



The
Compassionate
Friends

A close-up photograph of a tree branch with green leaves and a small sapling growing from it. The background is blurred, showing more of the tree and some light spots.

The bereaved lone parent

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

The bereaved lone parent

There are many reasons why we may be a lone parent. Bereavement, divorce, personal choice or other circumstances can all lead to someone living as a single parent. Whatever the circumstances, grieving for a child without a partner can bring its own difficulties, and can be very lonely and isolating.

The lone parent

Coping with the loss of our child without a partner to support us through this most traumatic of times is very hard. No matter how supportive friends or family might be, in many respects we must struggle with both the emotions and the practical aspects of loss by ourselves. If we now have no surviving children, we may also question our identity. Can we still call ourselves a parent? Of course we can, but it might take some time before we can feel comfortable with that feeling.

If lone parenting has been caused by divorce or separation, we may feel guilty or experience regrets about the way life has turned out. We may even feel that the separation played a part in the death of our child. Or it may be that the death of a child will lead to contact with our ex-partner, even if there has been no contact for a long time. This may stir up complex emotions at an already very emotional time.

If lone parenting has been caused by the death of a partner, the death of a child can bring back the grief from our earlier bereavement. If we have other children, losing a sibling will probably revive their earlier grief. It may feel very frightening, as if our family is falling apart.

Almost every bereaved parent will experience a profound sense of isolation, a feeling that no one else can understand the depth of our pain. For lone parents, this feeling of isolation can be particularly intense, and the isolation may become a spiral. We can feel that we've been abandoned and this may lead us to turn away from the company of those who have good intentions and want to help.

Sometimes this loneliness and isolation can lead us into destructive behaviour. If we find that alcohol, medication or other substances help to dull our pain, it can be easy to become dependent. At this time especially

we need to take care of our own health. Grief is exhausting, emotionally and physically, and we need to be gentle with ourselves to keep our bodies functioning.

The early days

As a bereaved lone parent it is most helpful if another adult can give practical and emotional support in the early days that follow the death of our child. Most people need help with the organising and decision-making that surround a death; there are choices to be made, but sometimes we feel too deep in shock and grief to be capable of functioning at all. We may need someone who can share the memories and act as a sounding board as we go over and over the last few days, and recount the tiny details which help us to face the impossible reality of what has happened. It helps to have someone who knows what is meant when we ask, “Do you remember...?” We often assume that this would be the role of the other parent in a traditional family, but a friend or relative can also be an enormous help.

When it all gets too much to deal with, it is particularly difficult if there is no one around we can let off steam to, or who can offer a shoulder to cry on. If we have another child or children there are practical concerns. Another adult in the house at least means that if we need to go out for a short walk or just take a nap, there is someone available to hold the fort, to look after the other children, to answer telephone calls and other similar activities that still need doing. As a bereaved single parent, we may sometimes feel that there is not enough of us to go around. When we are struggling to get through the day because of our own grief, our remaining children may feel that we are ‘not there’ for them, but there may be no one else to fill the gap.

Support from outside the home can be a great help; close friends and family may provide this in emotional as well as practical ways. Perhaps we need someone to do the shopping or take the other children to their activities. It will help to share thoughts and feelings with them, to cry together and not to be afraid of upsetting each other. It is seldom a good idea to bottle up our grief.

If we do not have supportive friends or family nearby, then in a time of crisis it can be a good idea to speak with our GP, who may be able to point us to where we can find some assistance. There are other sources of emotional help, such as the The Compassionate Friends (TCF) helpline (see the back page for details), manned by volunteers who are bereaved

parents who will be able to understand how we are feeling. The Samaritans are always there if we need emotional support and can be contacted by phone (116 123 in the UK), email or text. Gingerbread, a national charity for single parents, may be helpful especially if we have surviving children.

Returning to work

Being a lone parent may well mean that we are the breadwinner of the household. We may feel compelled to return to work before we are ready to do so. We may worry about losing our job if we do not return, or be anxious that we are not doing the job adequately as a result of being preoccupied, forgetful and exhausted. Sometimes we try so desperately to appear normal that we do not see that support is available, and that people can be sympathetic and helpful if they are given the opportunity. When we are consumed by grief it can be very easy to misunderstand things – to feel upset by a comment that was intended to be supportive. Colleagues and friends often do not know what to say or do, and may need some guidance. (We may want to give them a copy of the TCF leaflet *Helping bereaved parents*.)

However, returning to the workplace is sometimes beneficial. It can open up social contact and give us focus.

No one can tell us when the time is right to return to work. We have to balance all of the factors and do the best we can, as circumstances may mean that it is not entirely our choice. (See the TCF leaflet *Back at work*.)

Things that help

The experience of life as a single parent has probably equipped us with strengths that could now come to our aid. Many of us will already have learnt to organise and motivate ourselves, and these inner resources will be helpful in the weeks, months and years following our bereavement.

