



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

The death of our child affects us as no other death can. However deeply we have loved anyone else who has died, we now face a loss that seems to be outside the natural order of things.

Children are supposed to bury their parents, not the other way around. We are devastated. The unthinkable has happened: our child has died, and we are still alive. How can such a thing be? Every parent must face this terrible ordeal of grief when their child dies, but how we as fathers deal with our feelings can differ from how mothers grieve.

How grief affects us

Grief affects everyone in many ways; we may experience shock, despair, anger and guilt. This is natural. These emotions do not appear in any set order; sometimes one feeling dominates the others. Our emotions may swing between numbness and agony, and we can feel so confused. We can suffer from lethargy, sleeplessness and illness, making it a struggle to face the obligations of each day. For a while at least it can be almost impossible to summon up any real interest in anything other than our loss. Nothing else seems to matter. Yet at other times we may feel guilty because we have laughed at a funny situation, or have not thought of our grief for just a brief moment. We may struggle to find the words to describe how we feel.

As adult males facing this tidal wave of emotions, we may feel that we are expected to keep a lid on our sorrow, to protect those around us and to be “strong”. We may struggle to acknowledge or show

our real emotions because we are concerned about what others may think. We may also feel we need to be there for other family members and put their grief above our own. Yet we too need to allow ourselves to acknowledge our own thoughts, feelings and the tremendous sorrow we carry and to permit ourselves to cry or sob. It is okay to be not okay, and to express this to those who we trust and with whom we feel comfortable.

Blame, guilt and anger are often an integral part of our grieving. We may blame ourselves for our child's death, for not having been able to keep them well or safe from harm. Sometimes our anger turns outwards as we seek someone whom we might blame for this heart-breaking tragedy. The pain of our loss can be so great that we can feel real anger, even fury, towards another person or organisation. Maybe these feelings are justified by the circumstances of our child's death, or they could perhaps be due more to the feelings of pain, loss and anger spilling over.

Finding ways to cope safely with our feelings is important for our own wellbeing and for those around us, and each of us will find our own ways of trying to cope. Many of us find that being active helps, whether exercise, sport, or doing things with our hands such as gardening, cooking, art, woodworking or repairs. We may find that being around other bereaved fathers or others who have experienced loss, even if we are not always talking directly about our feelings, strengthens us through the solidarity of our shared experience of loss.

(The Compassionate Friends organises support meetings, walks and other social activities, both in person and digitally, for bereaved parents, some of which are exclusively for fathers. Being with others can help us feel less isolated and alone with our grief).

If we find ourselves overwhelmed with emotion and despair, particularly if any unexpressed sorrow turns into displaced anger, or if we find ourselves turning to alcohol or other substances in order to cope with the pain, we could consider getting other support. Our GP might be able to signpost us to further help, such as counselling. This support can strengthen us and allow a safe outlet for our emotions, at least in the short term, as we adjust to the enormous changes caused by our child's death. This could be the case no matter what the cause – if their death was sudden and unexpected, such as from suicide or as the result of an accident or crime, or if it was due to illness or a life-limiting condition.

Our household

Those of us living with a partner will have had experience of giving and receiving comfort when a difficulty arose, such as illness or some problem with work. The death of a child, however, can cause both partners to feel so overwhelmed by grief that it becomes almost impossible for either of us to lessen the pain and sorrow felt by the other. Additionally, our feelings are thrown around so ferociously when our child dies, a couple will not always be in the same emotional state, experiencing the same intensity of grief, at the same time. On occasion we may feel as though we don't know our partner any more. We will probably grieve in very different ways, at least at times. These moments of being out of step with one another can cause one partner to feel that the other is being insensitive to their feelings, or cause us to feel alone in the relationship. Misunderstandings can drive a wedge between us.

The more we are able to communicate with each other, the better. It can help to remember that our partner is the closest ally we have in surviving the death of our child, as they are living through the same terrible loss. It is important to accept that we both need

to deal with grief in our own way and try to respect the process our partner is going through. If we tend to remain silent, or if we immerse ourselves in activity to occupy our time, our partner may not realise just how deeply we are grieving. On the other hand, we may resist giving our full attention to our partner's tears, perhaps as we do not know what to say or fear we will lose the hold we have over our own sorrow and therefore fall into despair ourselves. We may feel responsible for trying to "fix" our partner's grief whereas simply being there with them is what is most needed.

Our relationship with our child will have been somewhat different to their mother's, whether or not we have been living with her. A mother has a physical bond through pregnancy and childbirth that we do not share in the same direct way. On the other hand, we may have been the main carer for our child, making their loss from our lives very acute. Sometimes it may feel that the support from others is directed more to the mother than to us as the father. We may need to voice our thoughts and seek out support, reassurance and understanding of how we are feeling.

If we are living with the mother of our child, we may find that one of us feels differently about physical intimacy following our loss. It is common for individuals and couples to find our sexual desires and sexual activity are impacted significantly by our loss, although this is usually temporary. We may eventually wish to raise the issue in a gentle and sensitive way. In some cases, we may need to seek professional support to help us and our partner with this aspect of our grief.

Some of us are part of a blended family where two partners, each with our own children, are living together. This can add a layer of complexity following the death of our child. It may make it harder to express our feelings about the loss of our child.

Unfortunately, relationship and marriage breakdowns are not uncommon following the death of a child. This may be partly due to lack of communication. The trauma and circumstances of losing a child can exacerbate existing tensions and stresses. Keeping open the lines of communication and being understanding of each other's pain is even more important than ever. It might not be easy but it is worthwhile, as separation or extreme discord would bring the loss of the only other person who can share all of our grief.

