



TCF NEWS

A newsletter for supporters of The Compassionate Friends

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Michael Rosen

Photo credit: Goldsmiths, University of London

Michael Rosen shares his grief and treasured memories of son Eddie at TCF AGM.

We were honoured to have author and broadcaster Michael Rosen as the guest speaker at the TCF Annual General Meeting this year.

Michael lost his second born son, Eddie, 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 speaks in public about Eddie's death, he told a jam-packed audience of bereaved parents.

Eddie was staying with his dad when it happened. He went to bed saying he didn't feel well and he thought he had a touch of flu, but Michael found him the next morning dead in bed.

Michael had seen dead bodies before – he had watched his mother die and had come across many bodies as a medical student - “a crazy idea that came from having Jewish parents,” but the death of one's son is different, and like many of us Michael experienced the shock and confusion that surrounds sudden premature loss.

A Northern Irish friend said to him “Death never comes in creaky boots,” meaning that it often doesn't announce itself. “I've never forgotten that.”

He also described the difficulty we have as a culture in dealing with death. “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.”

He said he'd heard something on the radio on bereavement, asking why we always talk about death as if it is failure – i.e. losing the battle with cancer – and how that just makes the loss even greater. “I'd never really thought that through before, but I did think she was saying something quite important.”

He says he didn't hold it against people when he went back to work and they didn't acknowledge what had happened. “My producer got me back to work fairly quickly. I took it that they were keeping me busy.”



Michael Rosen and
Group Contact Bridget Holley

Most people didn't mention Eddie but carried on normally talking about a new script or asking if I was coming 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 loving compassion."

He says his parents taught him how to turn things around that way. "There's a Yiddish saying my father would quote when someone had said something that made me feel bad - 'So they call you Pischer' - It means 'so what' or 'big deal'. It was his way of telling me I had to grow a thick skin. That was something my parents gave me and it saw me through those situations."

"In the opening of The Sad Book there was a picture of me smiling and I did walk around trying to be more cheerful than I really was. But I don't mind that I did that. 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 everything he could about the cause of Eddie's death. "I was absolutely desperate to know why he had died. I made myself an expert."

"I was 'thinking and doing' as my dear mother used to say. She was rather a primary school philosopher. At the time I thought 'What is she on about?' but as the years go by I sort of get what she meant - that it is impossible to think about something without having some activity and it is also almost impossible to do activities all the time without also doing some thinking. One of the things we quite often think is 'If I just sit on my bum and do nothing things will get better'. Another way of thinking is 'If I just do and do and don't do any thinking then things will get better'. But in actual fact you need to do both."

"We all have to find different ways of handling it. Everyone here is an expert on your own bereavement. No-one can tell you that you've got it wrong and there is a better way of doing it but what we can do is swap what we do with our bereavements and that's the wonderful thing about TCF."

Again like many of us, Michael battled with the "What ifs". "I thought that if I hadn't failed at medicine I might have spotted that he had meningitis. But I was very kindly reassured by the doctors who lived in my road - again I thought if only I'd knocked on their doors that might have helped - that they too had missed cases of meningitis. It's tricky to diagnose."

He said he found some comfort in understanding the cause of death. "It connected me and Eddie to the universe. I know religion can do that but I'm not religious. 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."

In the immediate aftermath, the whole family came together along with friends and neighbours. "It was a spontaneous re-making of the Jewish tradition of 'Sitting Shiva', although we are not a religious family. Our house became a story telling centre for about two weeks."

Eddie's mother, Susanna (Michael's second wife, from whom he was divorced), came from Northern Ireland, and wanted Eddie to come home, so that's what happened. "People are shocked by this, but Eddie lay in an open coffin in our house and family and close friends went in to see him. Maybe they touched his face and talked to him - I did. In a strange way it was helpful to me. I am thankful to Susanna for making that happen."

"We all have to find different ways of handling it. Everyone here is an expert on your own bereavement. No-one can tell you that you've got it wrong and there is a better way of doing it but what we can do is swap what we do with our bereavements and that's the wonderful thing about TCF."

Michael also stressed the importance of having a good funeral. "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."

And Eddie's funeral was a good 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."

They have also held regular memorial events, for many years holding a hockey match on the anniversary as Eddie played in goal for a local team. "It was always a wonderful occasion. They even let me on to play sometimes for a few minutes." After many years, they buried Eddie's ashes in Highgate Cemetery with an inscription "Larger than Life" on the stone, taken from a poem Michael's dad had written about Eddie.

