



The
Compassionate
Friends

When Our Child has Died Following a Road Incident



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

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When Our Child has Died Following a Road Incident

Our child has died on the road and we are in a state of shock. Every parent who has been confronted with the sudden death of their child, at whatever age, knows the devastation. Our existence, life itself, is changed for ever in an instant.

In this leaflet we look specifically at how we, as parents, can cope following the death of our child as a result of a road incident.

We are using the term 'incident' to refer to whatever caused our child's death, whether it was due to a collision, crash or anything else. We realise that 'incident' is not an exhaustive description, but hopefully as a neutral term, it will cover the broad range of circumstances that could have occurred.

A road incident could be a result of random circumstances or somebody might be at fault. A child may be fatally injured crossing the road. A younger child riding their bike, or an adult cyclist could be a victim. The driver responsible may not even have stopped at the scene, making us despair of ever getting justice, although justice will not bring our child back.

A child of any age might have been a passenger in a vehicle involved in a collision. The driver could have been their friend or partner. How do we as parents deal with our feelings towards them? The same question might be asked if a child's death on the roads was caused by a stranger's dangerous or reckless driving.

Our feelings may be even more conflicted if our child was the driver and at fault. Then again, we ourselves might have been at the wheel at the time of the incident.

Our child may have died immediately or at a later time. There might be other casualties, and we could be faced with an unthinkable level of devastation within our family. Perhaps we ourselves have suffered a life-changing injury.

All of these factors can add layers of complexity to our grief for our child's death, and can make living our life now so very difficult. Yet it is possible for us to survive. How we do so is the topic of this leaflet. It has been written with the help of parents and family members bereaved in this way, in the hope that our common experiences will be a support to you at this terrible time.

Please note: In this leaflet, we will only touch briefly on the legal and practical matters following a death on the road. For more detailed information, we recommend you download this booklet produced by BRAKE, the road safety charity, available here:

www.tiny.cc/brakebooklet

The First Days

Unless we were also involved in the incident, in many situations it is the police who are the bearers of the terrible news, and they usually arrive unannounced at the door. For most of us, those first moments are ones that we will never forget. Extreme emotional reactions are not unusual.

What we most need is for there to have been a mistake – that our child is alive and well. Tragically, the reality is different, and it can take some time for us to truly take in what has happened.

There is no easy way to give or receive such news, but the manner in which it is brought is important. Many – although sadly not all of us – experience calm professionalism from police officers, who give us clear information, stated in a compassionate way and in everyday language. We will be in shock and may not take in what is being said to us, so repetition is important, as is the opportunity to ask questions.

The police may not have all the information we need; they may not be able to tell us how, or even when, our child died; whether death was quick; whether they suffered. Even at this early stage, the police must focus on finding out how the incident happened.

If our child was an adult, they may have a partner and/or family of their own or be living in another part of the country or the world. In this

situation, we may not be the primary contact for police officers. We may therefore be informed by our child's partner or we might find out through other means, even via the media.

In these circumstances, the loss of control of even the flow of information can add to our devastation.

If our child has not died immediately

Our child may still be alive when we are informed of the incident. They could spend hours or days in intensive care or undergoing surgery, whilst we hold onto hope that they will make it through. If it becomes evident to the medical professionals that our child is not going to survive, we may be asked about organ donation.

If our child was married or in a civil partnership, their partner will have the right to make a decision about this, whereas if our child was a minor or single, then this will fall to us.

There are no words to describe how difficult it can be for a parent to be faced with such a major decision, and one that has to be made rapidly. In the long term, we might be glad that our child could help other people live; in the short term, thinking about the procedures involved could make this a very difficult choice. It is a choice that we alone can make, and we should not feel pressured one way or the other.

Getting help in the immediate aftermath

As difficult as it is, we should try to take care of ourselves during these first days. Warm drinks can help with our shock. We can eat snacks and fruit if we do not feel able to face a full meal. Our GP may be able to offer help if we are unable to sleep.

Sometimes the shock of a huge personal tragedy protects us from reality for a while; we seem to be watching the tragedy unfold through the wrong end of a telescope. This same shock makes it almost impossible to take in all that is happening. The aftermath of a fatal incident involves a bewildering number of professionals and organisations.

