



The
Compassionate
Friends

Prolonged and Intense Grief

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

Prolonged and Intense Grief

To lose a child is the worst loss of all. To lose a child suddenly or in traumatic circumstances intensifies the pain, and can make it more difficult to cope.

If our child was the victim of an accident, natural disaster or crime; if we have no surviving children; if he or she took their own life; if we had been estranged in the period leading up to their passing – all of these add extra layers to the immensity of our grief.

Following the initial shock of our child's death, it is common to feel anxious, depressed, angry, confused and frustrated. Grief is not a mental illness or a diagnosis; it is a natural response to the pain of loss. It can take many months, possibly several years, before we are no longer feeling continuously overwhelmed by our loss, although we still think of our child and miss him or her daily. As time passes, gradually we find ourselves better able to cope. We start having moments when our thoughts are not quite so dismal; we can begin to concentrate on our work, a book or television programme, enjoy a meal or an outing. There are still moments and days that feel almost unbearable, but these become less frequent. We find ways to maintain bonds with our child, perhaps through blogs and diaries, perhaps through treasuring some of their clothes or possessions, perhaps doing something that we

believe would make them proud of us. This is not what we had chosen for our life; we would give anything to have our son or daughter still living. But as time passes, we become more accustomed to the idea of them not coming back.

We are all individuals. Our child was an individual; our relationship with them, and the exact circumstances of their life and passing, are in many respects unique. Our own personality, age, occupation, health, financial circumstances, family unit, and social circle all have an impact. Although others who have faced similar losses may sympathise and support us, nobody is in exactly the same position as we find ourselves in.

Circumstances that make grief harder to bear

No matter what the facts of our child's death, the ache in our hearts will always be there to some extent. However, there are some circumstances that can make our loss even harder to bear.

Suicide is an example. When a child takes his or her own life, whether preceded by a period of mental illness, or completely unexpectedly, it is devastating for a parent. There are so many issues that may never be settled: The big “why”; the questions of whether we could have done more to anticipate what would happen; unresolved matters in our relationship. (For more on this, see The Compassionate Friends (TCF) leaflet *After Suicide*.)

If our child was the victim of crime, the shock of learning what has happened is extremely traumatic. It is a parent's worst nightmare; we may never be able to quite grasp that someone has intentionally taken the life of our child. Along with our personal grief, we may find our family the focus of publicity and media attention. Investigations and court cases can drag on for years. Even when there is a legal resolution, our child's death may resurface in the media years later if there is another similar incident. This is all very difficult to deal with. (For more on this, see the TCF leaflet *When our Child has been Murdered.*)

There can be other circumstances of sudden death, such as a road traffic or sporting accident. A straightforward medical procedure could have taken an unexpected turn. Our shock and anger may be amplified if it turns out that our child's life was lost needlessly. If only someone had paid more attention, or done a better job, or been more cautious... (For more on this, see the TCF leaflet *The Sudden Death of our Child.*)

The circumstances of our child's passing may not be the only factor that is making our grief difficult to bear. Perhaps we were estranged from our child for some reason. Perhaps our child's behaviour, such as alcohol or substance abuse, or risk-taking, precipitated their death. Perhaps they suffered from mental illness.

Complicated grief

Any and all of these examples can contribute to what is known as 'complicated grief'. For those of us who lost a child suddenly in traumatic circumstances and/or after ongoing

difficulties, we may find that the intensity of grief continues on and on; we remain in a heightened state of mourning. As time passes, we continue to feel extreme sorrow and pain at the thought of our child; we can focus on little else but their death, often visualising the scene, even if we were not present. We feel numb or detached, that life holds no meaning. We may struggle to remember the happy times our child enjoyed. We may feel overwhelmed by guilt or depression. We may have trouble carrying out the activities of normal life, withdrawing socially. We may feel like ending our own life, wishing we had died with our child. We may suffer significant sleep disturbances, or find ourselves turning to alcohol or other substances to try to dull our pain. In some cases, we may be actually suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

To an extent, this could be a snapshot of any parent's grief; the crucial difference between 'normal' and 'complicated' grief is the intensity and duration.

Many of us find ways to cope with our grief according to our own personalities and circumstances. We find ways to maintain our bonds with our child in the new relationship of their absence. We may join a support group, drawing strength from others who have suffered a similar loss. (For more on this, see the TCF leaflet *Living with Grief*.) Forming new friendships with people who understand can bring both hope and new meaning in life, and may also help to alleviate the symptoms of PTSD.

However, for some of us the struggle seems just too hard to bear. If our grief is complicated and prolonged, then the

typical strategies for living with grief may not seem to bring us relief. If we recognise that we are not managing, we may want to seek out external support, for this type of unresolved grief can contribute to mental and physical illness. Our GP may be able to advise us if we would like professional support, such as from a bereavement counsellor.

The loss of our child has changed us forever. The circumstances of our child's death, and/or their previous life contributes to how we are feeling now. It is important for our own health and well-being to recognise when our grief is too prolonged and intense for us to manage alone. If we find our path through life seems blocked, we may need professional assistance. Being in a better state of mental and physical health will only boost our efforts at honouring our child's memory.

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 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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