



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 each other through good times and bad. When a child has died, we are both faced with unimaginable pain and grief.

As a couple, we may be drawn closer together or be driven further apart as we struggle to survive this tragedy. We may experience and express our grief so differently that our relationship becomes strained, or existing difficulties are made worse. With the enormous pain of knowing that nothing can bring our beloved child back, even those of us in the strongest relationships may have difficulty finding the emotional resources to support each other.

Who this leaflet is for

In this leaflet, we are using the term “couple” to describe two people sharing their lives together as spouses or partners, regardless of gender or legal status. We may both be the biological parents of our child, or we could be part of a blended or step family. Our child may have another parent elsewhere. Some bereaved parents will have other children still living, but others will not.

A “child” could be any age: one year, ten years, twenty or fifty. They may or may not have been living under our roof. Some children may have died after an illness, whilst others died unexpectedly, such as from suicide or an accident.

Everyone grieves differently

“My partner is the quiet one in our relationship. He rarely opens up about his feelings while I’m much more demonstrative and emotional. We lived with these differences just fine until our child died. Now I am desperate for him to share our grieving together, but he just seems to be spending more time away from home.”

“I can’t bear all the tears! I just want life to go back to what it was. I want my partner to be who she was. I don’t know how to help her.”

As individuals, we all grieve differently. The way we express our grief may depend partly on:

- Our personalities
- whether we’re someone who usually holds in their feelings or lets them out
- our past history of bereavement and loss
- how emotions were handled in our family when we were growing up
- our religious views
- our relationship with our child – for instance if we were, or were not, their biological parent
- other personal factors.

How we grieve

Grief researchers have described two main ways that people grieve. Most people are a mixture, but there are some common patterns. Having an idea about our own style of grief, especially if they are different from our partner's, can go a long way in helping us to understand each other.

“Instrumental” griever tend to hold their thoughts inside. They may keep themselves busy with activities not directly linked to loss, perhaps wanting to return to work right away. The instrumental griever may keep their sorrow locked inside to contain their grief, choosing not to speak of their loss or their feelings. They may appear distant or unemotional. Their grief is happening deep within, and may not find an outlet easily.

“Intuitive” griever tends to be more communicative. They need to talk about their loss and may keep retelling the story of what happened. They express their emotions outwardly; there may be many tears. Intuitive griever are more likely to seek support from other people. It may be harder for them to resume normal daily living as their grief may be overwhelming.

Most people are a blend of these two styles, but lean more towards one than the other.

“He likes to ‘fix’ things and seems to feel inadequate when he can’t, but this is not something that can be fixed.”

In an ideal world, we will each be there for each other, holding each other through this most painful of experiences, with patience and consideration for our individual grief. However, the reality for many couples is not always so simple.

If our partner grieves in a way that is very different to our own, we can both feel unsupported and misunderstood at times. If one of us needs to keep talking about our child and our pain from their death, we can feel hurt if our partner seems reluctant to have this type of conversation. On the other hand, one of us may find it too painful to speak about our loss. Even the mention of our child’s name brings our deep pain to the surface, and we would rather this was not the case.

Even if we do grieve in similar ways, there are still going to be times when we are out of step with each other. Grief does not proceed in a steady path – it is more of a rollercoaster. There may be times when one of us feels the grief more intensely than the other. Perhaps one of us wants to take a breather and try to relax, and the other is unable to think about anything but their grief at the moment.

In addition, grief can amplify our normal reactions, making us extra sensitive to perceived slights.

Being aware that we all grieve differently and that our grief is not going to be consistent can help us avoid resentment towards our partner. Instead, we can work towards helping each other through the heartbreak.

Supporting each other

“I try to give her space. She sometimes seems to get more comfort being alone with her thoughts than with me. I know we still love each other. This is just something we need to get through the best we can.”

Although we may remind ourselves that there is no right or wrong way to grieve, it's hard if our journey through grief does not feel in sync. Still, our partner is our greatest ally as we both try to cope with this immeasurable loss. The love we share that has brought us together can also help us survive.

There are a few things that may help if we feel out of step with our partner:

- Giving each other space and encouragement to grieve in the way that is best for each of us
- Not criticising or judging our partner's style of grieving
- Not feeling any guilt about grieving separately at times. Although we may get comfort together, we probably also each need our own space at times
- Finding things to do together to remember our child and keep their memory alive. Simply sharing memories is important
- Not being in a hurry or under pressure to decide what to do about their belongings
- Having other people, such as family members and friends, who we can talk with so we do not lean too heavily on each other
- Recognising that the death of our child may impact us in different ways on a daily basis. For instance, perhaps one of us was the primary caregiver and our days are now empty.

