



The
Compassionate
Friends

The Sudden Death of Our Child

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

The Sudden Death of Our Child

When our child dies without warning, the shock and disbelief we suffer is overwhelming. It leaves us reeling; our world is rocked to the very core. How can this be true?

For a child of any age to die before his or her parents is not the expected order of things. This is even more shocking when the death is sudden, whether as a result of violence, suicide, a health emergency, accident or other cause. There will be no future opportunity to say the things we would want to or resolve misunderstandings. There is no chance to prepare, but mostly there is no opportunity to say goodbye. In the blink of an eye so many aspects of our life are changed forever.

Those dreadful moments, when we are told about – or even worse witness – the death of our child, are etched in our memory forever. Our world comes to a sudden stop in that instant and we feel out of time, out of place. The enormity of what has happened sinks in only gradually; we go into a state of shock.

The turmoil caused by sudden death

Shock is often the body's first response to news of sudden death. Everything seems surreal; we begin to operate on auto pilot because normal emotions and responses are paralysed. From the outside we may seem to appear relatively calm and detached. Because of this, other people often assume we are coping well. This is part of our inherent natural defence system and it can take weeks, months and even years for the bereaved to understand what has happened to their family.

As we begin to comprehend that our life has been irrevocably

changed, we experience a bewildering array of strong emotions. Feeling guilty about what might have been done to prevent the death is normal. As parents, our role is to protect, nurture and make things right. Our heads fill with those questions that begin with 'what if' or 'if only', and we often blame ourselves. This self-questioning is natural although ultimately, we will hopefully come to accept that it was not our fault. But in this early time, we may be tortured with these thoughts, going over and over the same things. It can help to share these thoughts with someone trustworthy. Sometimes it is too painful to do this with close family members; it can be more appropriate with a counsellor or within the safety of a support group.

Support groups can be very helpful in terms of countering feelings of isolation commonly felt by newly bereaved parents and their families. It really helps to know that however dreadful this situation is, we do not have to suffer on our own. The Compassionate Friends [TCF] run local support groups and larger meetings, as well as a private Internet Forum and Facebook Groups – see the back page for contact details.

Anger can also surface – sometimes unexpectedly and violently; sometimes soon after the loss, or maybe months or years later. As the reality of our child's death slowly sinks in, we have feelings of intense anger at the injustice, and experience deep anguish as we recognise that the loss is forever. Anger may be directed at God, or someone we hold responsible, or anyone or anything. Often it is triggered by the smallest thing and yet we are consumed with rage. We need safe ways to vent our anger – again, perhaps through counselling or sharing our feelings with people who have been through a similar experience.

Over time the burden of our guilt and blame can move from being a main focus of our grief to a level of realisation and acceptance that many tragedies in life are neither preventable nor foreseeable.

Finding ways of managing our daily lives in light of our child's absence is a real challenge for many families. It is difficult to watch the world continue as usual, whilst we are missing our child and our family is incomplete. We begin to feel out of place and time. What should be joyous occasions are now overshadowed by sadness. It is therefore particularly important for us to find fitting ways to remember and honour our child. This can be as simple as including

our child's name often in conversation, telling stories and sharing memories, or hosting significant memorial gatherings.

Writing can be a useful and creative outlet for our conflicting and confusing emotions; a safe way of expressing ourselves. It does not matter if we share our writings or they remain personal. Walking or just being somewhere beautiful can also be beneficial.

Physical exercise can be a safe outlet for painful emotions. It can provide focus and control, even if only whilst we are doing it. Gentle exercise such as yoga can be meditative and aid relaxation, whilst vigorous exercise such as running or boxing can be a way to express anger and leave us feeling calmer afterwards.

Gradually as we feel our way through this sudden loss, we begin to recognise our limits and learn to trust our own intuition.

For more on coping with early grief, see these TCF leaflets:

- *Grief of the Newly Bereaved* www.tcf.org.uk/griefofthenewlybereaved
- *Living with Grief* www.tcf.org.uk/livingwithgrief

Letting other people know

There is a pressing need to tell family and close friends before they hear about the death of our child through the mainstream media or via social media. Difficult phone calls will need to be made; perhaps a family member or friend could take care of this for us, if we feel unable to face telling this tragic news over and over.

Depending on the circumstances of the death, we may be subjected to what we see as intrusions to our family life by the police, the law or the media. Most sudden, accidental or unexplained deaths will entail police investigations, acutely distressing and involving parents, siblings and others. We are struggling to cope with the horror of the sudden death of our loved one whilst the police are investigating a potential crime. Even when the rational part of us recognises that the role of the police and the law is necessary, our emotions might still rebel at the intrusion. Media intrusion can be particularly upsetting especially when reporting is inaccurate and ill-informed. In dealing with the media many of us have found it best to issue a

short statement and photograph, then requesting privacy in which to grieve. A friend or relative may be able to help with this duty.

