



The  
Compassionate  
Friends



## A father's grief

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

# A Father's Grief

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The death of a child is an earth-shattering event. The unthinkable has happened. Our child has died, and we are still alive. How can such a thing even be real? Children are expected to outlive their parents, not the other way around. To be bereaved of a child is devastating, regardless of their age and whether they lived for days, months, years or decades.

## Bereaved fathers

There are many different ways of being a father. We may or may not be living now with the mother of our child, or perhaps we never have. We may be part of a blended family. We may not be the biological father of our child, but we have been fathering them. We may be single, or one half of a same-sex couple who had our beloved child via surrogacy. Our child may or may not have been living under our roof.

Just as there is no fixed type of fatherhood, there is no fixed way to grieve. We each need to find our own way through our grief. Although it may seem surprising when our bereavement is new and acute, we are not alone in this. Many of us are walking this difficult road.

## The early days of our bereavement

*"In those first days, I questioned what I was going to do next. How was I going to live my life now that my child had gone and my life was changed forever?"*

*"As a single man I felt so alone after my son died. I tried to be strong. I thought this was expected of me as a father."*

In the first few weeks after our child's death, the future may look empty and bleak. When things go badly, we fathers often feel we should be able to fix them. We see ourselves as practical and logical, able to find solutions and take action. But this is

something that we cannot fix. Our child has died and we cannot bring them back. Being unable to do anything about our loss can feel like torture to us. It may help if we remind ourselves that we are doing something - we are getting through the day, surviving.

We need to allow ourselves to grieve, whatever shape this grief takes. Our ego may not like it, especially if we believe we should be strong. As men, we may not like to show our feelings as we may think it shows weakness. We tend to keep our cards close to our chest, not revealing if we are hurting. We may also want to appear on top of things for the sake of our loved ones, especially our partner or our child's other parent.

However, keeping our feelings to ourselves does not usually work out well. Feelings that are suppressed can eventually surface in unhealthy and unhelpful ways. Holding things inside can lead to problems with our mental health.

For this reason, it's worthwhile exploring ways to express our grief, whether privately, and/or with our partner or a trusted friend. It can take strength to face our feelings. In the long run, we will be glad we did.

## **Finding safe ways of coping**

Grieving doesn't necessarily mean breaking down crying, although many of us do sob very frequently after our child dies, perhaps in private. On the other hand, some of us cry very few tears in those bewildering early days. Each of us feels immense pain, but we all express our grief in our own ways.

We may look for ways to escape the pain, turning to drink or drug use, gambling, sex - anything to keep sorrow at bay. These might seem to work for the moment, but often we will feel worse afterwards. In the long run they will not solve our grief. They could instead make it even harder to deal with.

Along with allowing ourselves time to grieve, what we need most is to look after ourselves, including our mental health. This is for our own sake and for anyone else in our lives who needs us. Some of us seek solitude, but others find it important not to be alone with our thoughts for too long. If we end up overwhelmed and feeling that we cannot keep living like this, then we should get some help. (More on this below)

# Coping with grief

*"I cried and cried. I couldn't stop. Yet my wife was calm on the outside, just processing what had happened. Her friends visited to give her support, and they ended up supporting me as well as her."*

There are so many powerful emotions that can threaten to overwhelm us when our child dies, including deep sorrow, anger, despair, regret and guilt. At times we are confused, as if we are lost in an endless bad dream. We may feel numb from shock. We can go through all of these feelings in one day, often several times.

## Sorrow and despair

*"I plunged into a deep pit - the whole world weighed heavily on me."*

In our entire lives up to now we may never have felt such deep sorrow. There is sorrow for our child who has been robbed of their life, sorrow for ourselves that our precious child has gone forever, and sorrow for everyone who loved our child and will now be in such pain. Sorrow is not self-pity. It is a much more generous and caring emotion. It comes only from love.

There is no cure for sorrow, but many of us do find some comfort in activities that honour our child's memory. Saying their name, visiting places that were meaningful in their life story, or eating the foods they once enjoyed can give some solace.

