



The
Compassionate
Friends

Grieving for our adult child (from 18 to 80)

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

Grieving for our adult child (from 18 to 80)

We do not expect to outlive our children, and being bereaved of a child of any age is devastating. The death of an adult child, who was living their own life, had a circle of friends and perhaps a career and a family, raises a range of issues for us as parents.

Grief can be complex. We are probably feeling a profound sense of loss, along with intense sorrow. We may also experience anger, guilt, anxiety and many other emotions. Our world has changed forever, with the ending of hopes and dreams for our child's future, and perhaps also for our own. We may feel guilty, wondering why we are alive when our child has died. We may worry about the wellbeing of our child's own children, if they had them.

We may have to contend with some unexpected and hurtful responses. Some people may believe that because our child was an adult, the pain of losing them is not as great as if they were younger. They cannot see that the role of a parent lasts for all of our lives, and our hearts are broken.

For many of us, losing an adult child is also losing a friend. We met up for coffee, went shopping together or chatted on the phone. They could have been a help with the practical challenges of day-to-day living, including technology. Our child may have been our trusted advisor for important decisions. If we are elderly or in poor health, we may have relied on them for support or transportation. If we have no other children, or at least no children who are able to take on this role, we may worry about the future. How will our life end up, especially if we have no partner?

Where our child was living

Our adult child could have been 20, 40 or 60 years of age, but they were still our child. They may have lived close by or even with us, allowing us to continue to enjoy their companionship, or they may have been living at a distance.

They may have settled in their own home, either alone or with a partner and family of their own. We became used to their absence and the empty bedroom, but things are different now. Now, we are no longer able to message them, speak together on the phone, or look forward to visits.

Alternatively, we might not have seen our child much in recent years. Perhaps their own lives took them many miles away, or maybe they even broke off contact with us for some reason. Now that they are gone, we may find ourselves looking back with regret that we missed seeing them for so long. If there was a rift, we have lost the opportunity to find out what caused it and to make the relationship good again.

“My child returned to live with me for economic reasons after a few years of independent living. It took a while for us to get used to each other again as adults, but in the end this arrangement turned out well and we enjoyed each other’s company. Their death has left a massive gap and I feel very lonely.”

Our child may instead have been living in the family home. This could have been for convenience, or there may have been specific reasons such as their health needs. Perhaps they needed our support on account of physical or mental illness, disability or problems with alcohol or drugs. Their absence now will have left a huge void in our daily routine.

On the other hand, it may have been that our child was caring for us. We may now need to seek out alternative support for our care needs. This can be destabilising and cause extra pressure which may compound our grief.

Whatever the reasons for them to have been living with us, their absence will affect us very deeply.

Our unique grief

Each person's journey through grief is in some ways unique. Grief is always difficult, but for some of us, it can be particularly intense and isolating. The extent or lack of social and family support can make a big difference in the ways that we cope.

If our child had a troubled life, our grief may be complex. They may have misused drugs or alcohol, been addicted, lived rough, or served time in prison. Although their choices were not our fault, we may find that feelings of shame, guilt and regret increase the pain of our loss.

Some deaths are sudden and unexpected, perhaps as a result of violent crime, a road traffic incident, a sudden medical emergency, or suicide. Sudden deaths often require a post mortem, sometimes followed by an Inquest (or Fatal Accident Inquiry in Scotland). Even when officials are striving to be sympathetic, having to face legal proceedings can extend and intensify our grief.

Along with grief for our child, if they died before starting their own family, we may also be grieving for an expected future that will now never be. If they were our only child, we are now childless and without the possibility of ever having grandchildren.

Relationships

Our child's partner

If our child was married or in a civil partnership, then the bereaved spouse will normally be next of kin. This means they will be responsible for planning the funeral, taking care of their possessions, and all legal matters dealing with the estate. We will wish to express our views. Our help may not always be welcome. Accepting that they have the legal right to make these decisions may be hard to bear. It will be particularly difficult if the relationship with our child's partner was poor and we are now shut out.

