



The
Compassionate
Friends



Coping with Judgemental Attitudes

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

Coping with Judgemental Attitudes

The death of a child is probably the worst thing that can happen to any parent, whatever the cause. For each family, the pain and loss are in some ways unique. It can be a struggle to carry on with life and to cope with the sorrow and anger that engulf us. As if things could not be worse, some of us also have to deal with the reactions from those who are critical of our child for a variety of reasons.

This includes those of us whose child died as a result of drug, alcohol or solvent use; illnesses such as anorexia and bulimia; dangerous occupational or recreational activities; involvement in crime, gangs or prostitution; accidents for which they may have been responsible; or suicide. Criticism could also be related to their expressions of gender or sexuality, their choices regarding religion or lack of it, or any other matter that is outside the traditions of our family or culture. Any of these might have had nothing to do with their death, yet could still affect how other people react.

When these circumstances exist, there can be some stigma attached to our child's life and/or death. We may hear comments such as, "They brought it on themselves," or "It was their choice." Some people may have the attitude that our grief is not entitled to the same respect or sympathy that is shown to others. This is not the case. Our grief is valid no matter how our child died. It is never lessened by difficult circumstances.

Please note: This leaflet uses the pronoun 'they' rather than 'he' or 'she' for our children.

The years prior to our child's death

Our grief might have begun long ago, if our child had become troubled or unreachable. We may have already faced repeated traumatic events for years before they died. On the other hand, we might have been completely unaware of any problems.

If we were aware, then their troubles or life choices might have caused us to feel guilt and shame. We might have worried about our child's life for many years. There may have been lengthy discussions with schools, police, hospitals or social services, always hoping that the problems would be resolved. We may have had to cope with constant anxiety, asking ourselves "Where are they?", "Are they okay?", or "What are they doing?" as we waited for the next knock on the door or phone call to summon us to the police station or hospital.

For others among us, our child's life became difficult as a result of random circumstances. A broken relationship, the loss of a job, a period of mental ill-health or any other difficulty might have sent them on a downward spiral. Along the way there could have been homelessness or imprisonment.

While our child was alive, there was always the hope that things could improve. Perhaps it was this belief that kept us going through the day-to-day despair: the strain of pretending everything was alright to the outside world, and the struggle of working and keeping the family functioning normally. However difficult these times were, they came to an abrupt end with the shattering news that our child had died.

In some cases, there might not have been anything inherently wrong with how our child chose to live their life. It may simply have been in conflict with the norms of our family or culture. Examples might be their lifestyle with regard to sexuality, gender or relationships, or choosing a different religious path or cultural identity. This might have caused them to be viewed negatively and as separate from our family or community.

No matter the cause, we might have lost touch with our child altogether. News of their death may have come after a long silence.

Whatever the circumstances and what happened before, our journey of grief has now begun when we are already at a low ebb.

The early days following our bereavement

The news of a child's death is always a terrible shock however we learn of it. Each particular set of circumstances will have its own agonies. The manner of death, how and when we found out what had happened to them, and any discoveries of what went before will all have an impact upon us.

Shock very often protects us from reality for a while. However, this numbness does not last and feelings flood in, threatening to overwhelm us. Most parents will feel some guilt when their child has died, thinking that if only they had acted differently, then they could have prevented the death. For parents whose child has died in a way that others may consider self-inflicted or as a result of their life choices, these feelings are complicated from the outset. Even before we are subjected to the opinions and judgements of others, we begin to accuse ourselves and wonder whether we may have failed as parents.

The contradictory nature of our feelings can be very frightening. We may experience intense anger at what our children have done to themselves and to our family. Yet we may also feel protective of them, understanding their pain and confusion.

We may experience a private relief - quickly followed by guilt - that the long nightmare is over, that there is an end to the trauma and dread of what they will do next, yet we wish we could turn the clock back to when they were alive.

If their actions have damaged others, we might feel ashamed; yet at the same time we might want to find someone or something else to blame for what has happened. We do not want it to have been our child's responsibility.

The funeral will need to be planned. The pain of the circumstances of our child's life and/or death may make it hard to decide what form it should take. As a family we may find some comfort in looking back on the whole of our child's life, rather than focusing on the immediate past.

Our immediate family and closest friends

Those of us with surviving children will need to answer their questions honestly in an age-appropriate way, whilst being careful not to burden them with details they cannot understand or absorb. Sadly, our surviving children may hear unkind comments about their deceased sibling and will want us to tell them that the stories are untrue. It is important to dispel misconceptions that they might hear from other people, either in person or via social media.

We can reassure our children of our love for them and that we also continue to love their deceased sibling, no matter what happened. Love is not conditional. We may disagree with someone's actions whilst still loving them.

We may find ourselves needing to support other vulnerable members of our family, such as grandparents. This may be at the same time as feeling unsupported ourselves.

Until now, we might have borne the burden of our anxieties with the support of only a few trusted friends and relatives – too ashamed to admit openly the extent and nature of our family's troubles. To help us manage our own grief now, however, we should try not to isolate ourselves for fear of what others might be saying or thinking.

Reactions to our child's death

Many people have to be told the news of the death: our other children, relatives, friends, neighbours and staff in schools or at work. The police, and sometimes the media, may be involved.