Despite being a writer, Michael did not write about Eddie's death for some time. "I got on with my normal work at the BBC but I ring-fenced Eddie and my emotions about him." It was about 18 months later when he was doing a children's show at the Edinburgh Festival and a young girl asked him about Eddie. He explained that children knew about Eddie as Michael had included stories of his antics as "a very rumbustious, wild jokey little boy" in his books of poems. "The day before he died a child had asked me what Eddie was like now and I had told him he had grown taller than me and could pick me up and swing me round. So when this girl in Edinburgh asked me what he was doing now I had to say he had died." The children seemed to accept it as children do. "Then I thought maybe I have got a job to do and that is to tell the children who read my books that Eddie had died, and that's how *The Sad Book* came about."

He has a continuing relationship with Eddie, having regular conversations with him and he has many happy memories. "He found some of the things I did very funny and he did some great take-offs of me." Michael said Eddie wanted to be some kind of actor/performer/comedian or a celebrity chef. "He would say to me 'The first bite is with the eye Dad,' referring to Michael's cooking which was often a bit thrown together. "And I often quote him to his younger siblings who never met him."

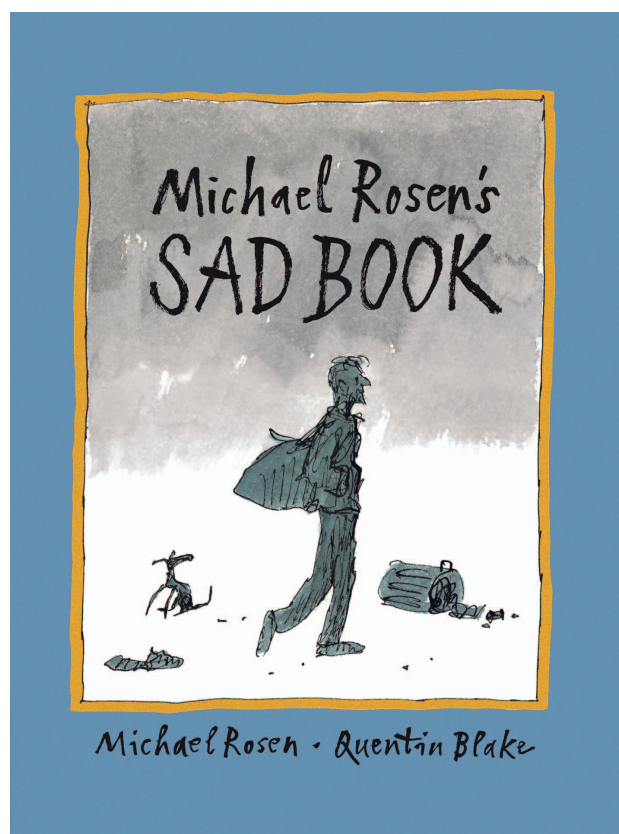
Michael has had two more children since Eddie died - with his third wife Emma. "I've been extremely, extremely fortunate in that I have been able to experience again that emotional space of parenting which was ripped away when Eddie died. I have been able to devote that energy to two more children. It 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. "I don't tick off the years, but I know others do. And I can now think about Eddie's death in a way I don't feel bad about."

He recalls that very soon after Eddie died, he went with Susanna to Paris and they visited one of the large famous cemeteries. And came across a distraught woman by the grave of her son who had died 20 years earlier. "She was uncontrollably upset - utterly, utterly bereft. It was only maybe 2 weeks since Eddie had died and I was pretty wobbly. I wondered if I had joined this state of being and that would be me for the rest of my life. It was an extraordinary moment. But there were other people celebrating at some of the graves, and I found myself thinking there are lots of ways of doing this."

He also told of another friend who had lost her brother and thought of him and the grief of losing him 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."

By Susan Hughes



Michael stayed after the main business of the afternoon to sign copies of *The Sad Book* and his *Selected Poems* (which includes wonderfully honest poems about Eddie and his death). Both books are available to purchase on the TCF website or to borrow from our Postal Library. Spending over an hour with a queue of parents and siblings, Michael spoke with each as he signed and dedicated his books to their sons and daughters, brothers and sisters.

Our guest speaker was warmly thanked and presented with a gift by our Chair of Trustees, Margaret Brearley.

A great afternoon, and our huge thanks to Michael for taking the time to speak to us.

The 2016 National Gathering

A powerful, searingly honest account of loss at this year's Gathering

On the second day of the TCF weekend Gathering of bereaved parents and siblings in Northamptonshire in October, we held a moving remembrance candle lighting event. Some lovely words - in the form of short readings and poems - gave comfort as we viewed the names of the precious children we have lost and each of us lit a candle to remember and honour each son or daughter, brother or sister.

