



The
**Compassionate
Friends**

**For parents bereaved of an
only child or all their children**

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

For parents bereaved of an only child or all their children

This leaflet is for those who have suffered the immense tragedy of being bereaved of their only child or all of their children. Sometimes we are referred to as “childless” or “parents with no surviving children”.

This leaflet looks specifically at the impact of having no surviving children. For a more general understanding of living with grief as a bereaved parent, see The Compassionate Friends (TCF) leaflet: *Living with grief*.

The particular pain of being bereaved of all of our children

“When my son died a year ago, I was heartbroken. I survived by investing my love and energies in my daughter. Now that my daughter has also died, I don’t know where to turn. My grief is all-encompassing.”

We childless parents discover early on that some of our feelings, and some of the issues we face, can be different and more intense than 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 future. Here are issues that parents may face in these circumstances:

- We may find that caring for ourselves is challenging for a while because the meaning of our life seems to have disappeared.

- We may want to withdraw from the company of our family and friends, especially from relationships where children are involved. We may find it painful to relate to other people's children and grandchildren regardless of how important they are to us.
- We may feel uncomfortable in our home, even if we share the house with our partner or other family members. This feeling may be intensified by the possibility that we may each be expressing our grief in different ways.
- Some of us may feel deeply bereft because we can no longer carry out our parenting role. If we have no grandchildren, we may feel desperately sad at the idea of facing the future without descendants. The years ahead could look empty and joyless.
- On the other hand, if we do have grandchildren, we may find ourselves with new responsibilities that could be quite challenging, although also bringing us some comfort. In some cases, our child's spouse may restrict access to our grandchildren, which will bring an added level of pain to our bereavement.
- Old age may also become a frightening prospect without our child, particularly if we live alone. Not all children offer companionship and support to their ageing parents, but for us, this is not even a possibility.
- We may wonder who we want to be the beneficiaries of our will and receive any inheritance which we had planned for our children to have.
- We may be anxious to realise that when we die, there may be no one to treasure our precious items, photographs and papers which may be of no monetary value, but are treasured by us. Again, while there is no guarantee that anyone's child will take care of these items for their parents, but for us there is no possibility of this happening.

Am I still a parent if I have no child?

“I find myself deeply preoccupied with the question, if I have no child, am I still a parent?”

The death of our only child, or all our children, will change the way we see ourselves, and can change the way others perceive 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 reinforces our sense of lost identity.

If our child was living at home, we face an abrupt end to our active parenting. Even if they had left home, we perhaps still played a part as the parents of an adult child, with the joys 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.

Loss of companionship

“We always went away for a few days together in the summer. Now I’m at a loss and wonder if I will be able to go to our favourite beach without them.”

An only child may well have grown to be a close friend and confidante, as well as offering practical and emotional support in their adult years. The loss is therefore of an irreplaceable friendship as well as of a beloved child, especially if we have no partner or are widowed. If our child had been living away from home, we will miss the contact we had with them, such as phone calls, texts, emails, and their social media updates. This will impact us even more if we are elderly or if our own life is physically restricted. We may become more vulnerable if we have depended on an adult child for physical or emotional support. Friends or other family members can take on important roles, but they will never replace our children.

For parents bereaved of all of their children, holidays, Mother's and Father's Days, Christmas and other special occasions can be particularly lonely and painful. We will need to explore ways of coping that work for us. For instance, some of us find that going away at these times gives us something different to look forward to when other people are occupied with families.

Alone and without children

"Sometimes I wake with this desperate yearning to talk about my child, but there is no one at my side who will listen to me."

For those of us without a partner, loneliness can be particularly acute. We may feel that our life has lost its meaning. If we are in contact with their other parent, we may feel blamed by them for what has happened. Negative feelings from the time of separation or divorce may be reactivated by our bereavement, bringing additional pain. If we are widowed, we may feel that we have been left behind, without anyone to support us or 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 now is profound.

The death of more than one child

If we have been bereaved of all our children - whether at one time or at different times - we may feel quite justifiably that our world has ended. We may feel cut off from the life we expected to live.

Simultaneous deaths bring an overwhelming feeling of vulnerability. In multiple tragedies, 'survivor guilt' can be very strong. If the deaths have been at different times, we may find that the more recent loss brings earlier tragedies back to the surface.

It can be bewildering to grieve for more than one child at a time. We may find we have to focus at times on mourning for each child in a different way, because each relationship is unique, but at other times we will want to mourn them collectively. We might do this in quite simple ways, for

instance, by lighting individual candles, or we might be creative, perhaps making pictures frames or collages of individual children and then making one of our children all together.

Physical and mental restlessness

“I used to enjoy playing an instrument. I recently tried to take it up again, and the music is helping me find some calm.”

Many of us can suffer from apathy and overwhelming exhaustion. We may find it difficult to concentrate for any length of time. It can be helpful if we manage to focus on a particular project, which could be a hobby or work-related. The rollercoaster of emotions, tension and stress we feel can result in restlessness, with an overpowering need to keep busy. In time, this may drive us to undertake some positive initiatives.

We may feel that it is too much for our friends to keep listening and supporting 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. 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, as can creating music or art.

For some of us, taking part in a specific support group for parents bereaved of all of their children (such as those organised by TCF) or speaking with a counsellor helps us to start to breathe again. Nothing can make complete sense of the life we have now but, somehow, we need to learn how to live it.