Even if we have had a good relationship with our child's partner up until now, it is likely to change. They will have their own ways of coping with their grief, and their ways may be very different from our

own. We may find we are in direct contact with them more frequently than before, especially if they and our child had children together. It may be that our shared grief brings us closer, and we can mourn in each other's company. But we may also find this does not happen, or that contact is broken or lessens over time.

Our child's partner may start to turn away from us to begin their life without our child, and this may include a new relationship. This can cause us additional pain. We may be happy for them in some respects, but still also feel resentful. They are able to 'move on' to be with a new person, whereas for us, our child is irreplaceable.

Grandchildren

"One of the hardest things for me has been realising that my child is going to miss seeing their own children grow up."

If our child had children of their own, our role as grandparents could now change. We may have more or less responsibility or contact with them.

Our grandchildren have lost their parent and will need big doses of love, comfort and understanding. Their world has been shattered, and because of this, the stability of their relationship with us can be a great source of strength. If our grandchildren are young, we may find it very painful that they will never get to know their parent, our child. We will want to share stories and keepsakes to help build a relationship of memory.

If the family moves further away, we can help our grandchildren cope by supporting the move as positively as possible. We can reassure them that we will stay in their lives with messaging and phone calls, and plan visits where feasible.

In time, our child's partner may go on to have a new relationship. It can be painful to hear our grandchildren address a step-parent in the same affectionate terms they used for our child. Other children may come into the household. Building a relationship with the newly enlarged 'blended' family will take some time.

“I haven’t seen or heard from my grandchildren for four years - it is absolutely heartbreaking and I have no idea why their father has refused to let us be a part of their lives, My daughter would be so upset.”

Sadly, our child’s partner may choose to break off contact with us. To be deprived not only of our child, but also of contact with our grandchildren, is extremely hurtful. We may not even know the reasons. In order to keep the door open for future contact, it may help if we try not to respond angrily. Staying calm and positive may offer the best chance of contact being resumed at a later date. However, this may not be until our grandchildren are older and can make their own decisions. Some of us have found comfort in writing letters we do not send to our grandchildren, in the hope that we’ll be able to share these words with them in the future.

On the other hand, we may have a very different situation, where we find ourselves taking on parental responsibility for grandchildren. This may be due to our child having been a single parent, or their partner not being able to care for them. There may be a legal process to formalise this relationship.

Having grandchildren to take care of may be welcome and bring us great joy. Yet taking on the role and responsibilities of parenting at this stage of life may also present some difficulties. We may not have the physical and emotional stamina we once had. Having young children or teenagers under our roof once more is a major life adjustment. This may have an impact on our job, our finances and our living arrangements, and perhaps change the plans we had made for our later years.

The changing relationship with our child’s partner or with their children can be a lot to cope with. We may find it helpful if there is someone we can confide in, outside the family, about how things are going and how we are feeling. This could be a trusted friend or in a support group such as those run by The Compassionate Friends.

Our other children: our child's siblings

It is likely that our relationship with our other children will alter, at least in the short term, while each of us responds to what has happened. They may express their grief in ways that are quite different to our own. They may choose to distance themselves from us. This will be hard, as we may feel we have lost more than one child. Alternatively, our other children may take more care of us than they do of themselves, and we may worry that they are not allowing time and space for their own grief.

Other people may not realise the depth of their grief. Our friends and other family members may focus their attention on our raw grief as a parent. Sometimes they will need reminding that our children are grieving too and in need of kindness and support.

Practical Matters

Funeral and legal matters if our child had no spouse

“The interview at the bank to close my child’s accounts was relatively straightforward once I had the death certificate, except at the start, they did not really appreciate that ‘the deceased’ was not some elderly relative, but my child.”

If our child had been living alone, it is likely we will be faced with the sad job of clearing out their home, as well as notifying others of their death and arranging the funeral – something we had never expected. We may want to elicit the help of close friends or other family to help with these tasks. Their emotional support will be invaluable.

