



The
Compassionate
Friends

A photograph of a stone path leading through a field of tall grass under a blue sky with white clouds. The path is made of grey stones and leads from the foreground towards the horizon. The grass is a mix of green and golden-brown. The sky is bright blue with scattered white clouds. A dark building is visible on the horizon to the right.

Helping a Bereaved Employee after the Death of their Child

The Compassionate Friends is a national charity supporting parents and siblings who are bereaved through child loss. This leaflet has been written by parents who have lost children of all ages in the hope that our insights can help you support employees after the death of their child.

Helping a Bereaved Employee after the Death of their Child

This leaflet has been written to help employers understand how an employee may be affected when their child dies. Awareness of the effects of such a traumatic event will be helpful to everyone in the workplace, particularly the bereaved employee and his or her colleagues.

Every bereaved parent is different; each workplace has its own structure and contractual obligations, and the employee has their own role and perhaps social ties with colleagues. Taking these differences into account, it is our hope that this leaflet will provide some useful suggestions and guidance.

The death of a child

All deaths bring sadness and grief, none more so perhaps than that of a child. We never think that our child will die before we do. In some cases, a parent may have anticipated the loss of their son or daughter, having cared for their child through an illness or disability. Other losses are sudden, such as following a road traffic accident or suicide.

Even if the death was expected it is likely that the parent will be in a state of shock and struggle to find a way forward. If their 'child' was an adult, they may suddenly be faced with new responsibilities for grandchildren. For others, the death has left them without any child or descendants. In every case, the parent is experiencing their worst nightmare, and their loss is likely to have a profound impact on them.

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) is a support group composed entirely of parents and relatives bereaved of a child or children. A 'child' can be anyone from an unborn baby to an adult. All members of TCF have lost children and can remember their initial helplessness and the need to talk about their loss. They are there to help and befriend any bereaved parent, and above all to listen to them as they try to work their way through their grief.

One simple way to help a bereaved parent in your organisation is to ensure that they have heard of TCF's work. A phone call to our Helpline (0345 123 2304) or a visit to our website at www.tcf.org.uk, by you or them, will put them in touch with all of our services, provided at no cost to bereaved parents.

On first hearing of the death

- It is a kind gesture to send or take a short hand-written note or card and flowers to the parent's home.
- Verbal or written assurances to the employee that they need not worry about his or her job, and that their responsibilities are being looked after in their absence, can be reassuring (if true).
- Help with legal or practical matters could be offered.
- It can be helpful to be aware of the way in which the child has died; if the death was sudden and violent there will be media interest, an inquest and perhaps a trial. All of this will put additional strain on the parent.

The funeral

- Some of your staff may wish to attend in a personal capacity. If you, or a senior member of the organisation, are unable to attend, you might ask someone to represent you at the ceremony. Guidance concerning flowers or donations is usually given by the bereaved family.
- This might be an opportunity to assure the bereaved employee that they should not concern themselves with an immediate return to work.
- Your organisation may have access to a benevolent fund which may be very welcome to help an employee manage the sudden expense of a funeral. If help is there, or somewhere else, try to make the employee feel at ease in applying for it.

Prior to a return to work

Some parents return to work very soon after the death of their child, some after months or even years away. Their return can depend on a number of factors: a need to pick up the threads of normal life; responsibilities; money worries and financial necessity; fear of losing their job; and concerns they might have about the extra workload on colleagues. Any of these might make a parent feel they must return swiftly. On the other hand, some parents want to return to work; it can give some relief from deep sorrow, and in concentrating on work matters the parent might gain some temporary release from grief.

A few practical suggestions:

- Ensure that any communications about sickness or compassionate leave entitlements are accompanied by a personal note.
- You, or a colleague, may wish to arrange to visit your employee to discuss how they feel about returning to work. Is flexi- or part-time work feasible? If their work is dealing with the public, would a temporary change of department to a more sheltered environment be possible?
- If your workplace has a Human Resources department, they should be informed of the nature of the absence.
- Your employee will have some legal rights for compassionate leave. Good practice is to offer "reasonable time off" to recover following the death of a child. Paid bereavement leave is obviously ideal for the parent.
- Before the bereaved employee returns to work, it would be useful to ask them what they would like other employees (and possibly clients) to be told about the death of their child, and whether or not they would prefer for their tragedy to be mentioned.
- It may be helpful for the employee to make a short visit to work, perhaps to do some undemanding tasks, before they make a full return. Part-time or flexible hours can also help to ease them back into work, although this may not be a possibility for everyone.
- In some cases it could be helpful for the bereaved parent to meet informally with some close colleagues away from the workplace before the official return to work so they can answer questions and explain how they would like to handle the situation.

Preparing the other employees

You are a caring employer – you are reading this leaflet. It may still surprise you, however, to realise the extent of the ordeal your employee is facing. They may be wondering how they will stand up to returning to the 'outside' world; will they burst into tears and embarrass their colleagues? How are they going to cope, physically and mentally, with their job? Sadly, some of our parents have experienced working with colleagues who don't know how to approach them and/or have felt bullied. It is essential to give them as much support as you can.

