



The
Compassionate
Friends

The Death of an Adult Child



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

The Death of an Adult Child

We do not expect to outlive our children, no matter their age. As bereaved parents we suffer a jumble of emotions, including intense sorrow. The sense of loss is one of the most profound; many of our expectations, hopes and dreams for the future are ended, and our world has changed forever.

Our family unit will never be complete again, and every relationship within it has changed. As parents, we may have the extra challenges of coping with our own grief at the same time as supporting any surviving siblings and possibly our child's own children.

Losing a child of any age is devastating. The death of an adult child, who has lived their own life, has a circle of friends, perhaps a career and a family, brings particular issues for us as parents.

For example, we may have to contend with some unexpected responses. One of these is that some people seem to believe that, because our child was an adult, the pain of losing them is therefore much less. They can't see that the role of a parent lasts for all of our lives. The death of our child, regardless of age, leaves us with love we can no longer give them and at times a feeling that in some vital way we failed to keep them from harm. In addition, our relationship with them could have matured from parent/child to one of friendship, and we will miss them on many levels.

Grief can be complex at the best of times. Older parents in particular may have intense feelings of survival guilt, wondering why, after a long and full life, we should be alive when our child has died. These feelings are not uncommon and you can read more about them in The Compassionate Friends (TCF) leaflet *Living with Grief*.

Where our child was living

It is more common nowadays for children to stay longer in the family home, and in some communities, it is usual for a son or daughter to always live there. There may also have been health reasons why our adult child continued to live with us. Perhaps they needed our support on account of physical or mental illness, disability or problems with alcohol or drugs. Their death will have left a huge void in our daily routine, adding further to our grief. A sense of purpose may have kept us going while we cared for them; now they are gone, we struggle to find meaning in our life.

On the other hand, our son or daughter may have settled under their own roof, either alone or with a partner and/or family of their own. We will have already adjusted to their daily absence, the changed routine and the empty bedroom.

We might have remained close to our child, or we might not have seen them much in recent years. Perhaps they even broke off contact with us, for whatever reasons; maybe they moved overseas. Now that they are gone, we may find ourselves looking back in great sorrow.

Our child's partner

If our child was married or in a civil partnership, then the bereaved spouse will normally be **next of kin**, and he/she 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, and help wherever possible, but must accept that they have the legal right to have their decisions carried out, however hard that may be for us to bear.

Funeral and legal matters if our child had no spouse

If our child was **living alone**, it is likely we will be faced with the sad task of clearing out their home, as well as notifying others of the death and arranging the funeral – something we had never expected.

If our child **died abroad** (or even in a distant part of the UK), we will face the practical problems of arranging for repatriation or burial abroad.

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 would be the ones to deal with our son or daughter'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. It is at this point that we may meet officials from financial institutions who do not appreciate that 'the deceased' is not some elderly relative, but is our child. We will have to search through their personal papers to establish their assets and any debts. We will likely 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**. If we decide to access these accounts, we will be looking at a flow of communication between our adult child and their friends, some of which was always intended to be private. We may discover they took part in activities or held opinions we had known nothing about. These might be positive and make us proud; then again, we may come across some things that cause

us additional grief and pain. If we are not ready to face this knowledge, it might be better not to proceed.

Accessing our adult child's digital world is a very personal decision, and it may help to take guidance from those who were closest to him or her (their lifelong best friend for example).

Grandchildren

With our child's death, if they had children of their own, our role as grandparents may change, temporarily or permanently. The children will need special comfort and understanding; this may be difficult for us in our own grief, and can be very tiring. Whatever our relationship with our grandchildren, it is best to answer their questions as simply and honestly as possible. When a grandchild's world has been shattered by the death of a parent (our child), the stability and security of their relationship with us will be a great strength to both them and us. They may feel that they can speak more easily to their grandparents than to their surviving parent.

Many of us will have had a good relationship with our child's partner, and will wish to maintain this. He/she may go on to have a new relationship, possibly with other children involved. It can be painful to hear grandchildren call a step-parent "Mummy" or "Daddy", but we have to accept this as a natural progression. It would be good, if possible, to build a relationship with the newly enlarged 'blended' family. If the family moves to a new home further away, we can help our grandchildren cope by being as positive about the move as possible, reassuring them that we will keep in touch and visit when it can be arranged.

In some circumstances, our child's partner may break off all contact with us. This is extremely hurtful. However, contact may well be resumed when the grandchildren are older and can make their own decisions.

Resources and support

Communicating with other bereaved parents can help us realise that we are not alone in what we are going through. The TCF online forum and private Facebook pages are safe places to express our feelings and listen to others. TCF also holds small group meetings around the country and larger gatherings. (See back page for details.)

We might have particular issues related directly to the cause of our child's death, and some of these are also discussed in particular subgroups of TCF.

Some of our children had **troubled lives**. They may have misused drugs or alcohol, been addicted, lived rough, or served time in prison. We may then suffer a complex grief, with shame, guilt and regret increasing our pain of loss. We may feel isolated.

Some deaths are **sudden and unexpected**, caused by 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, the legal proceedings can seem cruel.

The immensity of our loss

For many of us, losing an adult son or daughter is also losing a friend; someone with whom we met up for coffee, went shopping and chatted on the phone. If we are elderly or in poor health, we may have additionally relied on them for support and security. Our child may have been there with us for hospital appointments, driven us around when needed, or been our trusted advisor, for instance. Now we are faced with the practical difficulties of day-to-day chores without their help. We may also have worries for the future. If our partner is still alive, we may have felt assured that, when one

of us died, our child would be there to care for the one who is left behind. That cannot now happen.

Along with grief for our child, if he or she had died before they started their own family, we may also be grieving for an expected future that will now never be. If our son or daughter was our only child, we may have lost the possibility of ever having grandchildren. The years ahead can seem bleak and lonely.

The loss of a child of any age is devastating. No matter who our child was; no matter what they accomplished in their lives or how they behaved; no matter that some actions made us proud or some caused us sadness, they were still our child, and we will always love them. We honour their memories as we live our lives now. In time, we will find that the intense pain of our grief ceases to be constant, and we will be more able to enjoy happy memories that our child has left. Although life will never be the same again, we can pick up the pieces, helped by the knowledge that there are still other people who need us. In the future, we will be able to have times of happiness and laughter again - impossible to imagine when we are newly bereaved.

Here is a list of TCF leaflets and fact sheets that look in more depth at the issues above.

Leaflets:

- When our Child has Died of a Long-Term Illness.
- Our Adult Child's Friends and Partner
- Our Child's Digital Legacy
- Helping our Grandchildren When our Child has Died
- Childless Parents

- Coping with Judgemental Attitudes
- The Sudden Death of our Child
- When our Child has been Murdered
- After Suicide

Factsheets:

- On death abroad
- Inquests

All of these leaflets, and others, can be found here: www.tcf.org.uk/leaflets



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This leaflet is sponsored by The Compassionate Friends Kings Lynn support group in memory of all their beloved sons and daughters.

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