



The
Compassionate
Friends

Helping Bereaved Parents

The Compassionate Friends is a national charity supporting parents and siblings who are bereaved through child loss. This leaflet has been written by parents who have lost children of all ages in the hope that our insights can help you support bereaved families and friends.

Helping Bereaved Parents

Parents do not expect their children to die before them. Yet, every year thousands of parents are faced with this heart-breaking tragedy, shattering their hopes and dreams.

It is immensely difficult for bereaved parents to rebuild their devastated lives. Relatives and friends are usually supportive at first, but often, within weeks of the funeral, this support can diminish, at just the time when the parents and family are suffering especially deeply.

The family may include surviving brothers and sisters, grandparents and other relatives. All will have had different bonds with the child. Some may have an overwhelming need to talk about the one who has died, about their life and the seeming impossibility of continuing without them, whilst other members of the family may seem withdrawn and find it difficult to talk about the person who has died.

Relatives, friends and colleagues, such as you, may want to help, but feel inadequate, unsure of how best to support bereaved parents. There is no simple answer, as each parent, each child, each relationship has its own unique qualities. There is no magical solution to make things better for a mother or father as they mourn their son or daughter, no simple formula that will be right for everyone, yet your help can mean so much.

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) offers the following suggestions:

DO

Do be open in showing your concern and care; just by being there with them, a few words, a gentle touch, even sitting in silence, can be comforting.

Do offer to help with the children, the elderly, pets, and domestic chores to give them space to grieve.

Do ask how they are feeling, but only if you are prepared to listen to the answer.

Do say that you are saddened by what happened to their child, and encourage them to talk about him or her as often as they want.

Do allow them to express as much grief as they are willing to share; this may include despair, depression, anger, guilt, and, sometimes, other unexpected reactions, such as irrational thoughts or fears of madness.

Do share your memories and talk about the special qualities of their child.

Do reassure them that they did everything that they could in the care they gave to their child, where this was possible.

Do be patient: they may be unable to respond to offers of help while they are in deep shock. Ask again later.

Do remember the needs of surviving brothers and sisters: they, too, are hurt and confused, possibly frightened, and in need of attention, which their parents may not be able to give at this time.

Do stay around for the “long haul”, not only for the first few months.

Do realise that birthdays, anniversaries and many other special days, such as Christmas Day, Mother’s and Father’s Day, are very sad times. Sometimes the anticipation of these approaching days is depressing.

DON'T

Don't let your own sense of hopelessness or fear keep you from reaching out to a bereaved parent.

Don't be embarrassed by their tears when you are with them, or your own if you are overcome with sadness.

Don't ignore them because you are feeling uncomfortable and don't know what to say: being avoided by others adds to an already painful and isolating experience.

Don't tell them that such tragedies happen to only those who can survive, implying that they are special people chosen to suffer.

Don't change the subject when they mention their child.

Don't stop mentioning their child's name because you are scared of reminding them: they won't have forgotten.

Don't talk too much about your own children and grandchildren.

Don't presume to understand their grief because you have experienced the death of an elderly relative or even a pet.

Don't tell them what they should feel or ought to do. There is no timetable for grieving; each person has to do it in his or her own way.

Don't confuse grief with depression. There are no pills to treat grief.

Don't remind them that they have other children – they are not interchangeable; or suggest that they can have another child – another child could not replace the child who has died.

Don't suggest that the death of a child brings parents together. This is not borne out by the number of couples separating after their loss.

Don't expect them to want to attend social functions: the small talk is often centred on enquiring about each other's family.

Don't expect them to start going out and socialising until they feel ready; being in crowds can be overwhelming

Watching our words

It will never be easy to know what to say when someone's child has died, however good our intentions may be. The following remarks commonly cause added distress:

"Time is a great healer."

Time does not heal grief any more than it regrows an amputated limb. Things that make grief more bearable can only happen during the passing of time.

"I don't know how you cope, I couldn't."

The bereaved have no choice in the matter.

"I know how you feel."

None of us truly knows how someone else feels. Even if we too are bereaved of a child or other close relative, our

personalities, family stories and relationships can never be identical to the person we are supporting.

"You'll get over it."

Grieving is not an illness that one gets over, but a natural process which needs emotional space.

"It is God's will"; "S/he is in a better place"; "God only takes the best"; "The good die young"; "S/he is an angel in paradise"; "S/he will always remain young and never suffer the indignities of old age"; "S/he had a complete life"; "S/he was specially chosen by God to do some special work for Him"; "S/he is only in the next room."

Regardless of your own views, it is unlikely that any of these remarks will be of consolation to a bereaved parent. Some parents find great comfort in religion; others lose their faith following a death. Belief, faith and religious practice is something each parent will need to sort out for themselves.

Further suggestions

There are many practical ways in which you can support and help a bereaved household. Prepared food is almost always welcome, dishes that are ready to eat or just need warming. Offer to do the shopping or to accompany them – and be ready to come home early if you see that they are finding it too difficult. It may be less stressful for them to go to a supermarket out of their locality; in this way, they will see fewer people that they know. Be aware that the process of shopping can awaken painful memories, for example of favourite foods or disliked items.

While all parents might appreciate this practical help, it may be quite vital for lone parents.

Respecting the parent's autonomy and offering help without interfering is important. When a child dies, no matter their age

or the circumstances, their parent will often feel a sense of powerlessness, as they were unable to prevent their child's death. It is important for the parent's wellbeing to find ways to take back some control over what is happening around them. This could be regarding arrangements for their child's funeral, or simple things such as when they would like to go out for a meal, and so on. Try to bear this in mind when offering help; it is important to respect their wishes.

