



The
Compassionate
Friends

A mother's grief

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

A mother's grief

Our lives change forever when we first become mothers. Whether our baby was born within the previous 6 months or even 60 years ago, we remember the arrival of this little human being of our own flesh and blood who relied on us for care, love and protection.

When a child is young, they become our highest priority. We give up sleep, energy, privacy, time and interests, putting our child's needs ahead of our own. We might put a career on hold, at least temporarily. Motherhood can expand our sense of who we are and what we might become. We will have been through a period of adjustment in our new role as a parent.

The death of our child, from whatever cause, at whatever age, and no matter how long ago, is again life-changing. Perhaps we feel that we have lost a part of ourselves, because of the way our child was entwined with our identity. We are heartbroken and devastated. We may suffer from an overwhelming sense of failure. After all, we thought that we could protect them, but we were not able to. Whether we have been through a long all-consuming battle with our child's illness or suffer from the trauma that a sudden death brings, the circumstances in which they died will be heartbreaking for us. We may be struggling to understand the despair that led our child to suicide, or the events that caused an avoidable death.

Whatever age our child was when they died, we may feel angry at the unfairness of their death. This is against the natural order. Children should not die before their parents. We are also grieving for the future, which will not be what we had imagined it to be.

Our physical loss

“The Chinese count the first nine months in the womb as part of their baby’s age. My connection with my little one began earlier than with anyone else, including my partner. Other people also mourn my child, but my own loss is uniquely painful.”

Before giving birth to our children, we carried them in our wombs. Our bodies were a source of nourishment. There is an actual physical connection between a mother and her unborn baby. It is unsurprising then that many of us, at least in the early days of our bereavement, feel the loss of our child as an intense physical pain. The anniversaries of their birthday can become lonely and difficult times, because these particular memories are special to us. This is something that even close family members or friends may not be able to fully comprehend.

If we have been bereaved of a small or school-aged child, or an adult child with special needs, our life may now change considerably. There may be blank spaces in our daily routine that we struggle to fill. These times will always remind us of the absence of our dear child. If we have been bereaved of an adult child, they may have been living their own life separately from us in their own home, perhaps with a partner or children of their own. Our relationship may have developed into a mature friendship; it might have been close or may have been more distant. We miss them and the interactions we had together, however regular or sporadic they might have been. We may also need to adjust to changes in our relationship with their family if they had one. If our child was an adult, we may miss the support they gave us as well as their company or sharing an interest with them that was our special bond.

Some of us have adopted or fostered our child, cherishing them as any birth children. These mothers often say that their child grew in their hearts, as they went through the process of longing and waiting for them. Bereavement can bring back the pain of the earlier distress of infertility, before the child joined the family. This is an added sadness.



Caring for our child

As mothers, our care for our young child was practical as well as emotional. We have fed them, bathed them, changed and dressed them, cuddled them and carried them in our arms. Even if this was decades ago, it is still part of our shared life story. When our child dies, for many of us, our instinct is to want to go on caring for them as much as possible. Some mothers wish to hold their deceased child, wash and dress them, and perhaps place them in the coffin themselves, as a final act of tender physical care. Other mothers will not choose to do this, finding it too excruciatingly painful. Some mothers find the giving up of their child's body an agonising experience, and the hurt remains for a long time.

Although we may not see it at the time, the necessary procedures that follow on the death of our child in preparing for the funeral could be looked upon as our continuation of caring. Sadly, some parents have no body to see, touch or bury, and the conventional rituals of mourning are missed. Also, if our child had a partner, then they will have been their next of kin and we might not have been actively involved in their care or the funeral arrangements. This might be difficult to come to terms with. No matter what their age was, in some respects they are always going to be our "baby". The process of giving birth created a unique bond.

Coping with our grief

"In the first few years after my son died, I found social events with women of my age difficult. They naturally talked about their children constantly. I was so envious that they still had all of their children."

Being bereaved of a child is one of the hardest griefs to cope with. Finding our way through is going to take time and patience with ourselves. We will probably experience grief as rather like a rollercoaster. There are times when we might feel a few moments of calm, and other times when the pain and heartbreak of our loss are a real torment. Gradually, though, most of us discover that the intensity of grief lessens as we adjust to this hard, unwelcome reality.