News about our child can circulate rapidly on social media. Comments may be kind and respectful, but they may also contain falsehoods, assumptions and guesswork. Not having control over the way our child's death is discussed may compound our grief. This could be particularly the case if the narrative starts to include some blame or criticism towards our child. For instance, if our child's lifestyle or choice of companions put him or her in the potential of harm's way, there may be comments on the lines of "it was his/her fault..."

There is no right or wrong way to deal with this. Some of us may find that we can simply ignore negative and erroneous comments, whilst others may wish to put out statements to correct misinformation. We may also find it helpful to learn about features such as privacy settings, blocking/muting options, as well as being aware of who we can contact if we feel there is an issue that needs to be taken further.

The law, funeral arrangements and other formalities

All deaths bring legal tasks that have to be performed, some of them unfamiliar and unexpected. Some of us may have dealt before with these things, but when it is for our own child it is much more painful. The older the child was, the more likely that there may be more complex matters to deal with. If our child had been living away from home, perhaps with a partner, there may be issues about who has the legal duties as 'next of kin'.

We may have the opportunity to view our child's body, although depending on the exact circumstances of their death, this may not be possible or advised. If we are able to, and choose to do this, it can be a good idea to bring someone with us for support. Nothing can prepare a mother or father for this ordeal, especially where there has been visible injury.

Following our child's sudden death and in the midst of our deepest loss, we will inevitably have to deal with **bureaucracy**. An investigation may be needed to establish the cause of death. If

the Coroner (Procurator Fiscal in Scotland) rules an Inquest is to be held, this may mean that we cannot immediately finalise the preparations for a funeral. In addition, if the death was a result of murder or dangerous driving for instance, a criminal trial may have to be held. We will need all of our inner strengths to endure the long, agonising rituals that the law demands, but should remember that however awful this is we have already survived the worst thing. Some officials will be empathetic and supportive, but others will continue with their business, seemingly without thought for our anguish and suffering.

TCF has produced a series of factsheets with detailed advice about preparation for and **copng with inquests** in England and Wales, as well as the Investigation of Sudden Deaths in Scotland. See: www.tcf.org.uk/legalhelp

Some of us are confronted with the **death of our child whilst abroad** and have to arrange for repatriation. This can be fraught with difficulties – coping with different time zones, customs and languages. For some families, funeral arrangements cannot be made because no body has been found. In this case we have even greater difficulty in realising the reality of death. Knowing what to do with our child's possessions is now even harder; it might seem like a betrayal, because we cling to the hope that they may yet come home. Information about where and how our child died can help, as can any written communication or other evidence. This searching for proof may make us feel guilty, as if we were wishing them dead. This is not so! We just want, need, the truth, however painful it may be. If our child has died abroad or far away and we cannot visit, a photograph of the place may be of help.

See the TCF *Death Abroad Factsheet* for practical information on this. www.tcf.org.uk/deathoverseas

Finally, at some point we are given permission to **arrange a funeral**. Most people's experiences of this have been for elderly relatives, who have most likely expressed their wishes during life. The circumstances of a sudden death may mean that there was no chance to discuss them before, either with our deceased child, our partner or other family members. TCF has a leaflet, *Preparing Our Child's Funeral*, which may be useful.

www.tcf.org.uk/preparingourchildsfuneral

TCF Leaflets dealing specifically with some of the possible causes of sudden death :

- *After Suicide* www.tcf.org.uk/aftersuicide
- *When Our Child has been Murdered* www.tcf.org.uk/murder (revision due in 2020)
- *Our Child's Death Following a Road Traffic Incident* (due to be published 2020 www.tcf.org.uk/roadtraffic)
- *Bereaved through drug or alcohol use* www.tcf.org.uk/drugorcoholuse

Coping as we go forwards

We will never “get over” the loss of our child, but we can find ways to cope, and eventually, to live positively. We deserve to experience happiness, and to truly live rather than merely survive. This does not mean forgetting our child. Most of us want to live in ways that our child would be proud of. We may become involved with charity work or find ways to honour our child's memory. (For more on this, see TCF leaflet *Remembering Our Child* .)

Given the enormity of our sudden loss, it will not be surprising if eventually we look back and wonder about our actions when we first received the news about our child's death. Sometimes we might wish we had done things differently or regret decisions made. We should try to console ourselves that we did the best we could at the time. Nothing could have prepared us for this tragedy.

It is important to remember that each person's grief is unique. There are no right or wrong ways of grieving. We may see differences between ourselves and other family members as we adjust to coping with the emptiness that the loss of our child has brought.

If we have 'surviving' children, we may focus on their health and wellbeing but must remember that they are grieving too.

Whilst initially the world seems a desolate and dark place, gradually chinks of light and colour edge back in to our daily lives. As the terrible rawness of grief softens, what remains intact is our bond of love with our child, a love that continues and grows with us.



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www.tcf.org.uk |  [@tcf.org.uk](https://www.facebook.com/tcf.org.uk)  [@TCFcharityUK](https://twitter.com/TCFcharityUK)

This leaflet is sponsored by Robert and Wendy Treadgold in memory of their beloved son, Matthew. A remarkable and compassionate young man who is sorely missed.

Founder: The Revd Canon Dr Simon Stephens OBE

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