



The
Compassionate
Friends

Prolonged and Intense Grief

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

Prolonged and Intense Grief

To lose a child is the worst loss of all. To lose a child in traumatic circumstances intensifies the pain, and can make it more difficult to cope. If our child has been the victim of an accident, road incident, natural disaster or crime; if they took their own life; if they suffered from serious mental illness; if we had been estranged in the period leading up to their death – all of these add extra layers to our immense grief.

Our child was an individual; our relationship with them, and the exact circumstances of their life and death are in many respects unique. Alongside this, our own personality, age, occupation, health, financial circumstances, family and social circle all have an impact on our lives now. Although others who have faced similar losses may sympathise and support us, nobody is in exactly the same position we find ourselves in.

Circumstances that make grief harder to bear

Following the initial shock of our child's death, it is common to feel anxious, depressed, angry, confused and frustrated. Grief is not a mental illness or a diagnosis; it is a natural response to the pain of loss.

No matter the facts of our child's death, the ache in our hearts will always be there to some extent. However, there are some circumstances that can make our loss harder to bear.

Suicide is an example. When a child takes their own life, whether preceded by a period of mental illness or completely unexpectedly, it is devastating for a parent. There are so many issues that may never be settled: The big 'why'; the questions of whether we could have done more to anticipate what has happened; unresolved matters in our relationship, and more.

If our child was the victim of crime, the shock of learning what has happened is extremely traumatic. It is a parent's worst nightmare. We may never be able to quite grasp that someone has intentionally taken the life of our child. Along with our personal grief, we may find our family becomes the focus of publicity and media attention. Investigations and court cases can drag on for years. Even when there is a legal resolution, our child's death may resurface in the media years later if there is another similar incident. This is all extremely painful to deal with.

There can be other circumstances of sudden death, such as a road traffic or sporting incident. A straightforward medical procedure could have taken an unexpected turn. Our shock and anger may be amplified if it turns out that our child's life was lost needlessly. If only someone had paid more attention, or done a better job, or been more cautious...

The circumstances of our child's passing may not be the only factor that is making our grief difficult to bear. Perhaps we were estranged from our child for some reason. Perhaps our child's behaviour, such as alcohol or substance misuse, or risk-taking, brought on their death. Perhaps they suffered from mental illness or endured a long and painful physical decline.

We can often blame ourselves, no matter how many times others tell us we have no reason to do so.

Complicated grief

Any and all of these examples can contribute to what is known as 'complicated grief.' For those of us who lost a child suddenly in traumatic circumstances and/or after ongoing difficulties, we may find that the intensity of grief continues on and on. We remain in a heightened state of mourning. As time passes, we continue to feel extreme sorrow and pain at the thought of our child. Perhaps we can focus on little else but their death, often visualising the scene, even if we were not present. We feel numb or detached, that life holds no meaning. We may struggle to remember the happy times our child enjoyed. We may feel overwhelmed by guilt or depression or have trouble carrying out the activities of normal life, withdrawing socially. We may find ourselves wishing we had died with our child. We may suffer significant sleep disturbances, or find ourselves turning increasingly to alcohol or other substances to try to dull our pain.

To an extent, this could be a snapshot of any parent's grief; the crucial difference between 'normal' and 'complicated' grief is the intensity and duration. Complicated grief keeps us empty, unable to resume life again. Our pain can be so deep and long-lasting that we may begin to think of how to escape, how to end our life. At this point it is vital that we contact our GP or other health professional. It may seem impossible to us at the time, but with help we can move past this despair.

Coping with our loss

As we struggle to make sense of our child's death, we may also struggle to make sense of our own life. Finding the way forward is not easy, although many of us gradually find ways to cope with our loss according to our own personalities and circumstances. For instance, we might discover that maintaining our bonds with our child through memorialising activities helps us start to adjust to their absence. We may join a support group such as The Compassionate Friends (TCF), drawing strength from others who have suffered a similar loss. (TCF also runs a helpline, plus online forums and Facebook groups.)

However, for some of us the anguish of the struggle seems just too hard to bear. If our grief is complicated and prolonged, then the typical strategies for living with grief may not seem to bring us relief. We may be unable to visualise any future, much less desire it. Unresolved grief can contribute to mental and physical illness, and we may also find that existing conditions are made worse. Some of us will verbalise our feelings to an extent, and this can be helpful; but others may internalise the struggles and find it difficult to reach out for support.

Although such intense and prolonged grief is not unexpected or unusual, considering the circumstances, we should not lose hope of ever feeling better. It is possible to live with loss; many of us are doing so. However, **it is important for our own health and well-being to recognise when our grief is too much for us to manage alone.** If we find that our path through life seems blocked, we may need professional assistance. This could be through counselling, medical assistance or other therapies.

Our GP may be able to advise us, as well as signpost us to services available locally. It can be worthwhile booking a double appointment with our GP in order

to explain our issues, if they are not already aware. We could also consult with one of the bereavement charities such as TCF or Cruse Bereavement Care.

Finding safe spaces where we can explore the issues of our grief and talk about our child, without shame or guilt, and without concern for the listener – as might be the case with our closest family and friends – will almost certainly be a help to us. Of course, therapies and support groups have their limitations and certainly cannot relieve us of all of the pain of losing our child, but they can help us find ways to manage this pain.

Going forward

It can take months, possibly several years, before we are no longer feeling continuously overwhelmed by our loss, although we still think of our child and miss them daily. This time may be extended if we are struggling with health issues, particularly those related to mental health, which may have been made worse by this tragedy. However, as time passes, and with adequate support, we gradually find ourselves better able to cope. We start having moments when our thoughts are not quite so dismal; we can begin to concentrate on our work, a book or television programme, enjoy a meal or an outing. We discover that such activities do not represent a betrayal of our child. There are still moments and days that feel almost unbearable, but with the help and support we need, these become less frequent. We find ways to maintain bonds with our child, perhaps through writing their story, perhaps through treasuring some of their clothes or possessions, or activities that we believe would make them proud of us. This is not what we had chosen for our life; we would give anything to have our child still living, but as time passes, we become more accustomed to the idea of them not coming back.

The loss of our child has changed us forever. The circumstances of our child's death and/or their previous life contributes to how we are feeling now. Being in a better state of mental and physical health will only boost our efforts at honouring our child's memory. 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. Our child is greatly loved and greatly missed, and we always hold them close in our minds and hearts.

Further reading

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) have published a range of leaflets to support parents in the aftermath of a child's death. The following titles could be relevant at this time:

- *Living with Grief*
- *The Sudden Death of our Child*
- *After Suicide*
- *When our Child has been Murdered*
- *When our Child has Died in a Road Incident*
- *Bereaved Through Substance or Alcohol Use*
- *Coping with Judgemental Attitudes*
- *Remembering our Child (Leaflet and Handbook)*

TCF leaflets can be downloaded from this link: www.tcf.org.uk/leaflets
Printed copies are available from the TCF office (details on the back page).

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** 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

UK Helpline:

0345 123 2304

Northern Ireland Helpline:

0288 77 88 016

General Enquiries

0345 120 3785

E: info@tcf.org.uk

TCF Library

0345 120 3785

E: library@tcf.org.uk

To find out more about TCF visit

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

There are two ways of spreading light:
to be the candle or the mirror that reflects it...
Reflecting the light for our Beautiful Alice Barnett,
our inspiration. Eternally.

Founder: The Revd Canon Dr Simon Stephens OBE

President: The Countess Mountbatten of Burma