To help us keep a sense of all this confusion, immediately after the incident the police may assign us a **Family Liaison Officer** (FLO). If they do not offer this, we can ask.

The FLO should be able to help with a number of very important things such as seeing our loved one's body and answering, where possible, our questions about what happened. The FLO should also be able to keep us informed of the police investigation and any court dates. As well as this, they should help us manage any communication that might be required with motor insurers and any contact with the press. Many of us have found their FLO to have been tremendously supportive throughout the early dark weeks of our grief. However, it is worth mentioning that some of us felt disappointed at the level of support we received from our FLO.

What Happens Next

Even though we are devastated and shocked by the news of our child's death and it is difficult to think clearly, we have some urgent tasks to take care of. Hopefully, we will not be trying to manage all of this alone.

Letting other people know

Our first priority might be informing other people what has happened. It is important to convey the news in a personal way, even if that means through phone calls and emails, rather than those in our family and social circle hearing about it through the media or via social media. The police will sometimes try to ensure that someone can be with us to begin the necessary calls and communications.

Informing relevant agencies

If we are our child's legal next of kin, then we may need to inform various agencies and organisations of their death. This could include motor insurers, employers, their school, banks, and so on. For more advice on this, see: www.tiny.cc/brakepractical

Our child's body

For some of us, our child died before we had a chance to see them again. Now we are faced with something we had never imagined: whether to visit our child in the mortuary, later on at the funeral home, or not at all. This is a very personal choice.

Nothing can prepare a parent for the sight of their child at the mortuary, especially where there have been visible injuries. If we were not at the roadside or by their side in the hospital, this might be the first time we have seen them since their death. We may wish to speak to medical staff beforehand about their injuries so that we have an idea of what to expect.

A more immediate question sometimes arises if the police request that we come to identify our child's body. If we cannot face this awful task, we can ask the police if there is anyone else who could do this for us.

Post-mortem examination

The body of our child will be taken to the mortuary and a forensic pathologist will carry out a post-mortem examination.

We, as parents, have the right to ask for a copy of the pathologist's report or even an independent post-mortem, although there will be a charge for this. If our child was married or in a civil partnership, we are no longer their next of kin, and it is usually their partner who has the right to request a copy of the pathologist's report.

The post-mortem report is likely to include very distressing details of our loved one's injuries. It is entirely our choice whether to read the report or not. We are under no obligation to do so. Some of us, but not all, will want to know every detail of what happened; this might be better than letting our imagination run away with us. Some of us will choose not to read it at all. Others might look for some assistance with understanding the contents. For instance, we could ask for it to be sent to our GP so that they can go through it with us, or we could give it to a trusted friend or family member to read on our behalf. On the other hand, we might decide to leave it unopened until such time – if ever – that we feel ready to face the contents.

The role of the police

The police investigate every road death. If we were involved in the incident, saw what happened, or know something related to it, we may be asked to give a statement. If we do give a statement, the police will write it down and possibly make a recording of what we say. This can be a stressful event, and a friend or family member may be allowed to attend the interview alongside us for support. If we have communication needs, we may be entitled to some assistance.

If we want to understand more details of what happened, the police might help us by visiting the site and by providing further information. Again, just as with the post-mortem report, it is our decision how much detail we want to know.

The press and social media

A fatal incident on the roads is newsworthy, and newspapers, radio and TV are likely to report what has happened, particularly local outlets. This is not something we can prevent or control.

Some of us welcome media coverage whilst others deeply dislike it. It is up to us whether we talk to journalists or not. The experience of parents suggests that it can be a good idea to give the media a brief statement, together with a photograph of our child, so that accurate information is used. If we can't face speaking to the media directly, but want to say something about our beloved child, we can ask a solicitor or close friend to put out a statement on our behalf.

News about our child may circulate rapidly on social media. Some of us might choose to ignore social media altogether, whilst others have found messages posted on our own profiles or those of our child to be a great support and comfort.

If our child had their own social media accounts, we may want to keep an eye on what is posted there. There is no need to make a fast decision about closing their accounts, even if we are advised to do so.

The great majority of social media postings are likely to be kind and respectful, but there is also a possibility of falsehoods, guesswork and even deliberately cruel jibes. Not having control over the way our child's death is discussed may compound our grief. This could particularly be the case if the narrative starts to include some blame towards them. We will need to decide for ourselves how to deal with this.