Being able to speak honestly about our grief in a safe, supportive environment helps many of us. We are not as alone as we might have imagined.

A family member or friend who is prepared to listen as we talk about our child can help ease our pain. Particularly in the early days of our bereavement, if we give ourselves space by letting other people help, then we will gradually become stronger and more able to carry on.

Speaking with other bereaved parents can also be a great help. The Compassionate Friends (TCF) organises support groups, both online and in person. There is more information about our services, all organised and led by bereaved parents, on the last pages of this leaflet.

Some of us face additional issues, such as estrangement from family members, loss of friends, and perhaps difficulties with either access or new responsibilities for our grandchildren. For these and other topics, including more about coping with grief, please see the list of information leaflets at the end of the text.

“Do not hurry as you walk with grief; It does not help the journey. Walk slowly, pausing often. Take time; be gentle as you walk with grief.” (Author unknown)

Our surviving children

If we have other children, our relationship with them and the care they need will obviously depend on their age and maturity. They too are grieving. Being bereaved of a sibling, at any age, can have a major impact. Our children need the opportunity to experience and express their feelings of grief, including sadness, anger, relief and confusion. They need support and encouragement to understand what has happened, identify their feelings, release their emotions and embrace their sibling's memory.

Young and school-aged children will continue to need our physical care. Keeping up with routines can provide a structure for them and ourselves. They will benefit from the company of others, whether they are playing a game with friends or talking with someone they trust about what has happened.

Some of us struggle to support our other children, especially in the early days. The circumstances that led up to our child's death, and how they died, may have left us too overwhelmed by our own shock and pain. Later on, we may feel guilty that we were not always able to support our children to the extent that we would have wished. We recognise that this was because at times our grief overwhelmed us, but knowing this doesn't always remove our regret. We should be kind to ourselves; we have been managing the best we can in an immensely difficult situation. Hopefully there are other people involved in their lives – friends, other family members, teachers or colleagues – who have also been there for our children.

We may have an urge to overprotect our surviving children. We can find it difficult to allow them to lead a normal life, and to let them out of our sight. This is true especially if we feel that the death of our child could have been avoided, such as if it was due to a road traffic incident, an accident or through suicide.

“If my surviving child does not contact me or respond to my messages quickly, I imagine that the worst has happened. I try to hide my crippling anxiety.”

When our child has died as a result of illness, their siblings may carry their own secret fears that they too will become ill and die. If it was an older sibling who died, they may dread that something will happen to them when they reach that same age. It is not unknown for siblings to wonder if their parents would have preferred for them to die instead of their sibling – survivor guilt is very common after all deaths. We need to try to understand what is going through their minds and allay their fears.

Many families include children from previous relationships. We may be left to care for children who are not biologically our own, while a child we gave birth to is no longer with us.

Mothers bereaved of their only child or all of their children

Following this bereavement, we may now have no living children. Our hopes and dreams for future generations are ended. When we have lost our only child or all of our children, our new life is suddenly empty and frightening.

We need to survive – to be there for everyone around us, and indeed for ourselves. If we are in the lonely position of being the only survivor, then we need to persevere in order to bear witness to the fact that our child did live, and that they were special, precious and loved. Over the years our memories, though bittersweet at times, will become sources of comfort.

For more on this, see the TCF leaflet: *For parents bereaved of an only child or all of their children*

Difficulties in grieving with our partner

“My spouse and I are trying the best we can to be there for each other, but we find that we’re sometimes upset at different times. I might need to talk and let out my feelings, whereas at that moment they want to get on with other things. Other times, our role is reversed. We just try to take it a day at a time and respect each other’s needs of the moment.”

In a loving relationship we try to support and care for one other through good times and bad. Usually, when we are down, our partner will attempt to lift our spirits. But when our child dies, we are both faced with unimaginable grief and despair which are liable to engulf us as individuals. Additionally, we may experience and express our grief so differently that our relationship becomes strained. This applies whether or not they were the biological parent of our child.

Although there are many common elements in grief, we all grieve in our own way and at our own pace. Our partner or spouse may grieve in a way that is very different from us. Perhaps we express our emotions openly and want to talk, but they prefer not to talk about it, or at least not with us.

