



The
Compassionate
Friends

Our Adult Child's Partner and Friends

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

Our Adult Child's Partner and Friends

The tragic death of a son or daughter involves us in an extended circle of grief. The time our son or daughter lived in the adult world, building mature friendships, intimate relationships and perhaps even becoming parents themselves, means that with their passing, our own grief interacts with others who were in some way a part of their lives. Some will be well known to us but there will also be many we don't know. Responding to our grief together, where appropriate, may be mutually beneficial, although this is not always straightforward.

In this leaflet we are looking at the adult friends and/or partner of our child. For age groups up to and including teenagers, The Compassionate Friends (TCF) has also published a leaflet on *Our Child's Friends*.

If our child was married, in a civil partnership or long-term relationship

Our child's partner

If our adult child has left behind a partner, it is likely we will stay in touch with them, whether this is because we were particularly close, or perhaps because they are the parent of our grandchildren. When it comes to maintaining a relationship with our child's partner, people will vary in terms of the level of contact they are comfortable with. There is no necessarily right or wrong way, but it can be helpful to try to compromise and adapt to whatever works best for everyone involved.

Everyone grieves differently. We should guard against thinking critically about our child's partner if they are dealing with their grief in a very different way to ourselves. They may or may not show us how they are feeling; much will depend on our previous relationship with them.

Our child's partner may appreciate our comfort and support as they struggle with their grief. Depending on the circumstances of our child's death, they may feel guilty or awkward around us, even wondering if we might in some way blame them for his or her death, particularly if there had been problems in their relationship.

If our child was married or in a civil partnership, their partner will have been their next of kin for legal purposes. They may have arranged the funeral. Hopefully, we were included in the planning, but arrangements may not always be exactly as we would have chosen. We must try to be adaptable however difficult this might be for us to accept. Any memorial should ideally be a joint project between partner and parents. Setting something up without consultation because we did not like the way the funeral was handled could cause additional conflict. It is also possible that our child's partner will be too bereft to plan the funeral, in which case we can offer to lead, while taking all the time necessary to make certain that the ceremony meets the needs of everyone close to our child, including their partner.

It is possible our son and daughter and their partner had been living with us at the time of our child's death. If that is the case, we will want to reassure our child's partner that after such a terrible event they should not feel any pressure to leave the family home. Indeed, their continued presence in the weeks and months to come can be a great comfort. Eventually, however, the time will probably come when they will want to move on and form new relationships. Hopefully a way can be found which allows us still to have some contact.

On the other hand, our child's partner may choose to move on with their lives, and may not wish to keep us involved. If there are no grandchildren, this is entirely their choice. It can be difficult to feel cut out of a circle that was so much a part of our child's life, but if this happens it is something that we need to accept.

Our child's partner entering new relationships

Our feelings can be conflicted when our child's partner goes on to have a new relationship. If we knew our child had hope for a family, seeing their partner have children with their new partner can bring a renewed sense of loss. If our child already had children, a new relationship may mean seeing someone else seemingly take our child's place. A larger "blended" family can result, with a new set of (step)grandparents and possibly siblings from a former relationship brought into the family home. It can be painful

to hear grandchildren call a stepparent “Mummy” or “Daddy”, but we should try to accept this as a natural progression.

Some of us may find that access to our grandchildren is denied. Although grandparents can legally apply for contact through the court, it is always best to explore every other avenue first. It can be heart-breaking if contact with grandchildren is lost. If possible, try to leave the door open and remind the children that we still think of them by continuing to send cards and letters for birthdays and Christmas.

If we receive an invitation to the wedding of a previous partner of our son or daughter, some of us may feel that our presence might cast a shadow; while for others it will feel right to be part of such a joyful day. For parents with no surviving children, these times are an agonising reminder of a future lost, yet some take comfort from seeing again their son or daughter’s friends.

Advice on how to help grandchildren can be found in the TCF leaflet *Helping Our Grandchildren when Our Child has Died*.

Friendships

The friends we know

Many TCF members have written about the warmth and love they experienced from their children’s friends in the early weeks and months after their son or daughter’s death. Often we recognise in their friends the qualities we loved in our child - the same sense of fun or musical tastes, or shared interests. These very characteristics may help us to feel closer to our child who has died, although it will also be a painful reminder of our loss. These friends are likely to appreciate staying in touch as a sign of the value placed on their friendship with our son or daughter. It is important nonetheless that we do not make them feel there are things they must do. It may be best to have an attitude of “our door is always open if you want to visit.”