## Guilt and regrets

As men, we give ourselves the role of protector of our child. We feel that our job is to protect them from harm, but now the unthinkable has happened and they have died. It may be illogical and without any factual foundation, but we may still blame ourselves for somehow letting this tragedy happen. Thoughts go around and around in our minds: things we should have done, things we shouldn't have done. We exhaust ourselves; we beat ourselves up.

We may also feel guilty for laughing at a joke, or for not thinking about our child for just a brief moment. We can feel guilty simply because we are still alive.

On top of this, if we ever had problems in our relationship with our child, we won't be able to avoid turning these issues over in our mind. Part of being human and

therefore being a father involves having regrets, sometimes big regrets. If our child had grown to adolescence or into adulthood, we may have had difficulty understanding them and seeing life the way they did.

It can be difficult to come to terms with the fact that we are not perfect. Nobody's perfect. But we have always loved our child. We did the best we could for them.

## Anger

It's normal to feel very angry following our child's death. We can fly into rages or stay in a state of slower burning anger for hours, days or weeks on end. We are hurt and are lashing out. We can fire our anger at the wrong target, saying or doing things that we come to regret. We can lose a job, lose a friendship or even a relationship, and yet we are in so much pain we almost don't care. We tell ourselves that it's not as if our life could get much worse anyway.

Finding a safe outlet for these feelings is important to avoid harm to ourselves or others. Vigorous activities such as running or manual labour can offer a release. We may choose to do these activities alone. However, it may also be helpful to find those we can exercise or work alongside, at least occasionally. This will prevent us from becoming isolated.

## The People Around Us

### Our partner

*"My partner and I found that we were on different grief journeys. We had to allow each other to travel in our own way."*

Each member of a couple will not always be in the same emotional state, experiencing the same intensity of grief, at the same time. We will probably grieve in very different ways for at least some of the time.

Being out of step with our partner is not unusual, but it can cause us to feel alone in the relationship. We will need to allow each other space to grieve in our own ways. We cannot "fix" our partner, nor take away their sorrow, and neither can they do this for us. The way forward is through love, patience and being there for each other, no matter how we are each expressing our grief.

The following are all common behaviours following such an intense bereavement. None are right or wrong.

| Maybe this...  | ...or that  |
|--|---|
| Remaining silent   | Talking a lot about feelings  |
| Wanting to have lots of visual reminders of our child and to keep talking about them | Finding it painful to look at our child's photos or belongings, or even to speak or hear their name |
| Focusing intently on grief, with little energy for other activities                  | Staying busy to occupy our time and distract ourselves from grief                                   |
| Wanting to be at home  | Wanting to be out and about   |
| Wanting to be alone  | Seeking out the company of others   |
| Expressing grief through emotion and tears   | Feeling flat and without emotion  |
| Avoiding physical intimacy   | Desiring physical intimacy  |
| Delaying returning to work   | Going back to work to avoid thinking about our loss   |
| Returning to normal activities quite soon  | Unable to pick up the threads of daily life for many months   |

Sadly, not every relationship survives such a significant bereavement. The trauma and circumstances of the death of a child may exacerbate existing tensions and stresses. When things are difficult, it's worth remembering that our partner is our closest ally in surviving the death of our child. If we are able to find ways of coping with our grief and with each other, we may be able to work through this horrendous loss together.

## **Our child's mother**

While both mothers and fathers grieve for a child, it is worth bearing in mind that a biological mother has had a physical bond with her child through pregnancy and childbirth that we do not share in the same direct way. A mother's grief can be visceral. Hormones can also play a role.

If we are living with our child's mother, it may sometimes feel that support from others is directed more towards her than to us as the father. The more open we are with our feelings, the more people will realise that we too are grieving.

## Other children

If we have other children, they will be trying to deal with the loss of their sibling in their own way. Children may show their grief differently to adults, but their suffering will be just as deep. We may find it hard to understand what is going on with them, especially teenagers and older children. We need to support and guide them in any way we can, according to their age and maturity, and include them when we talk about their sibling who died.

If we have lost our only child, or all of our children have died, we may suffer an intense double grief: both the loss of our child and, if we have no grandchildren, the loss of our family's future. It may take us some time to find our footing and a way forward.

