



The  
Compassionate  
Friends

## Childless Parents

For parents who have no surviving children

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

# Childless Parents

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This leaflet is for those of us whose only child has died, or who have lost all of our children; we have used the word 'child' to cover both of these situations. Although there may be great differences in the circumstances of how they died, their age and other factors, as well as differences in our own personal situation, there are often similarities in the emotional impact on us as parents and in the practical aspects of our lives.

We childless parents discover early on that some of our feelings, and some of the issues we face, can be different and more intense from those confronting bereaved parents with surviving children. Some of us suffer a double grief: both the loss of our child and, if we have no grandchildren, the loss of our family's future. We are often deeply pre-occupied with the question "If I have no child, am I still a parent?". Here are some common problems and anxieties:

- We may withdraw from the company of our family and friends, especially from relationships where children are involved. We may find it difficult to relate to other people's children and grandchildren.

- We may feel ill at ease in our home, now empty and quiet. This feeling may be intensified by the possibility that we grieve in different ways from others close to us.
- We may give up caring for ourselves for a while, because our meaning of life seems to have disappeared.
- We may feel deeply frustrated because we can no longer carry out our parenting role. Looking after our partner or other people's children (even those who are closely related) does not compensate.
- We may feel lonely at the idea of facing the future without the grandchildren that we hoped our child would add to our family. The years ahead could look empty and joyless.
- Old age may also take on a frightening prospect without our child. Not all children offer companionship and support to their aging parents, but for us, this is not even a possibility.
- We may wonder who should be the beneficiary of our will and receive any inheritance.
- When we die, there will be no one to look after our precious trinkets, photographs and papers, of no intrinsic value, but treasured by ourselves. Again, while there is no guarantee that anyone's child will do so, for us there is no possibility of this taking place.

# Am I still a parent if I have no child?

The death of our only child, or all our children, will change the way we see ourselves, and the way others see us. We have lost our role of parent and may feel a lack of direction in our present life; it can take a long time to discover what our new role will be. There is no one now to call us “Mum” or “Dad”, and this deeply emphasises our sense of lost identity.

If our child was living at home, we face an abrupt end to our active parenting. Even if our son or daughter had left home, we perhaps still played a part as the parents of an adult child, with the special pleasures that often accompany this mature relationship.

Ultimately, after much self-questioning, confusion and pain, we come to acknowledge and understand that we were, are and always will be, parents of our dear child. Our caring now has to take other forms.

## Other people

Other people may ask questions that unintentionally cause us more pain, such as “Why did you have only one child?”, implying a kind of blame. They may try to comfort us by suggesting that we can have more children, or adopt. Perhaps in the future this may come about, but for the time being we are mourning our irreplaceable child. For those of us who are no longer able to have children, this is particularly cruel.

We notice very quickly that many parents live their lives through their children and grandchildren, and that their

conversation reflects this. They tell us in great detail about the things their offspring have said or done. We long to scream “shut up” at them, but know that this will probably result in a fall-out. In turn, these could be the people who will become embarrassed if we respond with tales of what our own, dead child used to do. How do we cope with them?

(For more on coping, see *The Compassionate Friends (TCF) leaflets: Living with Grief and Grief of the Newly Bereaved.*)

## Loss of companionship

An only child may well have grown to be a close friend and confidante, as well as a practical and emotional support in their adult years. The loss is therefore of an irreplaceable friendship as well as of a beloved son or daughter, especially when we are single or widowed. If our child had been living away from home, we will miss the phone calls, texts, emails, cards and news, even more so when we are elderly and our own life is physically restricted. We may become more vulnerable if we have depended on an adult child for physical or emotional support.

## Single and childless

Some bereaved parents are single. The loneliness can be particularly acute if our lives have revolved around our child. We may feel that our life has lost its meaning. We may feel we are blamed by the other parent for the death of our child. Negative feelings from the time of separation or divorce may be re-activated by the death of our child,

bringing additional pain. If we are widowed, we may feel that we have been left behind, without anyone to call our own. If we are single through choice, our family may only have been the two of us, with an especially close relationship; our sense of isolation is profound.

For childless parents, holidays, Christmas and other special occasions can be particularly lonely and painful, and many of us find that we cope better by going away, giving ourselves something different to look forward to when other people are occupied with families.

(For more on this, see the TCF Leaflet: *The Bereaved Lone Parent*.)