We are facing the worst days of our life, and we need to give ourselves and each other permission to cope in the best way we can.

Be prepared for ups and downs

How we deal with our grief will differ as individuals, and we may also experience different aspects of grief over time. Although it is likely that we will share the raw devastation of our grief immediately after our child's death, how we react subsequently will vary as we each learn to bear our loss in our own ways.

In all likelihood, we won't always feel the same at the same time. On any given day one of us may be feeling extremely fragile and distressed, while our partner is on a more even keel, emotionally. On another day, these positions may be reversed.

Grieving our child may affect our ability to empathise with, and support, our partner, as we may fear we will lose control over our sadness and fall into despair ourselves.

This is all part of the natural course of grief. Feelings do eventually become less intense. We need patience with ourselves and with each other.

Including other people

“I’ve learned to be comfortable with the fact that he spends time each month with other people at a support group. I went once but didn’t find it helpful, but he obviously does and values the conversations.”

No matter how well we are managing to cope with our grief together, it can still be useful to include other people. This may include family and friends, but it is not limited to them.

To talk through our feelings, many of us find support group meetings helpful. The Compassionate Friends (TCF) organises local groups and larger gatherings, both in person and virtually. Attending a meeting or joining an online bereavement group can give us the opportunity to speak freely about our child in the company of others who are also bereaved. We can also benefit from other people’s experiences.

However, here again there may be differences. One of us might be keen to attend a meeting whilst the other really does not wish to take part. If this is the case, we can try to respect the fact that our partner has different needs in their grief. There should be no feeling of obligation to both attend a group. One of us can go alone, if that is what we wish.

Getting support

The death of a child is widely recognised as one of the most difficult bereavements to cope with. It is therefore not surprising that some parents do need support from professionals such as bereavement counsellors.

We may look for such support for ourselves, but it will be up to our partner whether they too seek it out. Some bereaved parents turn to alcohol or other substances in an attempt to cope, or they may self-harm. If we have concerns about our partner's wellbeing we could 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 GP about our worries.

Other children

If our child was living under our roof, or there was frequent interaction, their death may have practical implications, for instance, if our child supported us in any way. As a couple, we will need to decide together the best way forward.

If we have other children, they can be a source of shared strength and purpose. The desire to survive as a family can bring us all together, although at times survival can seem almost impossible.

Our surviving children, biological or otherwise, will be affected by the death of their sibling. They may be grieving or may be too young to understand. They may also notice that our grief has changed us and may find themselves grieving for the parents they have now lost.

Some parents find themselves being over-protective of their remaining children, which could be a cause of disagreement. We may also have different ideas about how best to support our children through their own grief. We may find that one of us is more available for our children's needs at this time. If there are grandchildren, we may find our parenting role continues in a different way. We may have added responsibilities that we will also need to adjust to.

If we now have no other children – because one, or all, of our children have died – the rollercoaster of grief can be particularly

extreme. If we are a blended family, our partner may have their own children. We could feel left out of the joy of living, with our own life feeling curtailed and somewhat hopeless, whereas their lives continue. This could cause us to feel resentful. We may choose to disengage from some family events and celebrations, for our own self-preservation, at least until we feel like we are on top of our grief. Hopefully we can talk this through with our partner and they will understand our current limitations.

Other issues that grieving couples may face

Guilt and anger

Many bereaved parents feel guilt or regret. This is usually without foundation, but we may still feel somewhat responsible for what has happened or for letting our child down. Feelings like these can cause us to spiral downwards, and no amount of convincing otherwise by our partner may help. We will need to find peace within ourselves. This could be a long and difficult journey.

However, these feelings could also turn outwards. Rather than blame ourselves, we may start to blame someone or something else for this tragedy. This could even include our own child for their life decisions, such as substance use or their choice of partner. As a couple, we could also blame each other for some of what has taken place. We may have had different styles of parenting or different expectations. We could start to resent each other for past decisions, or even lash out in anger.

Our own thoughts and feelings may be quite mixed up. It often helps to be able to talk through these issues to try to make some sense of everything, but our partner may see things very differently. This could be very difficult for our relationship.

Any of this could isolate us from each other, just when we most need our mutual support. In our deep grief, it may feel exhausting to try and bridge these gaps with more communication, but this is worthwhile if we want to continue in our relationship. If things do become heated, then it may help to talk with someone else, a neutral party.

