



The  
Compassionate  
Friends

**After suicide**

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

# After suicide

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**Every year many young people, faced with a crisis, feel that they cannot bear to go on living. Most will survive a suicide attempt; some will not. The death of a child is always shattering, but suicide is a particularly cruel form of death for the surviving family and friends. We are often left with the seemingly unanswerable question, Why?**

Even if a note has been found which attempts to explain this drastic action, our minds regularly go over and over what we could have done to prevent this tragedy. We feel a strong sense of guilt. What was wrong with our parenting that led to this despair? How have we failed our children in their upbringing? They were our loved children.

For us families of children who have died from suicide, we have the additional stress of coping with the police, post-mortem, inquest, media and reactions of others. Unfortunately, suicide is still viewed unsympathetically by many people. We sometimes have to listen to thoughtless comments, however well meaning, such as how selfish are those who take their own lives. (See The Compassionate Friends (TCF) leaflet, Coping with judgemental attitudes.) Such statements are wounding for us, as we know that suicidal men and women often leave notes that show that they genuinely believe that their families will be better off without them.

## The early days

No parent is ever prepared for the death of their child. Even for those families who have lived for years with mental or physical illness, and/or repeated attempts at self-destruction, the actual death is a profound shock. Sometimes it comes with no warning; the police are at the door telling us something we can hardly begin to believe. Some parents may not have seen their child for months or even years; for others, their lives were closely entwined and their child lived, and perhaps died, in the family

home. Each suicide has its own story, but the common threads are the feelings of numbness, shock and disbelief. Then comes the relentless questioning.

Most parents are tormented by looking for reasons for their child's decision, and there is nearly always a huge element of self-blame in the questions that chase round in our minds. Close family and friends will sometimes feel that we are being too harsh on ourselves, and they do not understand our grief. On the other hand, sometimes we may feel that they are blaming us. We are filled with anger and we seek for convincing explanations – a broken relationship, inadequate mental health care, bullying, pressure of exams, employment problems, online suicide chatrooms etc. How could they have done this to themselves and us? We feel a continuing need to search for explanations.

## The funeral and memorial service

Careful preparation and guidance, from sympathetic family, friends or ministers of religion, can help us to focus on our child's life rather than the manner of his or her death. A memorial service can be held at a later date, which will provide us with enough time to consider an appropriate thanksgiving for remembering our child. Some of our children may have made their wishes known before they died, perhaps even on social media postings, and we can draw comfort from complying with these. Their friends and siblings can be a good source of help in suggestions for readings and music.

## The inquest

An inquest or investigation will be held following a death by suicide. Usually the proceedings are opened immediately, and the actual hearing can take place many months after the death. Waiting for and then taking part in the inquest will evoke strong emotions and vivid memories. We may not agree with the verdict, which adds to our distress.

As death from suicide inevitably involves the police and, quite likely, the Coroner (the Procurator Fiscal in Scotland), there is frequently media interest, as the Coroner's Court is open to the press and public.

It is a good idea to have a brief statement ready for release, so that accurate information is available.

We may be asked for a photograph, which not every parent would wish to provide. However the media may find photographs of our child on social media, so it may be best to offer a photograph of our choice. We should ask the media to respect our need for privacy in our grief. We may be assigned a Police Liaison Officer to give us support.

TCF has produced a series of factsheets with detailed advice about preparation for and coping with inquests in England and Wales, as well as the Investigation of Sudden Deaths in Scotland. See: [tcf.org.uk/legalhelp](https://tcf.org.uk/legalhelp)

## The impact on the family

Every death leaves a huge gap in our family: someone is missing and can never be replaced. Suicide was in the past a taboo subject. Until 1961, it was a crime in the UK. Although attitudes have changed, there can be still elements of fear and shame for families bereaved by suicide. Close friends and family may feel uncomfortable about the tragedy, and this can lead to isolation. We may encounter people (even amongst other bereaved parents) who believe that our grief is less valid, because our child apparently chose to die.

There can be differences within the immediate family, in the way each person perceives the death. Misunderstandings may arise and estrangement can occur between partners who thought themselves to be close. It takes a great deal of determination to remain positive during conflict, and have respect for each other's point of view. There are often differences in the way we grieve. We all have to make our own journey through grief, and we should allow other members of the family to do the same. Support from close friends or counsellors may be very helpful as we struggle with emotional upheaval. Often our child's friends can be a source of strength for us. For a single parent, coping on his or her own, this is a particularly lonely time. There are added difficulties, also, for parents who are left childless or for blended families. (For more on this, see TCF leaflets on *Childless parents*, *The bereaved lone parent*, and *Grieving child loss in blended and step families*.)

