



The  
Compassionate  
Friends

## Grieving the Death of a Twin Child

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

# Grieving the Death of a Twin Child

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The Compassionate Friends (TCF) has published more than 40 leaflets on various aspects of grief following the death of a child. This leaflet is specifically about the loss of a twin. We suggest it is read alongside other appropriate leaflets, such as those for different age groups or different circumstances of death. Please see the list of recommendations and links at the end of the text.

To lose a child is the greatest pain a parent can endure. The death of a twin adds another dimension to this tragedy. Although each twin is an individual, from the moment we found out that we were expecting twins, they might have been two inseparable people in our minds and in our hearts. What is more, not only are we trying to cope with our own grief, but in addition, we are supporting the surviving twin who will also be grieving, as well as any other children in our family.

## Coping with our grief

The death of a child is widely accepted as one of the most difficult bereavements to cope with. We do not expect to outlive our children; it seems to contradict the laws of nature. As bereaved parents we suffer a bewildering turmoil of emotions, including perhaps intense sorrow, confusion, anger, regret or guilt. We might lose our self-confidence or our ability to concentrate. We might find ourselves either eating for comfort or barely eating at all. We might be unable to sleep or to find peace of mind. Our sense of loss is profound. Many of our expectations, hopes and dreams for the future are ended, and our world has changed forever. Our family will never be complete again, and every relationship within it

has changed. We might be alone and without support for ourselves, or have a partner who might be grieving in a different manner.

As a parent of twins, we will have the extra challenge of trying to cope with our own grief while supporting the surviving twin, as well as any other children in our family. The surviving twin will be a constant reminder of the one who has died. This may be particularly pertinent if they were identical, but all twins were born as two halves of one miraculous arrival, whether conceived naturally or as a result of fertility treatment.



*“For the whole of their lives, we had celebrated their birthday together. Now that really happy day each year has turned into a sad memory and awareness that one of the two most important people is missing. We are torn between wanting to give our daughter treats and knowing that at the same time those treats can’t give her the shared birthday that she really wants.” – A bereaved parent*

Any major event for the surviving twin, no matter how joyous, might bring our loss into sharper focus, knowing that two of our children should be present. Occasions such as birthdays, the first day at school, the school prom, passing a driving test, graduating from university, a wedding or birth of a grandchild can make us feel our loss more keenly.

We may find ourselves worrying about our surviving child. Our fears might be even greater if a twin died due to a medical or genetic condition, as we may be afraid that the surviving twin will suffer from the same disorder. They may also harbour such fears. It might be worthwhile talking with our GP and/or seeking specialist advice. It is generally better to know the reality and facts, rather than silently fearing the worst.

We will need our emotional energies to make the massive adjustment to life without our child, and to continue supporting the grieving twin and

other members of our family. This means we will need to find ways of taking care of ourselves, as well as dealing with the difficult emotions we are experiencing.

### **These could include:**

- talking frankly and openly with someone we trust
- writing down our feelings, or expressing them through another creative activity
- devoting time to a cause we find meaningful, such as a charity
- being outside in nature
- learning relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing or mindfulness
- releasing some of our emotional energy through physical exercise.

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) organises support groups both online and in person. Conversations with other parents who have been bereaved in similar ways can be a tremendous help.

(For more on coping with grief, see the list of suggested leaflets at the end of the text.)



*“I am a lost twin. My hands are also the hands of my missing twin. I find looking in a mirror hard. The face looking at me is the face I saw when I looked at my twin.”*

– A bereaved identical twin

## Our surviving twin child



*“It never occurred to either of us that one of us might not be here one day – we expected our twinning to last for ever. Being girl/boy twins, we had different hobbies and friends, but at the root of everything, my twin was there when I needed him.” – A bereaved twin*

Only another twin can understand the depth of loss that a surviving twin child feels. There is an enormous void that can never be filled. They had one another from the very beginning. Our surviving child always had a companion at every stage of their existence and now that person has gone. Whether their twin’s death was following an illness or was entirely unexpected, the ending of that very close relationship could be the most devastating event that ever happens to them. It is not at all surprising that many surviving twins struggle with depression.

Growing up, the lone twin probably spent much of their life in the company of their twin – from being in the womb to arriving into the world, and then through the subsequent stages of development. They might have communicated together without words before they could even speak. Being the same age, they probably started school on the same day, and might have had similar interests, laughed at the same things and even had the same friends. They would have been a constant source of support for each other, whether they always got on well or not. Most likely they understood one another better than anyone else.

The surviving twin would expect this shared history and exclusive form of support to continue throughout life. Even if one twin had a prior medical problem, their death will have been a huge shock. It will have shattered the security that came from their twinship and made them uncertain about what to expect from their own future. It could make them question the meaning of their own life.

The age, developmental stage and personality of the surviving twin will impact on their ability to understand what has happened and how they cope with this tragic death. They will experience a range of emotions. They might feel guilty that they have survived, or frightened that they will suffer from the same illness or condition that caused the death of their twin.

Some surviving twins work and play twice as hard to make up for what their deceased twin is missing. A twin might feel they have to fulfil their own role as well as that of their dead sibling, trying to be two people, adopting some, or all, of the habits and interests of their deceased brother or sister. Alternatively, they may be frustrated at what they perceive as the idealisation of their deceased sibling, whose virtues are praised and whose less attractive qualities seem to be forgotten. They might also have to deal with changes in us and how we are coping. No matter how they manifest their feelings, the surviving twin will be experiencing a grief that is unique to them.