Mainstream and social media attention often fluctuate as time passes. Immediate, concentrated focus might stop as quickly as it started. If someone caused our child's death and there are subsequent legal proceedings, reporting may be more measured once the suspect has been arrested and charged. However, it is likely that our child's story will revive when the trial begins and/or if there are other similar deaths in the news.

- For more advice on dealing with social media, see the TCF leaflet *Our Child's Digital Legacy*.
- For more about coping with the press, see: www.tiny.cc/highprofile

The site and creating a roadside memorial

Some of us find that visiting the site of the incident where our child's life was taken can help us adjust to the reality of our loss, but it can be incredibly painful. Instead, we might go out of our way to avoid that spot, although this may not be possible if it is somewhere close to our home or on a local road.

Some parents find it a comfort to put up a roadside memorial – a temporary one such as flowers, or something more permanent, such as a small plaque or even a bench.

- Speak with the highways department of the local authority if you are seeking permission for this. The BRAKE charity may be able to help. Call **0808 8000 401** or write to helpline@brake.org.uk

The Impact on Ourselves and Those Around Us

In the long term, we each must find our own methods of adapting to what has happened, living with what cannot be changed, and of working through the pain and grief so that life can continue – albeit in a different way from how we would have wished.

Taking care of ourselves

We all grieve in our own ways. As we start to adjust to our lives without our child, we may find that every day is different and brings its own emotional, psychological and practical difficulties.

The trauma of our child's death could affect our health. We will need to make special effort to have a good diet, get exercise, take sufficient rest, and find ways to relax too. It's a good idea to try to get out in the fresh air; even short walks can be helpful.

We will probably want to use discretion with our social life, and not feel obliged to attend social events or entertain people if we are not comfortable around them at that time. Those of us with jobs and ongoing family responsibilities might find it difficult, particularly if we are overwhelmed even by basic daily tasks. We might just need to take it all a day at a time and/or ask for help.

Travelling on the roads again

Many of us find it alarming to travel on the roads after our child's death, especially if our journey takes us close to the scene of the incident. The sounds of a racing engine or screeching tyres, or the wail of an ambulance siren can instantly push us into a sense of trauma and high danger, even if we did not witness what happened. Hopefully as time goes by, the intensity of our feelings will reduce, and we will be able to cope better.

If we cannot manage to drive and our job requires it, we may need to talk to our employer about taking on different duties until we are ready to be on the road again.

Dealing with our feelings towards the person(s) responsible for our child's death

It is quite natural to feel hostility, anger, and even hatred for the person who killed our child. These feelings could also be directed at the police, the law, the justice system, other family members, or even against ourselves. If we are not able to find a way to deal with these intense emotions, they can become damaging and may lead to psychological or physical problems. Any existing mental health problems that we have might intensify. Professional help and/or the support of others who have been through a similar tragedy might help us.

Some bereaved parents have described how meeting the person responsible for the incident and perhaps then actively working towards forgiveness has helped them move forward, whereas others feel that what has been done can never be forgiven. We can let our own personal moral or religious beliefs guide us in this. It is a difficult and complex path upon which we will travel in our own time and way. If the driver was a friend or a family member, we have a colossal struggle to make room in our hearts for their sorrow and regret. There is no easy way to do this.

If our child was responsible for the incident

Roads are perhaps the most dangerous zones in our modern world. A random mechanical failure or the slightest mistake can have fatal consequences. In almost every other aspect of life, we suffer for the misjudgements we make, but we survive. We live and learn. However, the road does not always offer us a second chance. A momentary lapse of concentration or an unwise drink before driving can be all it takes. Tragically, our child has paid a heavy price, and possibly others who were hurt in the incident.

If this is what happened, our feelings will be mixed. We may have some anger at our child, or we may find ourselves defending them in the face of other people's accusations or criticism, or quite likely we will be managing all of this at once. How we go forward obviously depends on the exact circumstances, but generally, putting our focus on the bigger picture of their life, and not only those moments that led to their death, will help us find a way to grieve in peace.