They may try to distract themselves from their pain, while we have a great need to communicate about it. We may find ourselves drawn to a support group or friends in whom we can confide, while they seem to be keeping busy with other things. We are both suffering intensely from our grief, but expressing and coping with it differently.

As mothers, we may have been used to being the person who makes things better and sorts things out. Now we may find that the intensity of our partner's grief is unbearable, and we cannot hold their pain as well as our own.

Because of these differences and possibly other factors, it is not unusual to have some difficulties in a relationship with our "significant other" following our bereavement. As much as we wish to share our loss and support each other, it is not always so simple.

Our love, patience and understanding for each other is what will see us through. Some of us find that at times our partner may need space, spending time alone, pursuing leisure activities, or meeting friends. The same applies to ourselves. Some parents may temporarily spend more time at work, hoping to escape the grief at home. Recognising that we are each grieving in our own way and respecting each other's needs seems to be the best approach for getting through this. We may find in time that our relationship has been strengthened and deepened, although for some of us, the relationship sadly does not survive.

Coping alone

Some of us are lone parents. Not only do we have to fill the role of both parents to any surviving children, but we also have no partner to be with us in our lowest moments. We may find that this death reminds us of earlier losses, perhaps even the loss of our child's other parent, and we may feel doubly bereaved. In this situation, we urgently need the support of other adults, whether relatives, friends or professionals. If we are now childless, the isolation is almost unbearable, and we may question our continuing identity as a mother.

TCF's leaflet *The bereaved lone parent* has more on this topic.

Others in the family, particularly our own parents

Everybody grieves in their own way. Our own parents have lost their grandchild and will be grieving. In addition, as they watch us, their daughter, suffering, they may not know how to react to us or cope with our intense grief. Some of us have parents who have been able to support us emotionally and practically, whereas others discover that our parents draw back from the pain. At times, we might feel that we need to protect our parents from seeing how much pain we are in. We might feel that in some respects we have lost our own mother – that she is unavailable to us because of her grief or because she is grieving in a different way which we do not understand. If we are in a caring or supportive role for elderly parents, we may now find it more difficult to offer this support.

All of this can increase our sense of isolation and be very unsettling. Hopefully there are other people in our social circle – a partner, other family members, or close friends – who are able to be the emotional support we need at this vulnerable time.

Children born after the death of their sibling

“I welcomed the arrival of my next baby, but I also found my feelings were somehow mixed. I’m still grieving. Having a new baby did not replace my child who died.”

If we have another baby after our child has died, we may be surprised by how our feelings are interwoven and how the past death is also part of the new birth. Some mothers experience vivid flashbacks during pregnancy or labour. Although we are looking forward to the birth of our new baby, we may find ourselves suffering extremes of anxiety and fear, and a loss of confidence. This can make the early weeks and months fraught. Bonding with the new baby may be affected. Lack of sleep following the birth can add to the weariness which the earlier bereavement brought, but we can be helped by settling into a new routine.

Sometimes relatives or friends, however well meaning, can be extraordinarily insensitive. They may think, or even say, that the new baby will somehow wipe out the earlier loss, and that everything will be all right when we have a replacement. It is hard to explain that this baby can never replace the child who has died. Each child is a unique individual, and not a substitute for their deceased sibling, who will be missed forever by us.

The way forward

Our child's death has left a great gap in our lives that can never be filled. They are always with us in our thoughts and hearts. We each find our own way through our grief, learning to live in these changed circumstances whilst cherishing the memory of our dear child who we miss so much. In this new place, we can discover that it is possible to find joy in our present and future. At the same time, our love for our child endures and flourishes. They remain our dearly loved child forever, and we are forever their mother.

Further reading

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) have 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*
- *Grieving couples*
- *My child has died – how do I talk about my grief?*
- *Remembering our child (leaflet and handbook)*
- *Our surviving children: for parents with surviving children under 18 years old*
- *Our surviving adult children*
- *Grieving child loss in blended and step-families*
- *Helping our grandchildren when our child has died*

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

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t @TCFcharityUK

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General enquiries

0345 120 3785

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TCF library

0345 120 3785

library@tcf.org.uk

For Tobi, with all my love, mum x
Tobi Alice Stevens 22.02.2001 - 04.12.2020