

# United Journey

**Supporting parents, grandparents and siblings after a child dies.**  
Inspired by the journeys of The Compassionate Friends families



**The Compassionate  
Friends Queensland**

Supporting bereaved parents & their families

## When a child dies... Who can help?

No one expects their child to die before they do, yet every year this happens to thousands of families who face a future in which their lives have been changed for ever. Immediately after the death, parents and families are often helped by friends, relatives and care professionals. Later on this support often lessens, even though the pain of bereavement can remain intense as parents face the dreadful reality of learning to live without their son or daughter.

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) Queensland is part of a world-wide organisation of bereaved parents and their families helping each other through their grief. We offer peer support to parents whose son or daughter has died at any age and from any cause.

It is common for bereaved parents to feel that only those who have been through it themselves can possibly know the extent of their suffering. At TCF we know that there is no easy path through this pain, and we do not offer simple solutions. What we do offer is continuing understanding, comfort, friendship, encouragement and hope in a warm, supportive atmosphere in which empathy, privacy and confidentiality are assured.

## How can we help?

All TCF contact services are provided by parents who are themselves bereaved. This includes

- A national telephone helpline open every day from 10am-4pm and 7pm-10pm  
**1300 064 068**
- Support and social groups in Brisbane and regional Queensland
- Special memorial events, workshops, retreats as well as informal gatherings and support events
- Regular support magazines - HUGG (Helping us Grieve and Grow) - including



contributions from parents and siblings

- A library of grief resources in our Brisbane office
- A website with information and resources for bereaved parents, siblings and grandparents

## What to do next

If you think TCF may be able to help you then please contact us. We understand that reaching out to the Helpline can be difficult but however you contact us, the person answering will also be a bereaved parent and they are there to listen and care when you need to talk and to offer emotional support and comfort.

## How to contact us

**National Support Line :**  
1300 064 068 (10am-4pm, 7pm-10pm every day)

**Office Phone:**  
07 3540 9949 (Wed-Fri, 9am-2pm)

**Office Address:**  
Shop 4 970 Logan Road,  
Holland Park West, QLD 4121

**Email:**  
admin@tcfqld.org.au

**Facebook:**  
www.facebook.com/thecompassionatefriendsqld

**Website:**  
www.compassionatefriendsqld.org.au

# Grief of the Newly Bereaved

## Initial Shock

For a parent, there is nothing more devastating than the death of our child. How do we begin to comprehend the enormity of our loss? How do we learn to cope in such unfamiliar territory? We feel totally unprepared for what seems an impossible task, that of learning to live without our child.

First reactions of shock, numbness, denial and disbelief help to cushion us against the full impact of our loss. However, as the reality sinks in we begin to feel the full extent of our grief. Feelings of wanting to join our dead child are not uncommon and the ordinary things of life have very little meaning. It is quite usual for us to feel that we are going crazy at this time, because our emotions are so extreme.

Our child is constantly in the forefront of our mind; we may experience intense feelings of emptiness and loneliness, and a deep desire to hold our child again. We may feel dead inside, as if part of us has died too. There are reminders of our child in all we see and touch and hear; we may think we hear our child's voice or see their familiar figure in the street. We still sometimes expect them to walk through the door. At a very deep level of the unconscious we are still 'searching' for our child.

There are no short cuts through grief. Early on we often want to know how long it will take for the pain to become more bearable. We want to rewind to a happier time with our child and go back to our old life. Sadly, this cannot happen, and accepting this reality is an important step.

## Our Feelings

We may feel angry at the insensitivity of others to our feelings and needs. Some friends and acquaintances expect us to function 'normally' within a short time of our child's death. We feel that others are sometimes uncomfortable in our company and that they avoid mentioning our child's name 'for fear of reminding us', and if we mention what is uppermost in our mind, they change the subject. This is hurtful and difficult to cope with. We are bewildered at the intensity of our grief; we feel vulnerable and ill at ease in the world around us. Telling our friends openly how we feel, and that it helps to talk about our child, will release the tension and increase understanding on both sides.

We may also need to talk over the events of our child's death, trying to make sense of what has happened. Speaking with other bereaved parents can really help, as it is easier to relate to someone who has lost a child themselves, and through this we can discover that our feelings and reactions are quite normal.