Blaming ourselves

Feelings of guilt or regret are common in any bereavement, and parents in particular often suffer from these feelings. This is not unexpected. As parents we wish to protect our child from any harm, and the fact that they have died, whether or not we had anything to do with it, can cause us to feel like failures. Often this intense guilt is irrational, yet it bothers us nevertheless. For instance, we might regret that we had ever paid for our child's driving lessons all of those years ago, or allowed them to ride their bike in the neighbourhood. If we were in some ways involved in the incident, our feelings of guilt are likely to be even more intense.

Getting help

Any and all of these factors can intensify our grief. We are not only faced with the death of our beloved child, but we are also dealing with our feelings about other people's actions, our child's actions, and even our own. Because this is quite complex, it means that those of us who have lost a child in a road traffic incident often find that we benefit from some outside support.

Many of us find that counselling is a great help in finding our way forward, providing us with a safe and supportive space to express our thoughts and feelings. Others have turned to meditation or mindfulness therapy. Our GP may be able to advise us, as well as signpost us to services available locally.

Involvement with a peer-led support group might help also us put our thoughts into perspective and enable us to be gentler to ourselves. The Compassionate Friends has a group within our organisation for "Parents Bereaved through Road Traffic Collision" and offers the support that can only be given by those who can truthfully say, "Yes, we know this pain, we have been there." (Contact details are on the back page of this leaflet).

Looking to the future

Any parent whose child has died struggles in some way to find a way forward. However, this struggle may be even harder for those bereaved in such a sudden and traumatic way.

For many of us, finding our way involves creating a focus for good memories dedicated to our child. Directing our thoughts towards who they were and their life story can help ease the pain of how they died. Flowers at the roadside are a simple but common tribute, but there is so much more we can do. For more ideas, see the TCF *Handbook of Ideas for Remembering our Child*.

Some bereaved parents also get involved with appropriate campaigns, such as for road safety. For more on this, see: www.roadpeace.org. Such activities might be helpful, giving us a way of finding meaning in our life and creating positive change in honour of our child's memory. On the other hand, the efforts we put into such projects can drain us of our energy and also keep us in a place where we are still focussing on our child's death, rather than on the bigger picture of their life. If we do feel inclined to get involved in a campaign of some sort, we should carefully weigh up the impact it has on us.

For quite some time, it may seem impossible to even imagine finding peace of mind again. We will struggle with questions as to why our child died the way they did and be frustrated by the lack of answers. Yet the acute agony of our initial grief will eventually be in the past. The pain of grief will evolve, and over time we will find ourselves beginning to make adjustments and re-build our lives. There is no set timescale for how long this will take, and we each have to find our own survival strategies. We never stop loving our child, and very slowly our good memories will hopefully become a source of comfort and strength.

The Legal Processes

When it is suspected that someone was responsible for the incident that caused the death of our child, there will be various legal proceedings. The following is a very brief overview of what we can expect. (This information is primarily for England and Wales. There are slight differences in Scotland and Northern Ireland.) Please do look at the BRAKE website for more details.

The Coroner

The Coroner will usually open and then adjourn an inquest as soon as possible. This allows the death to be recorded and the Coroner to give authorisation for a burial or cremation.

The funeral

Once the Coroner has released our child's body, we will be able to make the necessary arrangements for the funeral.

It is important to take control of the public aspects of the funeral. We may want a small private ceremony or wish it to be an occasion when our local community can join family and friends in saying farewell. The media should respect our choice, but we need to make that choice known, so that this important day is not marred by unwanted intrusions.

The inquest

The full inquest will take place perhaps weeks or even months later. The inquest is an inquiry run by the Coroner's Office. It does not seek to apportion blame or responsibility, but only to establish the circumstances surrounding a person's death, including how, when and where the death occurred.

The media, as well as the public, have the right to attend both the inquest and any trial, and we will need to be prepared for that.

- The Compassionate Friends (TCF) has produced a series of factsheets with detailed advice about understanding, preparing for and coping with *Inquests in England and Wales*, as well as the *Investigation of Sudden Deaths in Scotland*. See: www.tcf.org.uk/legalhelp
- The **Coroner's Court Support Service** can help us before and during the inquest: Web: www.coronerscourtsupportservice.org.uk
Call: National Helpline on **0300 111 2141**

The police and the Crown Prosecution Service

If the police investigation of a traffic incident in England or Wales finds evidence that a crime may have been committed, this evidence is put into a report that is sent to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), the organisation responsible for bringing criminal prosecutions.