We were also fortunate to finish this emotional, but lovely, event by welcoming our guest speaker, Professor David Mosse. David lost his beloved son, Jake, to suicide in 2010. With powerful, heartfelt and searing honesty, he spoke to us about the shock, confusion and indescribable pain of recent bereavement, the journey of loss as well as sources of strength and the power of sharing. He talked of 'one reality ending that day and another reality beginning' and of the urgent, overwhelming question 'why' - a question which ultimately is unanswerable. As for many others, his son's suicide has set him on a lifelong search for understanding. David likened his grief for his son as like a 40 foot container crashing into his house - at first he thought he could take it away, but gradually came to realise that it would never go away and that he would have to continue walking 'around it'... He talked of joining a bereavement support group - and here found witnesses to his pain and his story



as well as understanding - and how much he learnt from others talking about their sons and daughters, their grief and anguish. He stressed that his bereavement journey had gained strength from interrelating and intersecting with others who had suffered a similar loss. He spoke of finding - by talking with others - new ways of expressing and thinking about his tragedy, which in turn helped him to cope better. He finished with a few words about finding a future after such a devastating loss. That knowing the worst can happen brought for him an awareness of the fragility of life and therefore more compassion and understanding of others. It was a powerful session which spoke to all the bereaved parents and siblings there.

You can read David Mosse's talk in full in the Winter edition of **Compassion** and on the TCF website under News/TCFNews.

Carolyn Brice

A personal account of the Gathering - "For the first time I felt I will be a survivor and not a victim"

I couldn't decide whether to go and booked after the deadline. It was an unnerving thought to go by myself and to meet lots of people, none of whom I knew and I worried a whole weekend might be too intensive and set me back. Something was telling me to go and I decided if I didn't like it I could come home, tour the local area or just enjoy the spa. I need not have worried, I was paired with a buddy who texted and phoned me beforehand and was looking out for me as soon as I arrived. In reality I loved having the chance to talk about my son, who we lost 2 ½ years ago, all weekend and to think of little else.

The weekend was very emotional and I cried as soon as I arrived and many more times. Each time there was somebody to look after me, to sit and talk. The volunteers were all so caring and committed to making sure everyone was OK. Usually, I spend so much time and energy trying to be brave and carry on with work and life, which involves not thinking about my son as it is too upsetting, and it was so good to remember alongside others who know how it is, and to not feel different for a whole weekend. I attended a couple of workshops and found it really peaceful to

decorate a candle bag for my son alone with memories, and it was somehow easier to light a candle alongside others. There is no pressure to do anything. I took home some ideas as to how other parents cope and deal with anniversaries and appreciated the honesty of those further down the line who admitted they still have hard times but that is how it is and something you learn to live alongside. I could go on and on about so much that helped me.

I came away feeling not quite so bitter, that I am actually doing well and need to be kinder to myself and not expect so much. Most importantly I felt I have found some peace and a little indication of how our son will fit into our futures. For the first time I feel I will be a survivor and not a victim. I have already booked for the gathering in Matlock and look forward to spending another weekend with my son and all the other parents and their children.

I would like to pass my sincere thanks to all the organisers and hope that one day I will be able to help other parents in some capacity as a legacy to my son.

C, Suffolk

Over 50 volunteers gather together for networking meeting...



Lisa Mayland, Helpline Volunteer

On the morning of Saturday 5th November, prior to the AGM, we held a networking and training meeting for our TCF volunteer team – over 50 of our dedicated TCF volunteers who support locally, run groups, listen on the Helpline, moderate our online Forum and Facebook groups, write leaflets, and volunteer in a myriad other ways, attended the morning. Here, Lisa, a volunteer who has recently joined the Helpline Team shares her impressions of the morning.

"Our volunteer meeting started with an inspiring and thought provoking speech from TCF's chair, Margaret Brearley. I had met this amazing lady over coffee a few minutes before, and, being very much a newcomer in TCF had not known who she was. She gave a comprehensive overview of the heart of TCF; its aims and intentions, the feel of what this wonderful and empathic organisation is about. She spoke briefly of the tragic loss of her own son Joshua and how TCF had provided a warm cocoon of support around her in those early, desperate days of her grief, helping her to keep going. She went on to say how she sees that as the unique nature of TCF; a group of warm and caring volunteers willing to cocoon and support others similarly bereaved.

