



The
Compassionate
Friends

Grieving Couples

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

Grieving Couples

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. We may be drawn closer to our partner, as we struggle together to survive our family tragedy.

However, we may experience and express our grief so differently that our relationship becomes strained, and existing difficulties can be made worse. Our suffering is so great that we may struggle to find the emotional resources to support each other, as well as care for other members of our immediate family. Underlying all this is the thought that we are powerless: we both know that nothing can bring our beautiful child back.

How we grieve

As individuals, our personalities and background can cause us to grieve differently. Each of us carries our past history of earlier losses and bereavements but the death of a child introduces a new dimension of grief. On top of this, it is generally accepted that there are male and female models of grief, although not all men follow the “male” model, nor all women the “female.” Regardless of our genders, we may find there are differences in how each of us grieve.

The “masculine” or instrumental form of grief tends towards holding in thoughts and not speaking about feelings. This

type of grief is more controlled and may show itself through keeping busy, often with activities not directly linked to loss. We may keep our sorrow locked inside to contain our grief, choosing not to speak of our loss, but instead throwing ourselves into our work and other activities.

The “feminine” or intuitive form of grief tends to be more communicative, with a need to retell the story and express feelings, to seek support and to expend more effort on memorialising our loved one. There is also more likelihood of guilty feelings.

It is hard when the reactions of our partner are not in step with our own, and can lead us to feeling unsupported at our time of greatest need. If we are someone who needs to talk to others about our lovely child and our pain from their death, we can feel frustrated and confused if our partner remains silent about our shared tragedy or appears too busy to be with us. On the other hand, if we find it too painful to speak or even think about our loss, even the mention of our child’s name or the cause of their death can be almost unbearable.

Grief can make all of us more extreme in our reactions, so it is not surprising that it can exaggerate our differences too. Being aware of these natural differences can perhaps help us avoid slipping into an attitude of resentment towards our partner.

As a bereaved couple, we can help one another by giving each other space and encouragement to grieve in the way that is best for our partner, even if it is not our own preference. We should not feel any guilt about grieving apart: we are facing the worst days of our life, and we need to give ourselves and each other permission to cope in any way we can.

(The TCF leaflets *A Mother's Grief* and *A Father's Grief* may be of help to any parent, regardless of their gender.)

Having other people, such as family members and friends, who we can talk with can be most helpful and provide an essential outlet.

Many of us find support group meetings very beneficial. The Compassionate Friends (TCF) organises local groups and larger gatherings, and this might be something in which we would like to take part. Attending a meeting or joining an online bereavement forum gives us the opportunity to speak freely about our child in the company of others who are also bereaved.

However, here again there may be differences. One of us might be keen to attend a meeting whilst our partner really does not wish to take part. Perhaps in this case we each need to respect the other's wishes. The one who would like to attend may do so; the one who does not should not feel obliged.

(There are more details about TCF's support groups and online support at the end of this leaflet).

Our surviving children

Our surviving children, if we are fortunate enough to have them, can be a source of shared strength and purpose, but also an anxiety. The desire to survive as a family brings us all together, although at times this can seem almost impossible. The pain each member of the family feels can become even deeper when everyone is together in the same room; the empty chair at the meal table is a horrible reminder to us all that things will never be the same.

Our own grief may not allow us to truly see the depth of grief our other children are experiencing. In turn our sons or daughters may not comprehend our suffering as parents.

Following the death of their sibling, children can be prone to anger, guilt and anxiety. Some will feel the need to protect their parents by hiding their own pain, or by trying to replace their deceased sibling by taking on some of their habits and mannerisms. This is a tremendous strain for them, and as parents we can work together to watch over them and offer reassurance.

Our children need us to help them in their loss, just as we need them, but helping them can be one of the hardest tasks we will ever face. Due to our own grief, it could be that one of us takes on more of this supportive role than the other, at least for a time.

It helps if we can talk honestly and openly with our children about their feelings and include them in deciding what to do about their brother or sister's clothes, books, sports equipment, bedroom. We should try to avoid making hurried decisions about his or her belongings, and take as much time as we need, not being influenced too much by what other people think we 'should' be doing. It may be useful to discuss this aspect with members of TCF to know the different ways in which this has been managed.

See the TCF leaflet *Our Surviving Children* for more on this topic.

Some of the other common issues faced by grieving couples

Blame and anger

Blame and guilt are often an integral part of our feelings as bereaved parents; we blame ourselves for our child's death, for not having been able to keep them well or safe from harm.

Sometimes our anger turns outwards; we seek for someone whom we might blame for this heartbreaking tragedy. This might become our focus whereas our partner may see things differently. We can also slip into an attitude of resentment towards our partner, sometimes without fair reason. We may even find ourselves blaming each other in some ways, perhaps not directly related to our child's death, but aspects of their upbringing.

Any of these emotions can isolate us from each other, just when we most need our mutual support. It is worthwhile making the effort to communicate and bridge any gaps in our relationship.

