



The  
Compassionate  
Friends

## Death of our Stepchild or our Partner's Child

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

# Death of our Stepchild or our Partner's Child

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The death of a child, no matter their age, causes heartbreak for their parents. This leaflet looks at some of the particular issues that may arise if the child who died was our partner's biological child but not our own.

**For other aspects of coping with grief, grief within blended families, and supporting surviving children, please see the list of publications produced by The Compassionate Friends (TCF) at the end of this leaflet.**

## Our grief

We live in a society that produces many variations of families, and anyone may find themselves in an active or passive parenting role for those who are not their biological children. The blended family may come about following earlier bereavement, through single parenthood or after separation or divorce, and the stepchildren may live part- or full-time in the new family. We may or may not be one of the child's legal parents.

Even though we do not have a biological or perhaps legal connection, the death of a child within our family circle is still going to be a terrible event. We may recognise within ourselves any of the common grief reactions such as profound sadness, confusion, sleeplessness, lack of concentration, and more. Grief is not orderly or progressive: it pours in causing great emotional turmoil, and is unpredictable in its timing and intensity. It comes in waves and often feels overwhelming. Gradually, however, the intervals between the waves increase, and very slowly some of the raw pain of grief begins to abate.

Unfortunately, as stepparents, we may find that some people do not acknowledge our grief and we may be overlooked in their concern for the birth-parents' welfare. This attitude is hurtful and can leave us

feeling like an outsider in our own family. Our sense of isolation can be heightened when the family is reminiscing over early memories of the child, at the funeral or at later family gatherings, particularly if we only joined the family recently. The involvement of the child's other parent in funeral arrangements or other matters can also leave us unsure of our position.

Whatever the relationship with our partner's child – whether we were close to them or actively involved in their upbringing, or not – their death has had a great impact upon us. Our own feelings may be compounded by concerns for our partner and any other children within the family. We are living with grief, and will need to take care of ourselves in order to be a support to those around us.

## Our partner's grief

What brought us together with our partner will have been the love we share. To see them now suffering such an agony of grief without being able to offer a remedy can cause us to feel somewhat inadequate. Their relationship with their child was unique to them and has lasted their child's entire life, however long or short that may have been. We might be taken aback by the forcefulness of their emotions and the rollercoaster of grief upon which they are now travelling. People grieve differently, and this can be an issue within any close relationship, no matter the biological parentage of the child who has died. Still, the differences can be accentuated because of our circumstances.

This could be further complicated by the relationship between our partner and their child's other birth parent. Under the circumstances, their 'other' parent may come back into our family's lives to a greater extent than before. They are likely to be involved in the funeral, and our partner may spend more time with them, sharing mutual memories, which could cause us to feel left out. On the other hand, bad feelings and disagreements between them, even perhaps elements of blame, can add to our partner's distress which will in turn add to our own. Yet another complication can be the involvement of their ex-partner's family in matters related to the funeral and memorials.

Supporting our partner through all of this will take a lot of love and patience. We will recognise their wish for their child to be remembered always with dignity, respect and above all, love. We can help by being ready to listen to any stories about their child's life, both with our partner, as well as in company with their family. It can feel as though we missed so much in our child's life, but no matter how long or short a time we were their stepparent, we will undoubtedly have memories of our own to share.

Our partner will need both our presence and, at times, our sensitive absence. This can mean giving them our undivided attention when they open up about their feelings, but it also means giving them space to grieve in their own way. Physical affection is important and can be very comforting, although we should also be aware that some bereaved parents go through a period of not being comfortable with any sexual activity.

The raw intensity of our partner's grief may last much longer than our own. We are witnessing them in their most private moments. To the 'outside' they may put on a brave face, whereas we might bear the brunt of emotional outbursts and anger. Our confidential support at this time is vital.

We will not always say or do the right thing. There may be times when we feel like we may have just made matters worse. Our efforts may not always be acknowledged by our partner straightaway. The reality is our partner has suffered the devastating loss of their child and there is very little, if anything, that can make it worse. It is most important to let them know that we will be there for them, no matter what.

Our partner also needs the kind support of others. Encouraging them to spend time with family and close friends, if this is what they wish, can be a good idea.

Many bereaved parents find it helpful to be amongst others in a similar situation. The Compassionate Friends runs support groups, both in person and online (a private forum and Facebook groups).