## The loss of more than one child

If we have lost all our children, either at one time or over a number of years, we often feel our world has ended, that we are cut off from life. Simultaneous deaths bring an overwhelming feeling of vulnerability and we discover that it can be bewildering to grieve for more than one person at a time. In multiple tragedies, 'survivor guilt' can be very strong. We will mourn each child in a different way, because each relationship is unique.

Where there have been consecutive deaths, we may find that the more recent loss brings earlier tragedies back to the surface. We can feel confused as to which child we are grieving for. We may feel a profound dread of going through it all again, and of a pattern being repeated if illness has been involved.

## Physical and mental restlessness

While many of us suffer from apathy and overwhelming exhaustion, or find it difficult to concentrate for any length of time, others may choose to focus on a particular and demanding project. Trapped emotional pressures, tension and stress often result in a frenetic restlessness, with an overpowering need to do something. In time, this may drive us to undertake some positive initiatives.

We may feel that we cannot expect friends to listen and support us in our grief, and that we desperately need another outlet for our innermost thoughts. Writing can be a valuable way to ease pain; some people use a diary to express emotions that are difficult to voice at the best of times. As with letters and other artistic pursuits such as poetry, music, painting and drawing, the significance is in the doing, even if no one else ever sees our work. Writing a detailed, loving account of our child's life and death can be both emotionally liberating, and a lasting tribute.

Some people may say to us that we are now 'free' to pursue our own interests - a career, further study, holidays, community commitments, etc. This is a very hurtful comment since it may be a long time before we can find pleasure in any of these 'freedoms'.

## Wills and finance

One of the practical changes that many of us have to make after the death of our child is to our Will. We should consider carefully where we want our fortunes, large or

small, to go, rather than let them disperse to relatives we hardly knew. A new executor may have to be chosen, and more thought given to the question of inheritance. Some of us leave a legacy to a charity or cause with which our child was closely connected, or which may be working to prevent further deaths of the sort that has taken our child. These decisions may feel urgent in the aftermath of our son's or daughter's death, but it is worth remembering that they can be amended later on.

## Looking to the future

When we face some of the complex suffering involved in the loss of an only child, or all our children, we may perhaps discover new strengths within ourselves. In the search for a life of renewed meaning, we may find some comfort through involvement in the lives of others - perhaps working to achieve some of the dreams which our child held dear. In this way we may reconcile the past with the present, giving ourselves a positive commitment to the future.

New interests also help us to regain some of our lost esteem and confidence. Some of us find that practical arrangements, for example creating an award or scholarship, involve us again in young lives in a positive way, and our child's name lives on.

Some childless parents feel a great longing to fill the home once again. We may be able to have further children ourselves, although the decision to have another child is often accompanied by anxieties. These fears will, however, be countered by the great joy and love that a new child brings. Later on, we may consider fostering or adoption.



As they grow up, children who were born after the death of their sibling often suffer a grief they find difficult to put into words although they never knew their elder brother or sister. To help them have a sense of the continuing family, we might put together a book or album about our dead child's life, and this sharing of stories can support the younger child in an imaginative way and help them feel they are part of the wider family story.

Some parents, especially those who cannot have more children of their own, have taken an informal but long-lasting interest in other children, who may be disadvantaged or refugee children. These options need a great deal of careful thought, but the commitment to such a child can bring great joy and benefit to everyone involved.

## Continuing support

Childless parents can find support through TCF and especially its 'Childless Parents Group'. This holds occasional meetings throughout the country, circulates its own newsletter, and offers online support groups for childless parents. The quarterly TCF publications *Compassion* and the *Childless Parents Newsletter* offer comfort and support to parents, in both reading and writing about shared experiences. The Postal Library has many books on grief in general, and some specifically for those who have no surviving children. TCF has its own website where you can find further details of support available.

**We all have to find our own way through grief. Learning to live with loss is not the same as minimising the life of our**

**child. Finding joy in our present and future is not a sign that we no longer value or miss our child, who was such a great part of our past.**

## Where can I go from here?

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. This leaflet aims to share the experiences of all of us bereaved parents and most especially those aspects which came upon us so suddenly and, sometimes, with no warning.

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 30 leaflets, on different aspects of grief which follow the death of a child. All of them are available at no charge to bereaved parents and siblings (but a small donation is, of course, always welcome).

If you would like to hear more about our work and access further support, you could ring our Helpline, number on the back page of this leaflet, and 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 **[www.tcf.org.uk](http://www.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**

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**TCF Library**

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**[www.tcf.org.uk](http://www.tcf.org.uk)**

This leaflet is sponsored in memory of our  
remarkable daughter Clare Ekins 1981-2005.

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

**President: The Countess Mountbatten of Burma**

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