As well as the inevitable procedures, such as identification and post-mortem, there may be decisions to make about how we describe our child in public, at least in the early days. If there is public interest, it can be a good idea to make a brief statement and then ask the media to respect our privacy and grief. We will have less control over what is said on social media.

Families very often suffer additional burdens because of the attitudes of others. Rumours and untruths may abound and people either avoid speaking of what has happened or unwittingly say hurtful things whilst trying to be helpful. Our children who have died in ways that attract criticism are often young adults. Some people may suggest that their loss is easier to bear than the death of a small child. We may receive comments like "They were grown up and living their own life," or "You couldn't have been responsible for their actions."

Our friends may not know what to say to us, but we too may be locked in silence, even though we feel a need to share our feelings. Sometimes we will imagine judgement and criticism where none was intended. Nevertheless, the feelings of isolation and shame are real to us, and we suffer intensely.

Publicity at an inquest, where negative – or even false – reporting of stories about our child can complicate our grief. The length of time that often occurs between the death and the inquest means that feelings we had hoped were behind us are re-awakened; we have to travel along that painful road all over again. We may discover that the media resurrect our child's story many times, even years later, when similar events occur.

Taking care of ourselves

Facing the pain of grief takes courage. We need to talk about our child's life and the circumstances of their death. Although the pain of what happened, the devastation of unfulfilled dreams and the shattering of hopes may fill our thoughts, we will also find there are priceless happy memories to be shared.

We need to find ways of expressing emotions and coping with them. This may seem easier said than done; grief can often feel unmanageable. Allowing ourselves and others to cry can be more helpful than bottling up our feelings. None of us expects our child to die before us. The worst thing that any parent can imagine has happened, and grief is our right as well as our burden. It is very reassuring to be able to talk freely to a sympathetic friend.

Although aspects of our child's life and death are unique to them, it is likely that there are other parents who have experienced broadly similar circumstances with their own child or children. Attending a support group, such as those organised by The Compassionate Friends (TCF), could help us gain strength for our journey ahead as we realise that we are not alone.

Some of us have found support through professional counselling. It is often easier to unburden ourselves to a complete stranger: there may be some aspects of our child's life or death that we are unable to talk about even to our family or closest friends.

(Further information about the help that TCF offers can be found at the end of this leaflet, along with recommendations for further reading.)

Longer-term family issues

The devastating blow of a loved one's death takes its toll on every member of the family. In the long term, we all must find our own way of grieving, adapting to what has happened and living with what cannot be changed. It is important to understand that we all grieve differently and to respect each member of the family in their grief.

If there is conflict between parents about how past decisions or events were handled, such disagreements can be bitter and damaging. Tolerance, patience and understanding will be needed if the family is not to break apart.

If we have surviving children, they will have much to contend with.

If they are young children, there is a danger of our becoming over-anxious, over-protective or excessively strict because of what happened, at a time when our children are themselves battling with an array of conflicting feelings. We will need to find a way of continuing to talk about what has happened, so that as they grow older, they reach a mature understanding of the facts and do not have to cope with either secrecy or falsehood.

No matter their age, they may be angry with their deceased sibling for the chaos that has been caused within the family or for the years of anxiety that have overshadowed their lives. They may resent us, their parents, either for not preventing the death, or for allowing their deceased sibling to behave in the way that they did. They may begrudge the time and focus we invested in supporting their sibling.

Some of our children may feel that we have not been honest in the past and that we have covered up for their troubled sibling, perhaps forcing the family into isolation. Others may think that they are being labelled by what has happened, feel tempted to experiment with the same experiences, or feel pressure to do so from their peers. Low self-esteem could hamper their ability to manage social situations.

Good friends who can cope with their powerful mood swings and who stick by them in the bad times are an invaluable lifeline. So, too, are adults who can listen to them and who are, perhaps, more able than their parents to bring some degree of calm into the turmoil. When we find that the problems are too much to take, it is better to seek professional help than to allow situations to fester in silence and bitterness.

(TCF runs groups in person and on Facebook for bereaved siblings, aged 18 and over. See www.tcf.org.uk/siblings)

The future

Although we are changed forever by the tragic death of our child, we can eventually find ways of coping and living with grief. Throughout the course of every life, there are moments of happiness, of love, of kindness. In time, we will find ourselves remembering the joy our child brought to us, even if this requires us looking back a long way, before their troubles began. Our child is part of our family forever. No matter their life choices or the circumstances in which they died, we will always love them.

Further reading

Other TCF leaflets that could be helpful at this time:

- *Living with Grief*
- *Remembering our Child (Leaflet and Handbook)*
- The Sudden Death of our Child
- Bereaved through Drug or Alcohol Use
- After Suicide
- Our Surviving Children

TCF leaflets can be downloaded from this link: www.tcf.org.uk/leaflets
Printed copies are available from the TCF office.

Who are the Compassionate Friends?

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** 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

UK Helpline:

0345 123 2304

Northern Ireland Helpline:

0288 77 88 016

General Enquiries

0345 120 3785

E: info@tcf.org.uk

TCF Library

0345 120 3785

E: library@tcf.org.uk

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This leaflet is sponsored in memory of
precious Emily Weiss who is always in our hearts.

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