Connecting with others who can appreciate and understand what we are going through can be a great support, and accompanying our partner to one of these groups might be something for us to consider.

If either of us is finding any aspect of our lives especially difficult, outside support such as counselling might be helpful.

We cannot take our partner's pain away, but with sensitivity, love and patience, extended for as long as needed, we will hopefully see them eventually find a way to live with grief. Things will never be quite the same again, but that does not mean that we will not be able to enjoy our lives together. In fact, we may find that our relationship has been deepened and strengthened.

## The age, life and circumstances of the deceased child

For the natural parent, in particular, there is a sense that our child is always our 'baby', no matter whether they are six days, six years or six decades old. For us, as the stepparent, we entered into this family after the child was born. Our own connection with them might span much less time, and we may or may not have been closely involved with their lives.

The age of the 'child' can make a difference in some respects to what happens now. If our partner's child was young – anywhere from being born sleeping to a pre-adolescent – there may be some issues to cope with that will be different than if they were a teenager or adult.

For instance, if the deceased child was young, we may have been more involved with their life on a daily basis, and our partner's life might have centred on their care and upbringing. Their absence from our family will leave a gaping hole. Our partner may struggle to adjust to living without them. We might cross paths with our child's friends from school and elsewhere, and there may be daily reminders of how prematurely their life has ended.

A grown 'child' might have been living outside of the family home, perhaps even with a family of their own, and our involvement might have been much less regular. Now there may be grandchildren to be cared for or a relationship to be maintained with a former partner of our child. This will bring its own challenges. On the other hand, they might have gone their own way, with little contact with their parents. If their life was troubled or their life choices had caused estrangement, their death might have come before any reconciliation. This can make the loss very hard to bear.

It can be particularly difficult if our stepchild – of any age – died in a way that might appear to have been avoidable, such as following substance use, disregarding health advice, careless driving, extreme sports or suicide. Whether or not there was any element of choice in these matters, it is still likely to make grief even harder for our partner, as they may blame themselves in some way. Such self-recrimination is common amongst bereaved parents but circumstances of death such as these can amplify any feelings of guilt, which are often without foundation. It may be beneficial for our partner to express these feelings, however strongly we believe they have no reason to criticise themselves, and we can help by listening.

Such circumstances might also make our own grief more difficult to deal with. As we watch our partner suffer in such extreme pain, we may face a mixture of emotions. This could include resentment or even anger towards the child whose choices appear to have led to where we are now. We might find it helpful to find someone outside the family to speak with, as it is important for our own mental health to be able to express and work through our complex feelings.

As a couple, we will need to talk about our child's life and the circumstances of their death. Although the pain of what happened, the devastation of unfulfilled dreams and the shattering of hopes may fill our thoughts, we will also find there are priceless happy memories to be shared.

## Other children in the family

Within our blended family, there may be another child or children. We may have had children with our partner; we and/or our partner may have other children from previous relationships.

A death in the family often causes insecurity, and our steady presence can be reassuring for all the children in the household.

Sometimes our **partner's surviving children** will turn to us for guidance, support and reassurance. They may want to talk about their parents' grief, and about their sibling, perhaps sharing feelings they cannot express elsewhere. Being there for the children, supporting them in an age-appropriate way, will not only help them but also be a comfort for our partner.

**Our own children** will also be in need of our time and attention. We will probably want to continue our family routines. We will need to bear in mind that our partner might find it painful to see life continuing almost as normal for us, and we too might feel guilty that our child is alive when theirs is not. These are feelings to talk through gently with our partner, to try our best to maintain stability and harmony within our household.

We should be aware that **if our partner has lost their only child**, their grief will be intensified. If we have our own child or children and they now have none, no matter how closely our family has blended together, our partner might not know how to deal with their complex feelings – sadness at their own loss and a mixture of happiness and perhaps envy at seeing us together with our children. This might be particularly noticeable in the early days of bereavement, but it could easily become an issue later, particularly on occasions such as birthdays, anniversaries, Christmas or other holidays. We might want to find ways of acknowledging their child at these times, such as raising a toast or including their name on a card.

As the years pass, our children will reach milestones including graduating from school or university, or getting engaged or married, and so on. As much as we might want to involve our partner in the celebrations, we should be aware that this could be very painful for them and they might prefer not to participate. We should support their decision, whatever that might be. We might find other ways of helping them feel a part, such as choosing a gift for our child. It is likely, but by no means certain, that these events will become more enjoyable for our partner as time passes, although there will always be some poignancy. Their child is missing from the celebration and has not reached that milestone, and this is cause for sadness.