For those of us without a partner, we may face additional worries, and may have no close adult with whom we can share our pain. If in these circumstances we have other children to look after, our everyday challenges could include running the home as well as holding down a job.

If we have surviving children, they will be coping with the loss of their sibling and will need our special care. They will be trying to deal with the loss of their sibling in their own way, and we may be mystified as what is going on with them, especially with teenagers and older children. We need to support and guide them in any way we can, according to their age, and try to include them when we talk about their sibling who died. Children may show their grief in less obvious ways to adults, but their suffering will be just as deep.

If we have been bereaved of 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. We may find that we withdraw from the world or throw ourselves into activity, but still struggle to find meaning in our life. It may take us some time to find our footing and a way forward.

Returning to work

We may return to work soon after the funeral of our child. This might be out of financial necessity or because we are afraid of losing our job. Sometimes the workplace can seem a relief from the pressures at home. Returning to some of our normal routines, roles and responsibilities may be helpful. If we are fortunate, our employer will allow us to ease back into our job on a part- or flexi-time arrangement if that will suit us better. We may need to move to a different area of work if, for instance, we are dealing face-to-face with members of the public, and are finding this too painful. Some of us may throw ourselves back into our former work whilst others may find it impossible to go back to the same job.

Often it will be difficult to face colleagues, customers and contacts, when we do not know what to say to them and they 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; they are willing to listen when we feel a need to talk about our child, both in the early days of our return to work and as time passes. It can help to agree with our employer or HR Department in advance of our return to work how our loss will be communicated to work colleagues and clients. This can help us manage the sympathy offered to us by others.

Avoiding isolation

Some of us do not go out to work. We may work from home, for all or some of our employment. We may be unemployed, disabled or retired. Whatever the reason, we will be around the house for much of the day, and this can bring other problems. There will be

less opportunity to interact with other people. 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 become isolated in our grief.

If our child was young, we may have spent a lot of time taking them to activities they enjoyed. This would have brought us into friendship with a circle of parents doing the same for their children. We might quickly lose contact with them now; everything has changed overnight. This can result in a further sense of isolation and loss.

Contact with family and friends who are prepared to accept that we will not be very good company at times can be extremely helpful. If we find that some friends cannot cope with our situation, we may need to accept that we lose them as friends, at least for the time being. Over time, many of us find that our circle of friends changes.

Some of us find it beneficial to join a club, group or association. This does not have to be related to our grief. Doing activities that we enjoy or would like to learn in company with others is another way of preventing ourselves from becoming isolated.

Taking care of ourselves

Our physical wellbeing can be helpful for us in trying to manage the emotional and mental aspects of grief. It can be beneficial to engage in some form of light exercise which will leave us tired and ready for sleep. At times we can think that we have no energy to participate in activities, but if we push ourselves, we can find relief from stress, and feel better afterwards.

We should feel no guilt about resuming some enjoyable leisure pastimes. We may also derive benefit from developing some

different interests, to help us achieve a new normality in a life without our child.

Many of us are helped by writing down our feelings, in whatever form suits us. It does not matter if we do this just for ourselves or for others to read.

Remembering our child

If we are our child's legal next of kin, we will need to decide what to do with our child's possessions, in consultation with our partner if we have one. This includes not only material items, but also the "footprints" they have left in the digital world, such as social media pages and blogs. How we handle all of this is a very personal decision, although again it is helpful that we proceed in harmony as far as possible with our child's mother, whether or not they are our partner at present, along with our other children, depending on their ages and wishes to be involved. Some of us will want to preserve many if not all signs of our child's presence; others will want to clear the space, acknowledging with deep sadness that our child has gone and will not return. Many of us will find the middle ground. How we feel about their possessions and pictures may change over time.

We may choose to spend some time on activities and projects centred on the memory of our child. This could be as simple as putting together a photo album, to a larger project such as raising money for an appropriate charity or building something as a remembrance. These can be positive outlets for our energies and bring comfort as we honour our child. However, we may wish to honour and remember our child in more private ways.

Birthdays, anniversaries, Christmas, Father's Day and other days of celebration are hard for us. The first few years can be particularly painful. In fact, whenever there is a family gathering of any kind,

there will always be a member of the family missing, and we will have an underlying feeling of sadness at these events. Anticipating and planning for upcoming dates and events can help us manage these emotionally difficult situations.

A different future

Our child is gone from our daily life, and we miss them. We will feel their absence so acutely at times. Our deep sadness and sense of loss for our child can often hit us unexpectedly. Yet we will also discover as time goes by that our feelings are not always so raw. We each grieve in our own way. Most of us find that we are gradually able to resume other activities and find pleasure in them, in spite of our loss. It does not mean that we are minimising the life of our child; finding joy in our present and future is not a sign that we no longer value or miss them. We will remember them with love and carry their memories with us always.

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*
- *A Mother's Grief*
- *Grief in Blended and Step Families*
- *Our Surviving Children*
- *Back to Work*
- *Childless Parents (for parents who have no surviving children)*
- *Remembering Our Child (Leaflet and Handbook)*
- *Our Child, Social Media and Their Digital Legacy*

TCF leaflets can be read and downloaded at this link:

[tcf.org.uk/leaflets](https://www.tcf.org.uk/leaflets)

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



The Compassionate Friends

Call our National Helpline

0345 123 2304

*The helpline is open from 10am - 4pm and 7pm - 11pm every day.
Calls are always answered by a parent whose child has died.*

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

t @TCFcharityUK

@thecompassionatefriendsuk

General enquiries

0345 120 3785

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TCF library

0345 120 3785

library@tcf.org.uk

*Sponsored in loving memory of
Dylan Cope 13/04/2013 to 14/12/2022,
cherished son and brother. Forever 9,
forever in our hearts and minds.*

