



The  
Compassionate  
Friends

## When Our Grandchild Dies

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

# When Our Grandchild Dies

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The death of a grandchild is a double heartbreak for us. At the same time as grieving as a grandparent, we are also a parent who feels unable to protect our child from the pain and desolation of bereavement. Needing to cope with our own grief as well as finding the strength to support our child can affect us profoundly. We feel great sorrow, not only at the loss of our grandchild, but also at the impact this has had on our family.

## A grandparent's grief

Families come in all shapes and sizes. Our adult child may have been parenting their child or children by themselves or as part of a couple. Their child may have been born to them or may have come into their life through fostering or adoption. Their partner – if they have one – may not be their first, and if so, may have brought other children into the household. Sometimes, because of distance or circumstances, our contact with our child or grandchild will have been limited. Our grandchild might not have lived under the same roof as our child.

All of this might have complicated our relationship both with our child and our grandchild. None of these factors are likely to reduce the intensity of our grief now our grandchild has died, but it can influence how other people respond to us, as they may or may not realise just how deeply we are grieving.

Following the initial shock at the death of our grandchild, which can leave us numb, some of our physical reactions may be tiredness

and changes to appetite and sleep patterns. Anxiety, loss of concentration and depression are common, but not everyone will experience all of these. Grief tends to come in waves without any predictability. If we have a partner, their waves may not coincide with our own, and this can cause friction. We should be aware of each other's emotions and make allowances for them. Differences in grieving patterns can cause a rift.

Many grandparents suffer from feelings of guilt. One of the most powerful is survival guilt. We are alive when someone, much younger than us, has died, and we may wish that we had died in their place. The death of a child, let alone a grandchild, is against the natural order. We feel guilty about the things we did or did not do for our grandchildren. Talking about these worries can help us to realise that nobody is perfect, and we all do the best we can in the circumstances with which we are presented.

We might also experience some feelings of anger. It is not always rational but needs to be faced. Anger is a strong emotion and may be directed at life in general, at God or any individual person or authority that we consider responsible for the death of our grandchild. It will help if this anger is expressed safely, perhaps through physical activity or exercise, talking to an understanding friend or writing. Such writing could be in the form of a letter in which we pour out all our frustration. Once written, the letter can be destroyed.

## Helping our child

The ways our child shows grief may be different from our own and need to be respected. We may not always be in agreement with their choices as they struggle to adapt. We can help by having a healthy balance between being supportive without interfering. It

will not help them if we tell them what they should or should not be doing, feeling or thinking. The best support is often being available to listen and empathise while they share their anger, anguish and despair with us. We may have a good relationship with our child's partner if they have one, and we can be a sympathetic listener for them too, if they wish, and perhaps take some of the stress away from the couple.

We might be able to offer help with the practical demands of family life, such as the care of other grandchildren who will be grieving too. Looking after any family pets, or perhaps doing a little work around the house, can relieve some of the pressures on our child; this could be especially valuable if they are a lone parent. Some people, particularly men, have problems expressing their emotions, and sometimes find shared activities more helpful. Whatever the circumstances, it is important to look after ourselves so that we do not get overtired. We need to cope with our own grief and find time to replenish our energies.

If the relationship between us and our child has been difficult, or even if it has been good, it may not be easy for them to talk to us about their thoughts and fears. Sometimes bereaved parents can find someone outside the family, perhaps a trusted friend, to open up to. They may find comfort speaking to others in the same situation or benefit from seeking professional support through a counsellor.

Many of us find it helpful to undertake activities together with our child and their family that keep the memory of our grandchild alive. Visiting memorable places, working on projects using their photos or simply raising a toast to them during a meal are just a few ideas.

If our child has no remaining children, it may be helpful for them to know about the Childless Parents Group within The Compassionate Friends (TCF). If we have no other grandchildren, this might also be useful for ourselves. Through this organisation, it might be possible to make contact with others who have lost their only grandchild. This could perhaps bring some support, especially if there is little or no prospect of another child being born into that generation.

## Helping our other grandchildren

If there are surviving children in the bereaved family, we may find that we are able to offer them much needed stability, comfort and support, especially whilst the usual patterns of family life are disrupted. This will be a significant time for both us and our grandchildren, and new bonds may be formed that can last a lifetime. We can gain great strength through being together and sharing time and activities, even if not talking about grief directly.

Children might have many fears and worries at this time. It is common for them to dread that they too might die, especially if their sibling died of an illness. We will want to answer their questions as simply and honestly as possible, even though this is painful and difficult for them and us. It is important to communicate with their parents so that we know how much information they wish for their children to be made aware of. TCF publishes leaflets and articles on children's grief and their changing understanding of death as they grow older, and the Postal Library has a range of literature that may be helpful.

Those of us living at a distance will be able to help and reassure our child and grandchildren with letters, cards, phone calls, texts, emails and messages. Social networks may become a lifeline for our other grandchildren as they reach out for support. It is

important that the surviving grandchildren feel special, loved and valued at this time; grandparents are well placed to help in this way with messages that are personal to each child.

## Family occasions

In the early years after the death of their child, our adult child will need our understanding at family occasions, when the absence of a much-loved child is felt especially acutely. There is always going to be a member missing from the family. In later years, on birthdays, anniversaries, weddings, births and other deaths, recognition of the pain and loss will be appreciated. Seemingly ordinary days, such as when the child might have started school, college or work, can be significant too. Of course, as grandparents, we may also find our thoughts at these times painful, and, perhaps, a reminder of the sad 'if only' that could change our lives. Wherever possible and appropriate, there can be much to gain from sharing our feelings with each other.

## Hope

**Over the years, the pain of our early grief as grandparents will hopefully lessen in intensity. The support and understanding of others who have endured similar experiences and are further along the journey of grief can be a great support to us. Whilst our grandchild's life was far shorter than any of us could ever have wished, we will eventually be able to look back and remember the happy times we spent with them. These shared memories will be a treasure for our family.**

## Further Reading

Other TCF leaflets that could be helpful at this time:

- *Living with Grief*
- *Helping Bereaved Parents*
- *Remembering our Child (Leaflet and Handbook)*
- *Coping with Special Occasions*
- *The Grief of the Newly Bereaved*

TCF leaflets can be downloaded from [www.tcf.org.uk/leaflets](http://www.tcf.org.uk/leaflets); printed copies are also available from the TCF office.

## Who are the Compassionate Friends?

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) was founded in 1969 by a hospital chaplain and a group of bereaved parents who recognised the lack of support and understanding they were receiving from those who had not suffered in this way. The reading of this leaflet may be your first real contact with TCF. We hope it has given you a little comfort, perhaps showing you that your pain and worries are shared by others. TCF publishes over 40 leaflets, on different aspects of grief which follow the death of a child. All of them are available at no charge to bereaved families. For further support and to talk to one of our volunteers call our Helpline on **0345 123 2304**. Our website at [www.tcf.org.uk/support](http://www.tcf.org.uk/support) has more information about our services.



The  
**Compassionate  
Friends**

UK Helpline:

**0345 123 2304**

Northern Ireland Helpline:

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**General Enquiries**

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**TCF Library**

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E: [library@tcf.org.uk](mailto:library@tcf.org.uk)

To find out more about TCF visit

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

Erin I remember you in the birds chirping in the trees,  
the butterflies, a rainbow, the sea flowing and in the  
sun rising and setting. Always loved. Nan 🌈🌍💙

**Founder: The Revd Canon Dr Simon Stephens OBE**

**President: The Countess Mountbatten of Burma**