Finding ways to comfort and distract ourselves can sometimes help. Activities that were previously pleasurable may provide us with a chance to relax and take stock, even if this is something simple such as soaking in the bath, listening to favourite music, watching sport or going to the gym. We may feel guilty the first time we realise we have laughed or experienced some brief respite from the misery of grief, but it will happen at some stage and it does not mean that we are forgetting our lost child or 'moving on'.

Compiling a Memory Book, with photographs, letters and little items, or a memorial website, can be a help. It can provide space and time to

remember our child and build a memory we can look at when we feel the need in years to come. It can be especially useful if we have other children who need help with their grief and can encourage them to share their painful but important memories. The TCF leaflet *Our surviving children* provides further information.

Many people, whether they have religious beliefs or not, find their thoughts turning to profound questions of existence at this time. Meditation, attending a place of worship, or talking to a religious leader or elder may help to bring spiritual comfort. Conversely, some people lose their faith after a bereavement.

We may seek, or be offered, professional help. This one-to-one support can provide the time to focus on our own emotional needs, rather than the needs of those we care for.

Friends, family and others

If we have an extended family they may come to our aid at this time, although not always in the form we wish for. We need to be open to new approaches, to try to accept good intentions from wherever they come, and not to allow past conflicts to prevent us from accepting sources of help. Sadly, it's not uncommon for rifts to develop at this time. We can feel that our family just don't understand us and can feel their comments or actions are hurtful. At times like this, we need all the support that we can get and things that may have seemed important in the past can often seem trivial in comparison to the situation in which we now find ourselves.

Friends can be a lifeline in these difficult times, but they often need help in understanding how they can best support us. We might need to explain that we need them just to be there, maybe not even talking much, and that we do not necessarily want to be taken out and 'cheered up'. We may welcome their practical help with household chores and so on, but we also need our friends for more than that: we need them to be alongside us and to be accepting of our current feelings, whatever they are. For some people this is too hard; they want us to be 'better' and back to our old self. They may be fearful for their own family or have suffered losses in their own pasts, which make our present state of grief too painful for them to bear. Some of these friends will return later, and we will probably discover some important new ones in the meantime.

Most of us find that it really helps to have someone to talk with, but it might be that our family or friends cannot fulfil this role for some reason. Instead, talking to other bereaved parents can bring us comfort. If we have

a local TCF group nearby, it might help to go along, or perhaps joining a support group on Facebook might help. TCF also has an online forum where we can talk privately with other bereaved parents. It can be very comforting to be able to say exactly what we're feeling when those around us can assure us that they too have felt the same way. Perhaps another bereaved parent will be able to put into words things which have been bothering us but which we were unable to express. When we find others who have faced this overwhelming grief, we often form very strong bonds of friendship which help us to cope.

If we have surviving children, they will also be mourning the loss of their brother or sister. No matter their age, our surviving children need us to reassure them, to love, protect and help them get through this devastating time. This can be extremely difficult for us as we ourselves are in shock and struggling to comprehend what has happened (For more on this, see the TCF leaflet, *Our surviving children*).

If we are now childless, we may worry about what appears to be an empty future. There are no easy answers, but step by step, as we adjust to our loss, we can find new meaning in our life. It can help to develop friendships with others who also have no children. We may find that new hobbies, perhaps joining a club or a choir, can broaden our social circle (For more on this, see the TCF leaflet, *Parents bereaved of an only child or all their children*).

Relationships

We may not have been in a relationship when our child died, and we may remain this way. As difficult as this may be on several levels, including emotionally and practically, it can however allow us the space and time to grieve in our own way. Loneliness is hard, but solitude may allow us precious moments of reflection.

If we later find ourselves in a new relationship, we will need to consider how and when we bring up the subject of our child(ren). If they were still alive, they would be a part of our life that our new friend or partner would accommodate. Although he or she (or they) is gone, they are still a part of us. We will continue to honour our child's memory as long as we live. Their anniversary and birthdate will always be special; there will be many occasions when we will want to "keep them in the conversation." It can be important to explain this early on in the relationship, and that our children are accepted as part of our new family, although not physically present.

Going forward

Gradually, over the years, we learn to live without the physical presence of our dearly loved son or daughter. We come to understand that we can face the future without leaving them behind, and that they are a permanent presence in our lives. They remain in our hearts for ever, and we never cease to love them.

Further Reading

Here is a list of other TCF leaflets that could be helpful at this time, depending on our circumstances.

All of these leaflets, and others, can be found online at **[tcf.org.uk/leaflets](https://www.tcf.org.uk/leaflets)**

- Remembering our child (leaflet and handbook)
- Back at work
- Our surviving children
- Parents bereaved of an only child or all their children

Leaflets for other people

- Helping bereaved parents (for friends and family)



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



@tcf.org.uk



@TCFcharityUK



@thecompassionatefriendsuk



@compassionate-friends-uk

General enquiries

0345 120 3785

info@tcf.org.uk

TCF library

0345 120 3785

library@tcf.org.uk



*In memory of Elizabeth "Lizzie" Mawer
who lived life to the full and gave joy
to all whose lives she touched.*