In Northern Ireland, it is the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) that decides whether or not to prosecute for criminal offences in Northern Ireland. In Scotland, it is the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (COPFS).

If the police investigation suggests that the action of an individual or more than one person amounted to a crime, the Prosecution Service may advise the police to bring charges.

The Crown Prosecution Service should meet with us if specific serious charges are being heard against another person or persons. They will explain the charges being brought, how the case is likely to progress, discuss our needs and answer our questions. The CPS should also meet with us if a decision has been made to reduce or drop a criminal charge.

If criminal charges against another person or persons are being considered, then we should be offered the opportunity to make a Victim Personal Statement (Victim Statement in Scotland).

Help available

- Your Family Liaison Officer (FLO) should provide a copy of the leaflet, *“Crown Prosecution Service – Service to Bereaved Families.”*
You can also find it here: www.tiny.cc/leaflet

See also:

- England and Wales: www.tiny.cc/codecrimevictims
- Northern Ireland: www.tiny.cc/nisupportvictims
- Scotland: www.tiny.cc/scotlandvictims

Attending court

It can take a surprising length of time before the trial takes place – even years may pass. When the case at last comes to court, there can be a feeling of relief, even though the raw agony of our grief may be reopened. For those of us with a partner or close family, we will want to make decisions about who, if anyone, attends court: trials can be long and at a distance from home, so there may also be financial and practical concerns.

Most criminal cases and appeals are held in public courtrooms. This means that we can attend, although this is not required unless we are called as a witness. If we decide to attend a court hearing, it may help to have support. This could be family members or close friends.

For more about what happens in court, see: www.tiny.cc/brakecourt

Seeing the accused for the first time

The court hearing may be the first time that we see the person(s) who is believed to be responsible for what happened. This can be extremely upsetting, and another reason why it is important to be supported by friends or family.

Visual evidence (such as photos or videos) can be presented in court for the benefit of the judge/coroner and jury or magistrates. Some of these

images may be particularly distressing for us. We should bear in mind that we are free to leave and re-enter a courtroom at any time.

The verdict and the sentence may bring yet more pain. Our child's priceless life was so cruelly cut short and we might naturally wish for this to be reflected in the sentence. Judgement following a guilty verdict may generate feelings that the sentence is inadequate, that the person responsible for our child's death will be free to carry on with normal life before they have been properly punished. In some cases, a guilty verdict in a road incident can result in a suspended sentence and a relatively short driving ban. It is not unusual to be dissatisfied with the sentence given.

The attention of the media will often focus on the family's reaction to the verdict and sentence. Again, it may be helpful to have a statement prepared, perhaps read out by a solicitor.

The aftermath

In the short term, some of us will feel relieved when the trial is completed, but many parents suffer great emotional stress immediately after the ending of the court case and need the support of friends. Many emotions may have been suppressed during the trial and these can resurface in an overwhelming torrent of pent-up grief and rage, particularly if the person responsible has shown little remorse.

As bereaved parents coping with the loss of our child, we now also need to learn to live with the outcome of the trial. For some of us, this means the continued presence of the driver's family, and potentially even the driver themselves, living within our community. If they do receive a prison sentence, how will we feel when they are released, especially if they return to their home nearby? Our anguish may be even greater if the driver was a friend of our child or our own. Each time we see them, we are likely to struggle with our feelings.

For more on this topic, see the TCF leaflet:

Coping with Legal Proceedings Following the Death of our Child.

Suggestions for Further Reading

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) has published a range of leaflets to support parents in the aftermath of a child's death. The following titles could be relevant at this time:

- *Living with Grief*
- *The Sudden Death of Our Child*
- *The Grief of the Newly Bereaved*
- *Our Child's Funeral*
- *Prolonged and Intense Grief*
- *Coping with Legal Proceedings Following the Death of Our Child*

You can obtain any of our leaflets by calling the TCF Helpline or contacting the TCF office for printed copies (details are on the back page), or you may download them from this link: www.tcf.org.uk/leaflets

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:

0345 123 2304

Northern Ireland Helpline:

0288 77 88 016

General Enquiries

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TCF Library

0345 120 3785

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To find out more about TCF visit

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Sponsored by David and Liz Leake in memory of their indomitable son Nick. His life a beautiful memory, his absence a silent grief.

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