You may wish therefore to hold a short meeting with those who work alongside the returning employee to discuss the points outlined in this leaflet:

- Most parents find it helps if those with whom they work have been told of their child's death; it can be deeply upsetting if someone who is completely unaware of their terrible loss casually asks if life is going well for them, or queries their absence, perhaps assuming they had been on holiday.
- Encourage other employees not to ignore the subject when first greeting the returning parent. A short acknowledgement, even simply "I am so sorry for your loss," is far better than being met by silence.
- Other employees should be made aware that there could be unexpected tears and occasional outbursts of anger at seemingly trivial things.
- You may want to ask them to limit mentions of their own children and grandchildren in conversation, at least for a time period.
- Warn them to try to avoid clichés such as 'Time heals' (it's a permanent loss, not a flesh wound), 'You've moved on' (where to?), 'Are you better now?' (they've not been ill).
- The way their son or daughter died can also affect people's reactions. If their child has died as a result of suicide, or through alcohol or drug use, and/or if there has been media coverage about the death, there may be curiosity as well as embarrassment, with everybody feeling uncomfortable. Other employees should be cautioned against prying. It is usually most helpful to take cues from the child's parent, and let them speak about it or remain silent on the subject, as they prefer.

When the employee returns

It is well recognised that grief has an impact on a person's wellbeing in physical, emotional and psychological ways, and a profound loss, such as the loss of a child, can intensify this impact.

Even after an employee returns to work, they may still be suffering from effects of bereavement: problems of concentration and memory, fatigue, exacerbation of existing illness and increased vulnerability to illness. This can lead to short-term loss of confidence, efficiency, effectiveness and performance. A bereaved parent may also have sudden new responsibilities, such as taking on care of grandchildren, or supporting other family members who are grieving too. Still, with time and sympathetic support, they will return to take their place in the team again.

- A “buddy system” could be reassuring, ensuring the parent can work alongside someone they already know (preferably a friend, depending on relationships within the workplace) who will be gentle and sympathetic, and may be able to take over or support with any customer-facing aspects of the job. The bereaved employee may even like to meet up with colleagues they know well outside the building, so they do not have to walk in alone on their first day back.
- It may be helpful to consider whether it is best if your employee works part- or flexi-time for a while. Giving them freedom to make choices about their employment at this time is likely to bear good dividends in the future.
- Flexibility on their role and responsibilities would also be helpful. For some, routine work may be easier to handle at the start. A public-facing role may be particularly challenging.
- The employer may want to ask the bereaved employee how they would prefer to re-enter work, what would help and what would be unnecessary.
- It is hoped that employers would be supportive if a parent needs time off to attend an inquest, or to keep counselling or medical appointments.

As time passes

Finally, bearing in mind that the loss of a child has a lifelong impact on a parent, there are a few further considerations:

- Grief is unpredictable and can surface at what feels like unexpected and inappropriate times.
- Some parents may be keen to return to work initially, regaining some sort of routine and normality, and only discover as the months pass that they have not given themselves sufficient time to grieve. An allowance for this can be very helpful.
- Some will have to face an inquest or some other proceedings, months or even years after their child's death, which can consume their time and return them to a state of early grief.
- A bereaved parent may not wish to take part in usual festivities at Christmas and should not be made to feel that this is required. It can also be a kindness to permit time off for the parent on particularly difficult occasions, such as their child's anniversary or birthday.

Ultimately, there is no reason why the value of a bereaved parent as a member of the workforce should be diminished. With time the parent who is supported and treated with consideration will find ways of coping with loss, and will continue on with the business of life.

A range of leaflets and articles on many different aspects of grief is also available from TCF that may help you better understand the trauma that bereaved parents may suffer. Thank you for showing your concern by reading this one.

Who are the Compassionate Friends?

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) is a charitable organisation of bereaved parents, siblings and grandparents dedicated to the support and care of other similarly bereaved family members who have suffered the death of a child or children of any age and from any cause.

We offer support, both directly to bereaved families, and indirectly by fostering understanding and good practice amongst professionals concerned with child death and by increasing public awareness. In TCF, "family" covers a broad spectrum of relationships. We aim to help any individual or family affected by the death of a child, including unmarried partners, adoptive parents, step families, same sex couples and single parent families.

TCF has no religious affiliation and offers support to bereaved families irrespective of the age of the child, cause of death, ethnic, social or political background.



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

TCF Library

0345 120 3785

E: library@tcf.org.uk

To find out more about TCF visit

www.tcf.org.uk |  [@tcf.org.uk](https://www.facebook.com/tcf.org.uk)  [@saytheirname](https://twitter.com/saytheirname)

Sponsored with love by 'Our Grieving Hearts',
a Compassionate Friends Support Group in
Brentwood, Essex - in memory of all our children.

Founder: The Revd Canon Dr Simon Stephens OBE

President: The Countess Mountbatten of Burma