Their reactions and coping mechanisms may be very different to our own. They need the opportunity to express their feelings of grief which may include sadness, anger, relief and confusion. While they need encouragement to identify their feelings, release their emotions and embrace their twin's memory, this needs to be on their own terms. It may take some time for young adults or teenagers to open up about what they are going through.



*“Twins are together in the womb before birth and share that space, those sounds, those movements, as they grow and prepare for birth itself. It’s an unbreakable bond from the start. My identical twins were inseparable, they attended the same schools and shared everything, including friendships. The loss of one son to cancer left his surviving twin rudderless.” – A bereaved mother*

## Support for the surviving twin

The surviving twin is adjusting to a massive loss, and it might not be easy for them to cope with the rollercoaster of emotions from their grief. In some cases, they might benefit from speaking with someone outside of the family circle, and they might be encouraged to see a counsellor. We could talk with our GP about this. If we or our child decide to see a counsellor, it could be worth checking that they have some knowledge of issues regarding twin loss.

Many surviving twins say that what has helped them most is being in contact with others in the same situation, someone who can better understand their feelings of loss. The following organisations and resources may be helpful for the surviving twin (or for us), depending on their age:

### **The Compassionate Friends | Siblings - [tcf.org.uk](http://tcf.org.uk)**

The Compassionate Friends offers support for anyone aged 18 and over who has lost their sibling. Support in Bereavement for Brothers and Sisters (SIBBS) is not specifically for twins, but the SIBBS group is still a useful resource, organising events and running a Facebook page.

### **Twins Trust - Bereavement Support Group - [twinstrust.org/bereavement](http://twinstrust.org/bereavement)**

This is an organisation that offers advice for parents who have lost a twin who was under the age of five.

### **The Lone Twin network - [lonetwinnetwork.org.uk](http://lonetwinnetwork.org.uk)**

This is a support network for bereaved twins aged 18 and over. It organises meetings in person and online where surviving twins can meet up and share their experiences and feelings. (There is a dedicated memorial bench for the Lone Twin Network at the National Memorial Arboretum near Burton-on-Trent.)

## **Twinless Twins - [twinlesstwins.org](http://twinlesstwins.org)**

This US based charity that gives support to anyone who has lost a twin at any age, and enables the surviving twin to get in touch with other surviving twins of the same age. Their website includes a range of resources.

## **Going forward**

The love we have for our child did not end when they died. We keep loving them and thinking about them. Finding ways to channel our love and thoughts can be helpful as we adjust to their absence. Of course, this is true also for their twin.

Many of us find it very important to spend time on activities that recognise and keep alive the memories of our children. Ideas for this are virtually endless, such as: organising photos of them, making a memory box, arranging for a tree to be planted in their honour, visiting places our child loved, and many more. (See the TCF Remembering our Child Handbook for a wide range of ideas.)

Including the surviving twin (and other children) in these remembrance activities, if they wish, can give them a positive focus for their grief. However, we should also understand that they may have different ways in which they wish to remember their twin. This might particularly be the case if they are teenagers or adults. What is most important is that each of us is acknowledging their twin in the ways that feel right to us. Although they are no longer physically present, they still have a place in our hearts and lives.

**Adjusting to life without our child takes a long time, and we will need to be patient with ourselves. Our grief may be more difficult to cope with at certain times of the year, such as holidays and special occasions. Seeing the pain that their twin is experiencing will also be**

difficult; the profound loss they feel will be lifelong. Yet we may also find comfort together and slowly find our way forward. The twin who has died is not forgotten. They are loved and remembered for ever.

## Further reading

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) has published a range of leaflets to support parents who have experienced the death of their child. The following titles could be helpful at this time:

- *Living with Grief*
- *A Mother's Grief*
- *A Father's Grief*
- *Our Surviving Children*
- *Remembering our Children (Leaflet and Handbook)*
- *Coping with Special Occasions*

TCF leaflets can be downloaded from this link: [tcf.org.uk/leaflets](https://www.tcf.org.uk/leaflets)

Printed copies are available free of charge for bereaved parents. Contact the TCF office (details on the back page).

## 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. 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 40 leaflets, on different aspects of grief which follow the death of a child. All of them are available at no charge to bereaved families.

For further support and to talk to one of our volunteers call our Helpline on **0345 123 2304**. Our website at **[tcf.org.uk](http://tcf.org.uk)** has more information about our services.

This leaflet is sponsored In memory of Harry, George's twin, and Olivia, Izzy's twin. They were both adventurous, sharing an insatiable joy of life and love of travel, seizing every opportunity to live life to the full. They adored their friends and family, and were known and loved for their fun, kindness and generosity of spirit, and their sudden deaths have not only left behind their twin, but an unfillable gap in their families. We know that Harry and Olivia would be delighted if other families of a lost twin could get as much support from The Compassionate Friends as we have, and would join us in sending our warmest wishes to anyone experiencing such a heartbreaking loss.

# Handbook of Ideas for Remembering Our Child



A handbook offering practical suggestions for remembering and honouring the memories of our children.

Printed copies are available free to all bereaved parents and their families by contacting the TCF office (contact details overleaf) or you can download this handbook at [www.tcf.org.uk/rememblinghandbook](http://www.tcf.org.uk/rememblinghandbook)



The  
**Compassionate  
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To find out more about TCF visit

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**Founder: The Revd Canon Dr Simon Stephens OBE**

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