as weakness. We may have increasing difficulty as the months pass: people may not realise that we are still grieving. Just one friend to talk with may make all the difference to our sense of isolation, of being one person to the outside world, but a very different one inside.

Difficult days

In the course of each year there will be hard days for us to get through, both on our own personal calendar – such as birthdays and anniversaries – and at public holidays. The preparations for Christmas and other festivals can be agonising for us, with everyone in party mood whilst we feel bleak and miserable. We may have to explain that this is a very painful time of year for us and that we find it impossible to join in the usual festivities. The same may hold true for holidays, when we have more time on our own and our thoughts have nowhere else to go other than to our loss. Upon our return, we may be in a more fragile state than before, and need to renew our return to work efforts. We may wish to try to take time off for days that we know will be particularly difficult, such as our child's anniversary or birthday.

The future

We may find that, as the months pass, those we work with expect us to be 'over it', or 'better', and that we should no longer be showing signs of our grief and distress. If our child died before, during or immediately after birth, or if she or he had reached mature adulthood, it is wholly possible that some colleagues will fail to understand the depth of our grief. When we feel strong enough, we may find it helpful to explain to our colleagues how to be supportive, such as the type of comments we find reassuring and constructive, and those that make us sad. If we feel that speaking up like this is beyond us right now, we can still share our frustrations with other bereaved parents via closed online forums or support groups.

Grief is unpredictable and can surface at unexpected and inappropriate times. With time we develop our own ways of coping and learn to be more resilient.

We should be aware that even several years down the road, we might need to reassess how we are managing. Some of us who quite successfully integrated an early return to work might find that some time later we are physically, emotionally and mentally exhausted. That may be the time to consider a break.

Many of us may question the meaning and importance of our work in the face of our loss. The world seems a different place; the way we view life and the things we now value might have changed. We may decide that our present line of work will not offer us the fulfilment that it did previously and that a change might help us. We may take extended leave to think about our future, or resign from that particular job and look for another one that we think will offer us more satisfaction. We may decide to stay in the same job, feeling that its familiarity gives us stability and comfort. It takes time and thought to decide how we see our future working life.

In all of these situations we need to be gentle with ourselves, not demanding more than we can give at that time. Many of us discover that returning to work, or possibly taking some new and different employment, reduces our sense of isolation. It can help as we struggle to adjust to our new life. We may also find satisfaction in our work-related accomplishments, which helps rebuild our self-esteem.

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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The printing of this leaflet is sponsored by
The Catharine Pointer Memorial Library.

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