It can be mutually helpful to share experiences and memories of our child. Often they will have photographs and stories to tell that are new to us. Some we will enjoy; others might cause us pain, yet it is all part of the tapestry of our child’s life, and we may feel glad to be allowed to see our child through the eyes of others.

We can discover new aspects of our child's personality and adult life through the sharing of memories, and we can find comfort and delight in seeing and hearing our adult son or daughter in photos, videos and sound files that we never knew existed. These will be precious keepsakes for the rest of our lives.

The wider circle of friends

Adult sons and daughters who have left the family home and live in their own separate world of college or work, perhaps even in another country, will have friends who are unknown to us. We may have heard their names in conversation, but we have never met them until death brings us together. If we can accept them, they in turn can draw comfort from feeling welcomed by their friend's family.

In the course of grieving, perhaps through interaction at the funeral, with other friends, or through social media, it is possible that we may discover aspects of our child's friendships that disturb us. If so, it is usually best to keep our criticisms to ourselves; it will not help any of us to express our disapproval to his or her friends.

If our child was a young adult and their friends are of similar ages, they might be overwhelmed by the reality of what has happened, and experience denial, anxiety and loss of self-confidence. They may also prefer to be private when they try to cope with grief. It can be helpful to be aware of the various support organisations that we could suggest to them or their parents which could provide them a neutral place to share their feelings, or to be able to communicate with other young bereaved people. For example, the website Hope Again has an online message board where young bereaved people can communicate. Grief Encounter is another example; this charity offers a variety of support for young bereaved people, including e-counselling sessions.

See www.hopeagain.org.uk and www.griefencounter.org.uk

Contact with our adult child's workplace, college or university can be emotionally draining, and we should feel free to ask others to deal with our child's employers or place of study if we don't feel we can face this task. It is probable that their work colleagues or fellow students will want to express their own sense of loss at the death of our daughter or son, and we are likely to benefit from the comforts their tributes can bring.

For more on this, please see the TCF leaflet: *The Death of an Adult Child*.

As time goes by

In the days and weeks that follow the funeral, it is natural for adult friends of our child to keep in touch with us, united by our loss and sharing emotional support. In time it will be just as natural for many of these friends to reduce the amount of contact. Although they will never forget our son or daughter, they have to take their lives in new directions, and to do this they may feel a need to cut ties with us. As a result, we might find ourselves clinging to some of those who are slipping away, making all the contact and becoming frustrated and even hurt when they are slow to respond. We may need to remind ourselves that these people are our child's friends and not our own. Sometimes, by letting go we can move forward with our grieving, and let our child's friends move forward with their own. It is also possible that one of our adult child's friends may find such comfort in our company that they could find it difficult to move on with their lives and begin to become over-involved in our own. We will need to respond sensitively, as appropriate to the situation.

Given time and freedom, some friends might choose to get in touch with us again, particularly when it means the most, on the anniversary of our child's death, or her/his birthday.

For those we stay in contact with, watching our child's friends pass new milestones such as marriage and parenthood can be painful, but rewarding too, knowing that our daughter or son would have always wanted the best for them in their future lives.

Social media can also help us and our child's friends. For example, we might create an online memorial where friends can leave tributes or share photos. We can communicate thoughts and memories via a dedicated Facebook or WhatsApp group. Another option might be to create a Just Giving page, where friends could be invited to make donations or fund-raise for a cause that was important to our child.

Using the digital world as a means of remembering may not be for all of us, but with careful thought and used in the right way, it can bring something extremely positive to our child's friends and to ourselves.

See the TCF Leaflet *Our Child's Digital Legacy* for more information.

In the long term

In the long term, life moves on; where contact with our adult child's partner and/or friends is maintained, there is both pain and joy in seeing their lives progress, responding to the challenges and experiences that our child did not live to face and hopefully enjoy. Yet our continuing involvement in the life of someone who was close to our child can, in unexpected ways, help to carry him or her with us as the years pass.

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

UK Helpline:

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General Enquiries

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TCF Library

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Sponsored by Terry and Maria Ahern in loving memory of our adored son James Ahern (10/3/92 - 16/8/14).

We chose to sponsor this leaflet in gratitude to James' many friends who have held us up with love and strength and who continue to keep James and us in their hearts. Thank you son, for bringing such extraordinary people into our lives.

Founder: The Revd Canon Dr Simon Stephens OBE

President: The Countess Mountbatten of Burma