If you feel that there are financial difficulties, particularly over meeting the funeral costs, you may be able to organise a number of people to contribute towards a gift of money to help the parents, but be sensitive about whether this is appropriate.

There may be belongings to be collected from places outside home. Offer to accompany the parents, or to go for them if they would prefer that. If you collect the child's personal items, do not bring them back in a bin bag – treat them with respect.

Correspondence arriving for the deceased son or daughter (who may, of course, have been an adult) will be very distressing for the parents. Perhaps, you could offer to write letters (for the parents to sign) to inform the relevant organisations. Nowadays, when you register the death, you are given a form to send off, signed by relatives, to prevent junk mail. Bereaved parents may need legal advice to sort out their child's affairs.

If you have any photographs of the child, give copies to the parents, especially if they have not seen them before. Share your memories of the child. It will be so reassuring to the parents to know that their child will not be forgotten.

Don't be afraid of telling amusing stories and occasions. Laughter may feel shocking at first, but it helps to put things into perspective by acknowledging the happy times with their child.

If you can, **write down your memories** of their son or daughter. A letter or a card with some special reminiscences can bring a great deal of comfort. We recall events in the lives of older relatives who have died, but there seems to be a reluctance to talk in the same natural way about dead children.

Sometimes there will be opportunities to post pictures and write about the deceased child on **social media**. It is best to be led by the parent in this. If they are posting pictures on their Facebook page, for instance, then do respond. Affirmations of their child's importance and acknowledgement of their grief are part of the support you can offer.

Bereaved parents are jolted out of their normal life patterns.

Picking up the threads again can be very difficult and may take a long time. They may feel unable to join in as they used to do because the devastation of their loss is so great.

From time to time suggest a meal out, or a visit to a leisure centre, theatre, concert or cinema. The invitation may be turned down for some time, but eventually there will be a day when it will be accepted. Do, however, bear in mind the circumstances of the death. If suggesting a cinema or theatre trip, consider the subject of the film or play.

Let the parents know about The Compassionate Friends (TCF).

TCF exists to support bereaved parents and siblings. You can find more details on the back page.

Surviving children in the bereaved family need

acknowledgement. Surviving children will be mourning their brother or sister, and this may not be adequately acknowledged by other family members and friends who direct their attention mainly at the bereaved parents.

Perhaps taking the children out would benefit the family as a whole – not only for treats, but also to provide a place where they can talk freely. They may not do so at home,

because they fear that their parents could be upset by their questions, thoughts and worries. These will vary according to the ages of the children, and they may demonstrate their feelings indirectly. Games and sports can be useful outlets for emotions that are too difficult to be put into words.

If there is a dog to be walked, the bereaved parents or children may appreciate some company.

Your own grief

As a friend, or member of their wider family, chances are you also knew the son or daughter, and will need to cope with your own grief. You may feel great sorrow, not only at the loss of the child, but also at the impact that this has had on their parents. There is no wrong or right way to grieve, and your way of coping with loss may well be different to that of the parents.

TCF produces a series of leaflets covering various aspects of grief, causes of death, and how to cope. Whilst they are written for parents and siblings, you may also find some titles helpful. Different relationships are explored, including:

- Grieving child loss in blended and step families
- Helping our grandchildren when our child has died
- When our grandchild dies
- The death of a stepchild

As time goes by

Be prepared to give your support to the family over an extended period. This does not necessarily mean visiting daily – telephone, text, letter or email contact can be equally welcome and sustaining. Consistency, rather than frequency, is what is needed.

As parents, they will grieve for their child as long as they live. Some of the worst times are the anniversary of the child's death, their birthday, and the major festivals, such as Christmas, Mother's, the New Year. It is then that the gaping hole in the family is felt most acutely. Any contact you make can help them to feel that they are not alone. Hearing others say the name of their child can be a priceless gift for them.

Bereaved parents will never forget your friendship and support. You cannot take away their pain, but your ongoing caring response can make it easier to bear.

Who are the Compassionate Friends?

"Every parent's nightmare is to lose a child"

This is a cliché, but for many, many families the nightmare tragically becomes a reality. Each year in the UK 9000* children and young people under the age of 30 years die – and this figure does not include the 3000 stillbirth and neonatal deaths and the beloved sons and daughters aged over 30, who may often leave a partner and children of their own.

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) is a charitable organisation of bereaved parents, siblings and grandparents dedicated to the support and care of other similarly bereaved family

members who have suffered the death of a child or children of any age and from any cause. We offer our unique peer-to-peer support directly to bereaved families, as well as indirect support by fostering understanding and good practice amongst professionals concerned with child death and by increasing public awareness.

We are an inclusive organisation and exist to provide peer-to-peer support, understanding, friendship and hope directly to bereaved families and individuals whose child has died whether as a baby, infant, school age child, teenager or adult son or daughter, whether it is a recent loss or one that happened many years ago. The death may have been from any cause, including as a result of a road traffic collision, a short or longer term illness, sudden unexpected death, an accident in or outside the home, suicide or through drug or alcohol use.

Equal access to our support and services is important for us. TCF has no religious affiliation and offers support to bereaved families irrespective of the age of the child, cause of death, ethnic, social, faith or political backgrounds. We offer support to any family affected by the death of a child, and this includes adoptive parents, step- and blended families, same sex couples and single parent families.

*Office of National Statistics



The Compassionate Friends

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