I was not aware of TCF's commitment to supporting research on grief, in terms of how it affects the bereaved and also what is being done elsewhere to improve practice. I was interested to hear of innovations in Germany to facilitate 'Grief Accompaniment'. In certain areas individuals are trained to go to bereaved parents almost immediately after the death of their child and walk and be with them in their grief for some days or weeks. Such hands on and practical support sounds a wonderful balm to the shocked and disoriented state of mind and soul. It was heartening to hear Margaret say in the AGM in the afternoon that TCF

would make its business to look at the implications it has for practice in Britain.

Margaret also spent some time talking about the complexity of grief in the bereaved parent, pointing out how sometimes complex grief happens after particularly harrowing deaths such as murder, suicide or multiple losses. She raised the awareness of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD being a very real factor in grief causing it to be severe, prolonged and debilitating and she affirmed TCF's interest in the research that is being done on this, saying careful study and reflection of this research would also inform TCF's practice.

Later in the morning we divided into 2 groups for training. The first group was entitled Enhancing a TCF Support Group. This was for those who wanted to focus on running a group and the topics dealt with were structuring a group meeting, planning and presenting topics, ideas for best practice, coping with challenging situations in support groups and valuing informal get-togethers. As I am quite new to TCF and a Helpline volunteer, I opted to be part of the second group called Developing Volunteer Skills and Knowledge. Here we covered topics including using and promoting the unique TCF Library, improving listening skills, coping with challenging situations and presenting TCF to other organisations.

After a thoroughly useful and productive morning, we were forced to finish for lunch - such a shame as there was so much to talk about and for me a rare treat to mix with other volunteers and to begin to get to know more about TCF. Roll on the next volunteer training day!"

Lisa Mayland

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Tom's Pie in the Sky

A truly magical day was held on 3rd July, 2016 in memory of our lovely son, Tom, to raise money for charities close to his heart and ours. Tom died suddenly in an accident on August 31, 2014, just two weeks before he was due to head off for a long planned trip to Cambodia to teach. He was almost 23.

We held 'Tom's Pie in the Sky' in the lovely gardens of an old house we bought not long after Tom died – it's a major renovation project – due to finish next April. We all looked at the house before Tom died – and we all loved it – and we bought it just 3 months after Tom died. We very much feel him there with us. It just feels right.

We were blessed with good weather, loving friends and family, as well as a couple of local bands (friends of Tom) who came to play.

We invited everyone to make and bake pies, sweet and savoury and then bring them along to share. A huge variety of pies appeared on the day and was much enjoyed with the odd pint or summer punch and many memories shared. The pies were judged by Tom's family – the top three winning

prizes donated by local businesses. So many prizes were donated – so we able to hold a raffle to raise funds and we were overwhelmed by everyone's generosity.

A total of £1200 was raised which was shared between The Compassionate Friends, The Good Grief Project and a couple of local charities which were close to Tom's heart – our local homeless centre and an organisation for disabled children called 'Unique Kidz'. Tom considered himself to be very fortunate – happy, content and much loved, with a big, open heart for others, especially those less fortunate than him.

Everyone who came had a wonderful time and all felt Tom strongly that day. We intend to hold the event every year – to love, laugh, cry, and share our collective memories of Tom. He had friends of all ages and from many walks of life and this was very much felt throughout the day.

The day ended with a release of helium balloons to which Tom's friends and family attached their own very personal messages to him.

This was a day that truly reflected Tom's love of spending his time with his family and friends, of laughter, conversation, music, pies and ale. It also truly reflected how much Tom is loved and missed.



Tom's long-term girlfriend Jess wrote the following about Tom – it sums him up completely:

"Tom is a carefree person who enjoys the simple things in life. Money and popularity do not drive his happiness instead he searches to create joy in everyone around him, which in turn makes him happy. His generosity and kind nature make him a welcoming person. He is so generous with the love and kind words he shares so naturally on a day to day basis with everyone he met. He does not judge by age or status and has many friends from all walks of life. He is a person who listens and enjoys a simple chat over a pint or a full blown debate if you're willing to give it a go! He likes to share ideas and can talk for hours and hours. He doesn't like to let people down, and adored his family and friends. He's a feisty little guy but so full of love and laughter. He has ideas, plans and dreams. He wants the most from life and to learn as much as he can from the people around him. He has so much potential ready to share and grow with the world. He has many passions, two of his favourites are music and real ale. He enjoys being outdoors and surrounded by the natural world. He's very compassionate towards animals and interested in science, current global issues and conspiracy theories. He questions everything and looks further than most people can be bothered to. Me and Tom have spent hours marvelling at the world around us, looking to find an answer to it all. I think Tom taught me the meaning of life, to love and be loved in return. He is an explorer, a wanderer and a dreamer. And a beautiful one at that, his face is beautiful and captivating, just like his heart. I know he knows how much I love him, and how much I wanted him to do all the amazing things I know he is capable of. He can take the worst situation and make it bare-able with a few words and a smile. And the strength of that is shown by how a memory of him can make me smile even at this indescribably painful time. I hope he is living out his dreams somewhere as extraordinary as him".