## Helping ourselves

*"I was tempted to make immediate decisions, like scattering our child's ashes or clearing their room. Then it struck me that there is no rush. It has been better to wait and feel my way through. Now I'm in calmer waters, I can think straight and make better choices."*

## Keeping our child's memory alive

We may wish to spend some time on activities and projects centred on the memory of our child. These could be private and mostly for us personally, such as putting together a photo album or arranging for a tree to be planted, or they could be for the benefit of others.

Many of us want something positive to come out of something so terrible. We might feel moved to do something useful related to our child's death, such as raising public awareness about a health condition, raising money for a charity, or campaigning about something important to us or our child. This gives us a focus and honours our child's name and memory.

On a more personal level, birthdays, anniversaries, Christmas, Father's Day and other times of celebration can be hard, particularly in the first few years. Whenever there is a gathering of any kind, the fact that our child is missing can feel particularly stark. We may want to find ways to include the memory of our child on these occasions. This could be as simple as raising a glass or telling stories about them.

## Our health

Grief is a whole-body experience. The stress and emotional turmoil of grief can have an impact on our physical health. We can help ourselves by looking after our bodies: running, walking, going to the gym, team sports, yoga, or whatever appeals to us. We can try to eat healthy foods and get enough sleep. Even if we feel unable to do much, a little can make a big difference.

Returning to activities we used to enjoy can be helpful. Making or fixing things can give us a sense of fulfilment, and the process can give us peace of mind. All of this is important for our mental health.

## Going back to work

*“I was glad to get back to work. In the beginning it was difficult, but the normality of working propelled me through the day.”*

We may return to work soon after the death of our child. Sometimes the workplace can feel a relief from the pressures at home. Returning to some of our normal routines, roles and responsibilities may be helpful.

On the other hand, it can be difficult to face colleagues, customers and contacts, when we do not know what to say to them and, similarly, they might not know what to say to us. Some will express their sympathy, but others will be embarrassed, anxious and even avoid us altogether. Thankfully, there are likely to be those who show kindness, even when we are not easy to be with. Hopefully there will be at least someone who is willing to listen when we want to talk about our child.

## Staying in touch with people

Some of us do not go out to work. We may work from home, or we may be unemployed, disabled or retired. If we are around the home for much of the day, we will have fewer opportunities to interact with other people. This can leave us isolated with our thoughts and grief. It may be helpful to make arrangements to see friends, to try to accept invitations to social events, or to have regular digital or phone contact with family members and friends, so that we do not feel that we are walking this road alone.

We can feel torn about accepting invitations to go out. We suspect there is little chance we'd be able to enjoy it much, but being in company can be good for us.



We may agree to go, but decide to let everyone know that we may have to leave with little warning.

Contact with family and friends who are prepared to accept that we will not be very good company at times can be very helpful. On the other hand, we may find that some friends cannot cope with our situation. Over time, or sometimes very quickly, many of us find that our social circle changes.

It can be helpful to take some control over our social life. Some of us find it beneficial to join clubs, groups or associations. These do not have to be related to our grief. Doing activities that we enjoy or would like to learn in company with others can help prevent us from becoming isolated. Volunteering can also be a good idea, when we feel ready.

## **Social media**

We can write about our child on social media. People who know us can offer their support and comments. This can be very encouraging.

On the other hand, not everyone who uses social media will care about us or our child. We can waste a lot of energy getting into a spat or dealing with unkindness. If we find that social media is getting us down, we can block the offending people or at least ignore them. Sometimes we might choose to step away for a while.

## **Finding support**

### **Other bereaved fathers**

While some of us are comfortable opening our hearts to others and talking about our deep sorrow, many of us do not find this comes naturally at all. It may help to spend time with other bereaved fathers. Being in their company will strengthen us. It is good to know that we stand together. In particular, fathers who have been bereaved for some months or years know the landscape of grief and can act as a guide for us. In the future, we might even become a mentor to another man whose child has more recently died.