Sexual issues

“At the start, I avoided touch because it made me so emotional, but my partner still had needs. They were hurt that I was not willing to engage in sexual activity. We got through this rough period by giving each other space. Eventually we worked out a compromise. It’s still not perfect, but it’s the best we can manage in these fraught circumstances.”

Our sexual relationship could become more difficult. For some bereaved parents, allowing ourselves any pleasure can feel almost an insult to our child. We may feel guilty and upset with ourselves, or with our partner. For others, sex is associated with closeness and comfort, and is symbolic of our shared love for our family. Intimacy with our loving partner can provide a brief respite from the searing intensity of grief. Lack of affection can feel like a rejection.

An added tension can arise from the fact that reproduction is connected to sexual activity. This could leave one of us feeling quite distressed and emotional about the idea of having sex, whereas the other may be happy about it. They could even be hopeful of conceiving another child, if this is a physical possibility.

On top of all of this, either or both of us might be affected by the intense tiredness and low mood that often accompanies grief.

There are no right or wrong ways to have intimacy while we are grieving. If what we need is very different from our partner, we will both need patience with each other. Simple affection and the warmth of loving arms around each other may be the first step to solving any differences. It will be helpful if we can manage to communicate together about this subject.

Spiritual issues

Previously, we may have shared spiritual beliefs and religious practices, but these may change following the death of our child. 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 our beliefs radically, it can drive a wedge between us.

Relatives and relationships

Grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, brothers and sisters, and if our child was an adult, their partner and children, will have their own grief for our child. They will also have 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. Although it is sometimes difficult to navigate, it is important that, as a couple, we make our own decisions and find our own peace about our child. We should 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 family members as we prepare for our child's funeral, it is ultimately our own wishes and preferences that need to take precedence. Of course, if our child was an adult with a partner, they are the next of kin and will have responsibility for this type of decision.

The death of our child may possibly bring our child's biological parent back into our lives, as they may wish to be involved in arranging the funeral or other matters. This can also complicate our relationship as a grieving couple.

The impact of people's reactions

"My husband's sister flew straight to see us and kept stroking my arm. To be honest, I found it extremely unhelpful, but I knew that my husband appreciated her support, so I didn't want to say anything."

The impact of how other people speak and behave can cause tension between us. One partner may see a friend or family member as supportive, and another may find them irritating or be disappointed by their reactions and comments. Again, this is something we may need to talk through together.

The way forward

“It’s been a long road, but we’ve now come to terms with the fact that we’re both handling our grief in our own ways. My partner has done some amazing charity events in our child’s memory, while I’ve been more insular in my grief. That’s okay. We both love our child, and we’re both doing our best.”

Each of us is a unique individual with our own unique relationship with our child. We are their parents, and they have their own place in our hearts. As we replay and record the story of our child’s life and death, we can acknowledge the role each of us played. Whilst the deep ache of missing our beloved child does not go away, 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 us. It does not indicate that either one of us loves our child more or less. 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. This may be hard for our partner to bear, but it may be what each of us needs to do at this time.

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 hopefully develop a deeper understanding of each other. 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 right or wrong 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.

Some couples do not manage to stay together after the death of a child, but this does not have to be the case. Paying attention to our partnership, giving each other space, and allowing ourselves to follow some different paths if necessary can help preserve our relationship, if this is what we both desire. We may even develop a stronger connection over time.

Our grieving will probably have intensified our awareness of each other and our sense of “together yet alone.” The wish to remember our child and to share memories will always be there, yet our lives do continue. The insights into our relationship that have been so painfully discovered as we grieve may eventually enrich our partnership in the years ahead. We are changed forever by this painful bereavement, and our way forward will not be easy. Still, the comfort of our shared memories will be a strength and keep our child close in our hearts.

Further reading

You may like to read this leaflet alongside any of these other titles by The Compassionate Friends (TCF) for more about different circumstances:

- Living with grief
 - Grieving child loss in blended and step families
 - The death of our step child or our partner’s child
 - A mother’s grief
 - A father’s grief
 - Various leaflets on grieving the death of a child
- in particular circumstances can be found on our website
tcf.org.uk/circumstances

Leaflets can be downloaded from **tcf.org.uk/leaflets**,
or printed copies can be requested from our office.



The Compassionate Friends

Call our National Helpline

0345 123 2304

The helpline is open as often as possible between 10am – 4pm and 7pm - 10pm every day. Calls are answered by a volunteer who is a bereaved parent.

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

X @TCFcharityUK

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General enquiries

0345 120 3785

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TCF library

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*In loving memory of our beautiful son, Andrew,
who tragically and suddenly died from Covid
in January 2021. He was 28 years old.*