Spreading the word of the work of TCF

Sheila Swindale took part in a Cheshire Bereavement Day. Here we share Sheila's reflections on the day with you...

On Monday 26th September 2016 Orbitas Bereavement Services Limited, a company wholly owned by Cheshire East Council, arranged a Bereavement Day in the Civic Hall, Nantwich, Cheshire.

There were 25 other organisations represented including funeral directors, solicitors, ambulance crews, police, residential homes, churches, registrars from the council, a representative from the local crematorium, a representative from the local children's hospice, and a table for The Compassionate Friends which my daughter Jane and I were in charge of for the day. Carolyn kindly supplied a pop-up and a wide range of leaflets.

I was horrified how few people had heard of us but many having seen

what we do took leaflets and thought that they may be able to recommend us to relevant people in the future. Although few people stopped at our table to talk with us, for me, in general, it was a really rewarding and useful day and so satisfying to be amongst so many caring people. Meeting the established groups was actually more fruitful than meeting individuals and I am sure they will refer to us in future circumstances.

I have decided that where I can in my local area I will try to make our presence much more obvious so that more people can benefit from what we have to offer. I felt so proud to be able to represent our organisation and was delighted to have my daughter, a sibling, sharing the day with me.

Sheila Swindale, Helpline Volunteer



Sheila and her daughter

And meanwhile in Scotland...

Hugh McAninch, TCF's coordinator in Scotland, writes:

With the help of two of our newest volunteers, Clare (Group Facilitator in Aberdeen) and Betty (Group Facilitator in Elgin and Inverness) we were kindly given the opportunity by CRUSE Scotland and the Grampian Child Bereavement Network to have a TCF publications table at their joint conference in Aberdeen in October. Other organisations present were SANDS and Aberdeen Association for Mental Health. Betty was also given time to promote two of her books "One Step at a Time" and "A Mother's Grief". It was a very productive day meeting and networking with many of the bereavement professionals doing such valuable work in the north of Scotland.



Our New Compassionate Friends from CRUSE

In early October I was invited to facilitate a workshop, entitled **Say Their Name**, at the Scottish CRUSE Annual Volunteer Conference in Perth. Our wonderful short film, of course, played centre stage. Ten CRUSE volunteers (some of whom are in the photo - including Stewart Wilson, on the left, their Executive Director) attended the workshop. We pulled out together some topics to discuss from the video, including avoidance of others; what is normal - no rule book; acceptance that the pain might continue but will become more tolerable; no new memories - limited time together; isolation; new expectations. What followed was a very productive and helpful discussion, assisting CRUSE volunteers in their understanding of parental grief. We also met up with Katherine (Sam's mum) and TCF contact for Dumfries and Galloway at the conference, who is also a CRUSE counsellor.

Supportive summer weekend at Willersley Castle

We held our second supportive weekend at Willersley Castle in Derbyshire from 19th -21st August. We welcomed fifty bereaved parents and three siblings. We held discussion groups, craft activities, art therapy and candle - lighting events. The weather was not kind to us but the organised walk in the surrounding countryside was as popular as ever. Walkers were undaunted by the heavy showers. As usual, craft was very popular and was expertly supervised by our Compassionate Friend and talented artist Emma Smith, together with Emma Andow who worked tirelessly all day helping people with their hearts and candle jars.

Margaret Brearley joined us this year and, as well as helping us with discussion groups, she gave a talk on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder which was both profound and inspiring.

We could not run this weekend without the help of our kind and dedicated volunteers: Pat and Jerry Morris, Jan and Mike Alcock and this year Margaret Rice joined the team, so grateful thanks to you all.

Nothing can take away the overwhelming pain of losing a child, but I hope all those who attended found warmth and friendship and returned to their lives feeling less isolated in their grief.

Margaret, Tony and Emma Andow



**This weekend will take place again next year
at Willersley Castle from 18th- 20th August 2017
and will be advertised in January.**



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