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Michael Rosen on his grief for his son and society's difficulty with death

"We all have to find different ways of handling it. Everyone is an expert on their own bereavement. No-one can tell you that you've got it wrong. But what we can do is swap what we do with our bereavements and that's the wonderful thing about The Compassionate Friends."

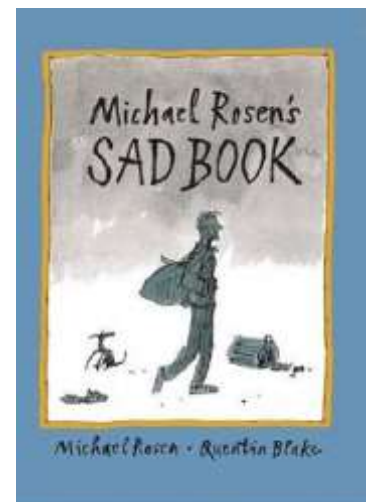
Addressing an audience of bereaved parents at a meeting of The Compassionate Friends – the national UK charity supporting those who have lost a son or daughter – author and broadcaster Michael Rosen spoke candidly about how he coped after the death of his son Eddie, and about how badly society in general deals with grief.

Michael lost Eddie - his second born son - aged 18, from meningitis in 1999, and famously wrote **The Sad Book** - a children's book about grief. While he is obviously adept at public speaking, he rarely talks in public about Eddie's death.

Eddie had gone to bed with what he thought was a touch of flu, but Michael found him dead the next morning. He experienced the shock and confusion that surrounds sudden premature loss, and the difficulty other people have dealing with this.

He observed: "We live in a strange culture when it comes to death. We don't really know what to do with it or how to have a public conversation about it. Generally we do it badly."

Michael was speaking at the Annual General Meeting of The Compassionate Friends – a charity made up of bereaved parents offering support to those who



have recently lost a child of any age from any cause. Michael is a patron of the charity.



Chair of Trustees, Dr Margaret Brearley, explained that because of society's unease with the death of a young person, traumatised bereaved parents are often left isolated. "The Compassionate Friends helps by stepping in to provide support to bereaved parents from others who have walked that path. We talk together, allow people to express their grief and offer hope that they can survive. The friendships that form from such understanding help enormously."

Michael says he has now forgiven people for not knowing what to say. "Some people say useful things. Most people don't. Many people stand there flapping and I used to blame them but I don't any more. It's not their fault. It's just so awkward. We haven't got a way of talking about it."

He says when he went back to work, most people didn't mention what had happened. "They would ask me about a new script or invite me to lunch and I wondered if they knew what I'd been through. Some of it probably was the 'Buck up' thing that makes us all fed up but they were trying to be helpful and I took it as a gesture of compassion."

Like most bereaved people, Michael put on a brave face for the outside world. "In the first page of *The Sad Book* there is a picture of me smiling and I did walk around trying to be more cheerful than I really was. I know for some people they are cross that they have to do that but for me maybe because I am a performer and an actor it didn't matter too much that I was doing that."

As is quite common, Michael went on a mission to find out all he could about the cause of Eddie's death. He said he found comfort in understanding about meningitis. "For me that crude down to earth basic biology was immensely reassuring. It hadn't been some weird spectre that had reached into his room and plucked him away - it was simply a bacterium that was doing what bacteria do."

Michael also stressed the importance of having a good funeral. "By that I mean you must take from it the hope, love and courage that other people give you in what they thought about your loved one." They played a recording from Arsenal vs Sheffield Wednesday in the cup final which Michael and Eddie had attended together. "People were looking round wondering why we were

listening to this but I knew why. And we finished with Bob Marley. It was absolutely amazing."

Like most bereaved parents, Michael keeps Eddie in his life, having regular conversations with him and reminiscing about happy memories. "He found some of the things I did very funny and he did some great take-offs of me. And I often quote him to his younger siblings who never met him."

Michael says he has been "extremely extremely fortunate to experience again that emotional space of parenting which was ripped away when Eddie died," being able to devote that energy to two more children. "It is not a substitute or replacement but that parenting thing whatever it is - the thing that we feel when we want to do nice things for or with our kids - I've been lucky to have it again and I obsess about it. I got a text a few minutes ago from my young son who said he had won his football game this morning. I grab things like that."

He says he is now coping relatively well with life, and can now "think about Eddie's death in a way I don't feel bad about."

He also told of a friend who had lost her brother and thought of him and the grief as a river that was always next to her. "The river is deep and dangerous and if she fell in she might not be able to get out, but at the same time the river was always beautiful. This was a useful image for me to think about. The grief can be overwhelming if you fall into it but the love I have for Eddie is a beautiful presence in my life. "

You can find out more about The Compassionate Friends at www.tcf.org.uk

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