If our child was not married or in a civil partnership and they had children, their children will inherit their estate, unless there is a will specifying otherwise. If there are no children, then the parents are next in line to inherit under the laws of ‘intestacy’.

This means that we may be the ones to deal with our child's estate, including closing bank accounts and much more. It may be the first time we have come across the complications of executorship or administration. We may need to search through their personal papers to find the necessary information. We will probably need multiple copies of their death certificate. It could be helpful to seek the advice of a solicitor.

Our child's 'digital legacy' would also come to us in those circumstances, and we will have the right to their phone, tablet or computer. With these will come entry to their email and social media accounts. We will want to think carefully before accessing their personal accounts, as these contain private communication between our child and their friends.

If our child was caring for us

If we are coping with health issues or ageing, our child may have been a big help to us. They may have lived close by or with us. As well as their companionship, we might have relied on them for our personal care or transport needs. They may have helped with tasks like banking, talking to our utility providers, paying bills, as well as accompanying us to hospital appointments. Even if our child mostly supported us over the phone, we may feel anxious about how we will manage without them.

If we have other children, hopefully there is one who can fill the role that our child had, but they might not be able to do this. They may not be available or capable of offering the same support.

Alternatively, we may have been bereaved of our only child. In these circumstances, as well as our deep sadness, we may also now be frightened about who will take care of us now and in the future.

If our adult child was our carer, it's important to make sure we find new support as soon as we can. Organisations like Age UK may be able to help us find resources within our community. If we cannot manage alone, we may need to contact our local authority to explain the situation.

Useful contacts

Age UK: ageuk.org.uk | 0800 055 6112

The line is open between 8 am and 7 pm every day.

The Silver Line Helpline | 0800 4 70 80 90

Run by Age UK, this is a free, confidential telephone service for older people that provides friendship, conversation and support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

TCF Factsheet - Aging without descendants

Available on our website visit

tcf.org.uk/resources/AgingWithoutDescendants-Factsheet.pdf

Coping with the immensity of our loss

Coping with grief following the death of a child is not easy. It can be difficult to find people who relate to what we are going through. We may become lonely, especially if we draw back from social interactions. That is why many parents find it helps to get in touch with The Compassionate Friends (TCF). TCF provides a safe, supportive space to share thoughts and feelings. In communicating with other bereaved parents, we can find reassurance that we are not alone in what we are going through. We can understand each other in ways that many other people, not similarly bereaved, simply cannot.

TCF private Facebook pages are safe places to express our feelings and listen to others. TCF also holds small group meetings and larger gatherings around the country, as well as online. The Grief Companion programme can provide individual support to the recently bereaved. There are details of the TCF helpline and contact information on the back page.

Going forward

Our child was a unique individual. Regardless of their life story, no matter if sometimes they made us glad or sad, they were still our child and we will always love them. We draw comfort from happy memories, although of course, these are not the same as their living presence. Our journey of grief is filled with ups and downs. Most of us find in time that the intense pain ceases to be constant. We experience times of happiness again, helped by the knowledge that there are still other people who value us. Yet we continue to miss our child and feel distressed by their absence. Irrespective of their age or our own age, we are always and forever a parent. We will never stop cherishing their memory in our hearts and minds.

Further Reading

Here is a list of TCF leaflets that look in more depth at the issues discussed in this leaflet. All of these leaflets, and others, can be found online at **tcf.org.uk/leaflets**

- Living with grief
- Our adult child's partner and friends
- Our surviving adult children
- For parents bereaved of an only child or all their children
- Helping our grandchildren when our child has died
- Coping with stigma and other judgemental attitudes
- Our child's digital legacy



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

@thecompassionatefriendsuk

in @compassionate-friends-uk

General enquiries

0345 120 3785

info@tcf.org.uk

TCF library

0345 120 3785

library@tcf.org.uk



*In memory of our daughter Pippa Bertram
who we lost aged 20 on 15th December 2018.
Hope this helps others in our situation.*



*Sponsored in loving memory of our precious son
Cameron Sharratt who will be forever 24.
“Loving, Loyal and full of laughter”.*