Wills and finance

“Making arrangements should I need care in the future is not something I expected would be necessary, but now I've made the effort, I feel a bit more peace.”

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 estate, large or small, to go, rather than let it be dispersed 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.

To help with practical tasks such as writing a will and appointing executors, on our website you will find a factsheet with resources for parents aging without descendants. The factsheet includes some practical ideas, links and organisations that might be able to help. Download the fact sheet here tcf.org.uk/agingwithoutdescendants

Social situations

“It was a painful conversation. She went on and on about her child’s new job and how proud she is, but went completely silent when I mentioned my own child.”

Many people, whether casual acquaintances or close friends, or even members of our wider family, simply do not know how to respond to bereaved parents.

Asking if someone has children is common in social situations. We are then faced with deciding whether to talk about our bereavement(s). How much we want to say is our own choice. If we do tell them about our child(ren), people can react with visible shock, stunned silence, or gushing sympathy. It can bring a conversation to an abrupt, awkward end.

Many parents live their lives through their children and grandchildren, and their conversations reflect this. Our friends may tell us in great detail about the things their offspring have said or done. This may be difficult for us to deal with. On the other hand, some will find it embarrassing if we choose to talk about our own, sadly deceased, child. We hope that they will show compassion and accept our need to include our child in conversations, but not everyone will be comfortable with this.

Some may try to comfort us by suggesting that we can have more children or adopt. Whether or not this is possible or desirable in our circumstances, we are mourning our irreplaceable child. Such suggestions, while well meaning, are not helpful.

Some people may try to encourage us by saying that we are now 'free' to pursue our own interests – a career, further study, holidays, community commitments, and so on. However well meant, such comments can be deeply hurtful and leave us feeling isolated in our grief.

“I hate hearing other parents complain about something or other that their child has done, the mess they left in their bedroom or their lack of motivation in their job. What I would give to have something like this to talk about!”

The question of having more children

“I didn't think I'd ever want another child, but it's been amazing how happy my new baby has made me. Of course, she's not taking my late child's place. They both have unique places in my heart.”

For some of us, if our child or children have died, we have no further interest in bringing more children into our lives.

However, some childless parents feel a great longing to fill the home once again, perhaps after some time has passed. We may be able to have further children ourselves, although the decision to have another child is often accompanied by anxieties. Alternatively, we may consider fostering or adoption.

Some parents, especially those who cannot have more children of their own, have taken an informal but long-lasting interest in other children, for example, 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.

Coping with our grief

“Memories do not make up for the fact that my child is sadly no longer here with me, physically, but focussing on their memories does bring them close to me in my thoughts.”

We are all different both in how we grieve and also how to find our way in life after we have been bereaved of a child or all our children. We will individually discover what helps us a little or raises our mood momentarily. The process is ongoing, and can feel different at different times.

Sometimes we will welcome a distraction: a mundane chore, a walk or a chat. It often helps to get some fresh air and exercise. If we feel unable to be active, reading a few pages of a book or watching a TV programme may help. Often achieving small things will help us to function and take away the intensity of the pain for a minute or two. If we can try occasionally to only concentrate on what we are doing at that moment and not about what has happened or the future, it may ease our mind a little.

New interests can help us to regain some of our lost self-esteem and confidence. Joining a craft course or a walking group, or taking up some voluntary work, might help fill our time and give us a new sense of purpose.

Some of us will garner strength from our faith or beliefs, or the community around us. Others may become more solitary, taking time to process what has happened alone or with someone close.

Speaking with other parents who have also been bereaved of all of their children is likely to be a help. The Compassionate Friends offers ongoing support through meetings, online and in person, and on Facebook, with dedicated groups for parents in these circumstances. There is more information about this on our website.

“Thank you for yesterday. I’m so pleased I was given your Helpline telephone number. It really helped me knowing that there was someone who knew the intensity of grief I was experiencing.”

Keeping their memory alive

For bereaved parents, it is vital that our children's names live on in some way. Taking time for remembrance activities is important. Keeping their memory alive through blogposts, books, art or music, memorials or benches, charity events or donations, can encourage us that they are going to be remembered.

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. This can take time and cannot be rushed. 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.

Going forward

Our child or children will probably have been the centre of our lives in some respects. Now they are gone, we will need to re-establish ourselves and try to find meaning in a life that is very different. Although this will be a long and painful struggle, as we draw on our own inner resources, we will find a way through. It is likely that we will make new friends, some of whom we have found through TCF. As bereaved parents we have all struggled, but then discovered in short moments of unexpected peace or happiness that we can have hope. Our grief will not always be so intense. Most of all, the love of our children remains forever. Their precious memories are part of us. Even now, they give us strength to carry on.

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*
- *Handbook of ideas for remembering our child*
- *Coping with special occasions*
- *Childless parents*
- *Coping with friends, family and social situations*
- *The bereaved lone parent*
- *Grieving for more than one child*
- *Factsheet of resources for parents aging without descendants*

TCF leaflets can be read and downloaded at this link:

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

 **@tcf.org.uk**

 **@TCFcharityUK**

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TCF library

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*In memory of our wonderful boy, Fergus Yard.
So very loved, forever missed.*