### **The Compassionate Friends (TCF)**

One place where we can meet bereaved parents, and fathers specifically, is The Compassionate Friends. TCF organises meetings, walks and other social activities, both in person and digitally, some exclusively for fathers. There are also private Facebook and WhatsApp groups.

## Support with overwhelming grief

Grief can be very slow to soften. We can feel flat and weighed down by sorrow for a long while. We may begin to worry that it will never get any easier. This is completely natural.

It is not unusual for a grieving father to find that the intensity and turmoil of their grief is overwhelming. However, if our grief feels too much to bear, if we are self-harming or having thoughts of suicide, then we need to get some support. There are various organisations that can help, or we might wish to speak with our GP. (Find support on the right hand page)

## Living with memories

**Our child is gone from our daily life and we miss them immensely. Their death is probably one of the most painful experiences we will ever endure. It has propelled us into a future that we have not chosen.**

**We feel their absence so acutely. Our deep sadness and sense of loss for our child can often hit us unexpectedly. Yet we will also discover that our feelings are not always so raw. Most of us find that we are gradually able to resume the activities of daily living. There is still joy to be found in spite of our pain. Surprising as it may seem at the start of our bereavement journey, we may even be able to do something useful as a result of our grief. Life still has meaning, and our child is still a part of that life. Although we can no longer see them, we can carry their memories with us always. Love lives on.**

## Further reading

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) have 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
- Grieving couples
- Grief in blended and step families
- The bereaved lone parent
- Remembering our child (leaflet and handbook)

TCF leaflets can be read and downloaded at this link: [tcf.org.uk/leaflets](https://tcf.org.uk/leaflets)

Printed copies are available from the office, free of charge for bereaved parents (see contact details on the back page).



## Finding support

### Helplines

**The Compassionate Friends** - 0345 123 2304 - calls are always answered by a bereaved parent

**Samaritans** - 116 123 - call free any time of the day or night

**Cruise Bereavement Support** - 0808 808 1677

### Bereavement support specifically for bereaved fathers

**strongmen.org.uk** - Strong Men is for men who have lost parents, partners, siblings and children

**guysandgrief.com** - Guys and Grief is a podcast by men who have experienced infant or pregnancy loss

**daddyswithangels.org** - Daddies with Angels offers online person-to-person support and access to support groups for bereaved fathers

**grievingdads.com** - Grieving Dads is a website that links to books, personal coaching, workshops and on-line courses for fathers who have lost children at any age, including miscarriage and stillbirth

**lullabytrust.org.uk/bereavement-support/fathers-partners-co-parents**  
- The Lullaby Trust provides support to anyone who has experienced the sudden loss of a baby or young child

**parentingqueer.co.uk/support-groups** - The Queer Parenting Partnership runs a Facebook support group for LGBTQ+ parents who have suffered pregnancy loss

### TCF leaflets

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) have published a range of leaflets to support parents in the aftermath of a child's death. TCF leaflets can be read and downloaded at this link: **tcf.org.uk/leaflets**



# The Compassionate Friends

Call our National Helpline

**0345 123 2304**

*The helpline is open as often as possible between 10am – 4pm and 7pm – 10pm every day. Calls are answered by a volunteer who is a bereaved parent.*

Email our National Helpline

**helpline@tcf.org.uk**

For more information and support visit

**tcf.org.uk**

Find us on social media

**f @tcf.org.uk**

**X @TCFcharityUK**

**@thecompassionatefriendsuk**

**in @compassionate-friends-uk**

General enquiries

**0345 120 3785**

**info@tcf.org.uk**

TCF library

**0345 120 3785**

**library@tcf.org.uk**



**Annabelle - 28.10.2008 - 05.04.2018**

*Our daughter is so loved and missed with every breath we take. Our Love for Annabelle is for life. Our Grief is for life. Our Bond is Unbreakable and Forever. We will always talk about Annabelle and say her name. We have beautiful memories, the happiest 9 years of our lives. Though we cannot see our daughter her love is still our guide, and she is still in our hearts. We will always honour Annabelle's life.*

Helen Shaw & Terry Brookes

Founder: The Revd Canon Dr Simon Stephens OBE President: The Countess Mountbatten of Burma  
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