## Our changed lives

The death of our partner's child is likely to bring many changes to our lives. The initial arrangements for the funeral, burial or cremation will have been the start, but there is much more to come. The family structure might be altered. Our daily schedule might be different. Responsibilities may have shifted. All of this will take time to adjust to, alongside the emotional upheaval of our loss.

Our ideas about the future as a couple might change. If we had been planning to have children together, our partner might now be having second thoughts. It would not be surprising, considering what has happened. Hopefully in time, with patience and mutual respect, we will be able to talk about our concerns and agree together on the best way forwards.

Death often awakens the pain of previous losses. We, or our partner, might have thought that feelings relating to the end of a previous relationship were resolved, but we now find that painful issues are re-emerging, particularly if either of us was widowed. While we can relate to some extent with each other's pain, we are each an individual, and our circumstances and previous relationships and losses were in many ways unique. Having patience with ourselves and each other is essential as we work through the issues that have now arisen.



However, for many parents, it is the loss of our child that is the most significant and truly life-changing loss that we have ever experienced. Little else compares to the pain of burying one's own child. Coping with this loss and making something of the life that remains is the challenge we face. For many of us, remembrance activities that celebrate our child's life and keep their name and memory alive take an important place in our lives. There are a range of ideas for this in the TCF publication *Handbook of Ideas for Remembering our Child*. This includes practical and digital remembrance activities.

Here again we might find some differences between ourselves and our partner. They might have a driving need to invest time and effort in remembrance. We might not feel quite the same, but our support for them in their efforts will be appreciated and may even be crucial.

Part of this includes an ongoing awareness of significant dates, such as our child's birthday, the anniversary of their death, the date they were due to finish university, and so on. Times like this can be very difficult, as we might be flooded by a wave of emotions. It can be helpful to prepare for such dates. There is no wrong or right way to grieve or mark these days. Hopefully, as we discuss this with our partner, we will be able to plan some activities that seem appropriate to both of us. If there is a difference of opinion, we might want to defer to our partner, recognising their unique bond with their child.

## Finding our way

**The loss of a child is the most devastating of bereavements to cope with. As a blended family, we are balancing the needs of our partner, our own feelings and other family relationships. Our partner will have good and bad days, and probably so will we. The child who is now absent from our family still has a place in our thoughts and home. Their death will always bring sadness, but as we comfort each other, and live with love, patience and understanding, we can find our way forward together.**

## Further Reading

Other TCF leaflets that could be helpful at this time:

- *Living with Grief*
- *Grieving Child Loss in Blended and Step Families*
- *Grieving Couples*
- *Our Surviving Children*
- *Remembering our Child (Leaflet and Handbook)*

TCF leaflets can be downloaded from this link: **[www.tcf.org.uk/leaflets](http://www.tcf.org.uk/leaflets)**

Printed copies are 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. This leaflet aims to share the experiences of all of us bereaved parents and most especially those aspects which came upon us so suddenly and, sometimes, with no warning.

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 30 leaflets, on different aspects of grief which follow the death of a child. All of them are available at no charge to bereaved parents and siblings (but a small donation is, of course, always welcome).

If you would like to hear more about our work and access further support, you could ring our Helpline number on the back page of this leaflet, and you will be able to talk to one of our volunteers, all of them bereaved parents. He or she could give you the number of a Local Contact and details of any Local Group which may meet regularly in your area. You could also find out from them details of our occasional retreats, when a small number of bereaved parents meet and talk in peaceful surroundings. Most years there is a weekend gathering, to which all members are invited.

Our website at **[www.tcf.org.uk](http://www.tcf.org.uk)** has more information about our services, how to join TCF as a donating member, private Facebook groups, and support forum where bereaved parents can 'talk' online. We also publish a quarterly journal, *Compassion*, containing articles and poems written by our members about their own experiences. And, if you would also like further reading, please contact our Library for details and recommendations of books on all aspects of bereavement.



# The Compassionate Friends

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## **TCF Library**

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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://twitter.com/TCFcharityUK)

This leaflet is sponsored by Robert and Deborah Treadgold in memory of their beloved son and stepson Matthew. A compassionate young man whose world was full of fun, friends and love.

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

**President: The Countess Mountbatten of Burma**