Sexual issues

Our sexual relationship can also become more difficult, with one of us in desperate need of closeness, comfort and the release which sex can bring, while the other feels that this is inappropriate. Because sex is so closely related to reproduction, we may find the very idea of it far too upsetting, whereas another might hope in some way to 'replace' our lost child. For some, it can feel almost an insult to our deceased child, a source of guilt and distress that we should allow ourselves any pleasure. For others, sex may symbolise our

shared love for our family, and sharing intimacy with a loving partner can provide a brief respite from the searing intensity of grief. If we are not able to fulfil our partner's needs in this regard, there may be a temptation to seek intimacy and comfort elsewhere.

We should not expect too much from each other or from ourselves. A common understanding can take considerable time to achieve. Communication and patience are key.

Spiritual issues

Our spiritual views may change following the death of our child, even if before we shared common beliefs and practices. One of us may find support and strength in our long-held faith, with prayer, meditation or attending services becoming a mainstay of our grieving. For the other, religion could become a focus for rage at a god who could allow our child to die, and our beliefs can fall apart, at least in the short term. Alternatively, one or both of us may have been sure that this life is all there is, but now find that our search for meaning or for comfort has drawn us to religion. If one of us changes radically, this can drive a wedge between us.

A third parent

If just one of us is the biological parent of our child, we may worry that our partner cannot truly grasp the depth of our grief. In addition, the death of our child may possibly bring our child's other biological parent back into our lives, as they may attend the funeral, and so on. This can all complicate our relationship as a grieving couple.

The TCF leaflet *Blended and Step Families* looks at this issue in more depth.

Families

Grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, brothers and sisters might form the larger circle of our family. Each one will have their own grief for our child, as well as their own views on subjects ranging from funeral arrangements to aspects of our child's life and death. Some members of our family may have more traditional views which may or may not coincide with our own. One side of the family may have quite different cultural or religious traditions to the other.

Tensions can arise over these differences. It is important that, as a couple, we make our own decisions and find our own peace about our child, and do not allow any external pressures to make this difficult time even more so. For example, while we can take into account the wishes and preferences of our family members as we prepare for our child's funeral, it is ultimately our own wishes and preferences that need to take precedence.

Time span

Feelings of grief do not have an allotted time span. How we deal with our grief will differ as we differ as individuals. This will be true over time. We may experience different aspects of grief as the days, weeks, months and years pass by. Although it is likely that we shall share the raw devastation of our grief immediately after our child's death, how we react subsequently will vary as individually we learn to bear our loss.

For a relationship this means that on any given day one of us may be feeling extremely fragile and distressed while our partner is feeling more even and at ease. In a week's time it is highly possible that these positions become reversed, with one of us slipping down as the other gains strength. When we

are in a specific mood state, it is difficult for us to fully imagine feeling a very different emotion. What's more, we may resist giving our full attention to our partner's tears, for fear we will lose the hold we have over our own sorrow and therefore fall into despair ourselves. But if we are able to put these fears aside, we can continue to act as a supportive partner over the years to come.

Support from outside the family can be vital – from professionals such as bereavement counsellors, or from friends. If we have genuine concerns about our partner's wellbeing we should encourage them to seek help via their GP. If they refuse all help but appear to us to be at some kind of risk, we can talk in confidence to our own GP about our concerns.

The way forward

Each of us has a special relationship with our child, living or not. We are still their parents, and they have their own place in our hearts. As we replay and record the story of our son's or daughter's life and death, we can acknowledge the role each of us played. Our shared memories can be a great source of comfort.

Our way forward includes accepting that our partner may be expressing their grief differently to ourselves. It does not indicate that one of us loves our child less or more. It is simply that we have our own ways of coping. Speaking about our child and our loss is not better or worse than silent withdrawal; it is our individual preference, although it may be hard for our partner to bear.

Our relationship may become strained, as grief can be an emotional see-saw – when one is up, the other is down. But if we stay aware and sensitive to each other's moods, we

can make it through. We need time and privacy to grieve as individuals, and also to have time together.

At some point we will return to work, restart our social life, go on holiday, and discover that we can find some joy in life again, however unimaginable this may seem at first. The timing and speed of how we embrace life's activities might differ between us. Again, there is no wrong or right way, no way that is intrinsically better or worse than the other. Respecting our differences becomes vital; not accepting each other's way of doing this will only distress us more.

We need to have realistic expectations of what we can achieve, together and separately. We may need to look closely at our partnership, to give each other space, and if this is what we choose, allow ourselves to pursue some different paths without being afraid that this will drive us apart.

Our grieving will probably have intensified our awareness of each other and our sense of 'together yet alone.' The need to remember our child and to share memories will always be there, but our lives do continue. The insights into our relationship that have been so painfully discovered as we grieve may enrich our partnership in the years ahead. As a family, we are changed forever by the death of our child, but the shared memory of our son or daughter is the most precious treasure for always.

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.



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