## Talking to our children

It will depend on the age of any surviving children as to how we explain to them about the death from suicide. While we may not wish to burden them with too many distressing details, it is essential that they hear the truth from us, rather than finding out in the school playground, in the newspaper, on television or on social media. We need to find a way of avoiding saying something that they will later discover was a lie or pretence. We will want to ensure that others close to them are giving a similar explanation. This may necessitate talking to their teachers, families of their friends, and any other leaders of leisure activities which they attend. As the children grow older, their understanding of death and suicide will mature, and we can talk to them in an age-appropriate way.

We should not try to explain too much to younger children, but reply sensitively to their questions, reassuring them that they are loved and we share their grief over the loss of their brother or sister. Older children may find it very difficult to articulate their thoughts and emotions with us or with other brothers and sisters. They may feel angry with their dead sibling for causing all this sadness and disruption for the family, and blame us or themselves for not being able to prevent the death. Sometimes they will fear that they too may come to want to end their lives. In fact, we parents can have a dread that this could happen again, and we watch our surviving children with anguish and foreboding. It is often better if they are able to talk to some trusted people outside the immediate family, as they may not want to add to our grief by communicating their fears to us.

Adult children sometimes feel that they cannot or should not feel as much grief as their parents. Their reaction may be to avoid mentioning their sibling, for fear of upsetting us. This can be hurtful, but we have to realise that they are trying to protect us. It can be helpful if they are able to meet siblings from other families who have suffered a similar tragedy.

# Surviving

As the weeks and months pass, and the inquest has taken place, our family will try to pick up the threads of life again. Things will never be the same, but we will arrive at a new normality without our child. We continue to feel the need to tell our story, and we have to discover which family members and close friends are able to support us in the longer term. We are often surprised at people's responses, and help can come from unexpected quarters. We have to be prepared to lose some friends who are unable to cope with our situation. We will make new friends who can accept us in our grieving state; we seek out other parents who have faced a similar tragedy, and they are able to empathise with us. It may be a good idea to write down our thoughts at this time, even if we show no-one the results; this can be in the form of a diary, an article or a poem. Writing a letter to our child, expressing our feelings, can also be part of the healing process.

If our son or daughter has died in the family home, we may be given advice by well-meaning relatives or friends to move house. We must think very carefully before making any major changes. A move may not stop the flashbacks that we endure after that dreadful event, and sometimes familiar surroundings filled with memories of happier times may help sustain us in our grief journey.

It is generally accepted that a death by suicide is one of the most difficult bereavements to cope with. For those of us who lost a child suddenly in traumatic circumstances and/or after ongoing difficulties, we may find that the intensity of grief continues on and on; we remain in a heightened state of mourning. We may find ourselves in the midst of "complicated grief". Please see the TCF leaflet on *Prolonged and Intense Grief* for more on this.

Meeting other parents through TCF, or other suicide support groups, who have suffered a loss through suicide will give us strength to carry on: we will be able to talk freely to others in a safe environment. This could be in person and/or via a digital forum. TCF has a private "bereaved by suicide" forum, a Facebook page, and holds supportive events for those who have lost children in this way. (See [tcf.org.uk/suicide](https://tcf.org.uk/suicide)).

Other national organisations that can be helpful for us in this specific type of loss.

### **Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide (SOBS)**

T: 0300 111 5065

[uksobs.org](http://uksobs.org)

### **Samaritans**

T: 116 123

[samaritans.org](http://samaritans.org)

### **Cruse Bereavement Care**

T: 0808 808 1677

[cruse.org.uk](http://cruse.org.uk)

A free booklet, *Help is at Hand: support after someone may have died by suicide* can be ordered via The Compassionate Friends or from here:

**[supportaftersuicide.org.uk](http://supportaftersuicide.org.uk)**

you will be able to talk to one of our volunteers, all of them bereaved parents. He or she could give you the number of a Local Contact and details of any Local Group which may meet regularly in your area. You could also find out from them details of our occasional retreats, when a small number of bereaved parents meet and talk in peaceful surroundings. Most years there is a weekend gathering, to which all members are invited.

Our website at **[tcf.org.uk](http://tcf.org.uk)** has more information about our services, how to join TCF as a donating member, private Facebook groups, and support forum where bereaved parents can ‘talk’ online . We also publish a quarterly journal, *Compassion*, containing articles and poems written by our members about their own experiences. And, if you would also like further reading, please contact our Library for details and recommendations of books on all aspects of bereavement.



# 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**

**info@tcf.org.uk**

TCF library

**0345 120 3785**

**library@tcf.org.uk**

*This leaflet is dedicated to our son  
Stevie-Lee Goodwin who sadly took his own life  
28/09/2017. Greatly loved and missed xx*