Sometimes we fear we shall forget what our child looked like, or that we may not be able to recall their voice. Seeing our child's clothes and belongings around the house brings back painful memories. We need not make hurried decisions about our child's personal things. We can pack them away until we feel ready to sort them out. In time we may wish to keep some as treasures, and they will indeed become a comfort. Some may have special meanings to any surviving children or our child's friends; the gift of some of our child's belongings could be an important step in working through our grief.



Tears are an important way of expressing anguish. If they come it is usually better to let the tears flow than to bottle it up. It may be difficult for some of us to cry, but even if we find ourselves crying in public, we should remember we are entitled to our tears, and not to worry about what others may think.

It is not unusual to have feelings of guilt and to torture ourselves with "if only" and "what if". It can help to remind ourselves that we loved our child, and would never have done anything to harm them. Many people also experience deep feelings of anger which can flare up suddenly in situations that would normally not bother us.

## Relationships

The shattering experience of our child's death may create tensions within our marriage or partnership. All the understanding that has been developed over the years together will be put to a severe test. We feel that we should be able to console each other, and many do, but we also discover that we are individuals who have to grieve in our own way, at our own pace. We may not have the strength to comfort each other as we would wish, nor to understand our partner's grief pattern. Tolerance, affection and patience are needed to help each other through this devastating experience.

## Other Children

If you have other children, remember that they too are grieving. They are often the 'forgotten mourners' within a family. They need their parents' love most especially at this time, and excluding them from the family sorrow will only add to the fear and confusion that they may already be feeling. Sharing grief with the family will strain relationships but can also strengthen them.

## Supporting ourselves

Physical exhaustion is a common symptom of early bereavement. We can waste energy pretending to be in control when we feel far from it. Be yourself whenever possible. Try to eat sensibly and rest as much as you can, even though sleep may be elusive in the early weeks

and months. Walks and exercise in the fresh air may help restore normal sleep patterns; and other relaxation techniques can also be useful.

Look for ways to interact with others so you do not feel as isolated. This could be family, friends, counsellors or a support group such as those run by TCF. Whatever you choose, proceed at your own pace—there is no right or wrong way to grieve.

## Going forward

We may wish for a straightforward path after bereavement, but we do not 'move on' from our grief we 'move forward' with it. We will continue to face ups and downs, but over time we adapt to the reality of our grief. The impacts such as tiredness, loss of short-term memory and lack of concentration will all improve gradually, as will energy levels and the ability to organise daily life.

Face each new obstacle or problem as it occurs and try not to look too far ahead, take one day and one step at a time. Some days will be better than others, grief cannot be hurried.

Slowly the intensity of our grief diminishes, though this does not mean that our love for our child becomes any less. We simply become more able to live with the love and the loss that we carry. We know our life will never be the same after the death of our child, but time and the mutual support of shared experiences will help us to find ways to honour our child's life and to rebuild our own.



## A Mother's Grief

When we first become a mother, our life changes. We experience powerful feelings of protection, and want always to be able to say, "I'm here. You're safe".

When our children are young, they become our highest priority, and we accept new and wide responsibilities. We give up sleep, energy, privacy, and time, putting our child's needs ahead of our own as we adapt to their time frame. Becoming a mother changes us and can expand our sense of who we are or what we might become.

When our child dies, we lose a part of ourselves, not only because they are our children, but also because of the way they have become entwined with our own identity. We may experience an over-whelming sense of failure; we thought that we could protect them and keep them safe, and we have been shown in the harshest way possible that we were wrong.

Whatever age our child is when they die, we still feel the unfairness of their death. The natural order of things is that parents die before their children; anything else is against nature, an accident, a catastrophe.

### Our physical loss

When we have given birth to our child, the physical sense of losing a part of ourselves when that child dies, is searing. We carried our child in our womb and our body was their source of nourishment.

Many of us may feel the loss of our child as an intensely physical pain. As time goes by, some of us may find the anniversary of their birth becomes a very lonely and difficult time, because our memories of it are unique to us. That is something even the closest members of our family may not be able to share, or even comprehend.

Even though we may not have given birth to our child, but have adopted or fostered them, they are as loved and cherished as any birth child. These mothers often say their child grew in their heart, as they went through the longing and waiting for them to become part of their family. The child's death may bring back the trauma from infertility before he or she came to us.

### Our loss as a caregiver

As mothers, our care for our young children has often been intensely physical as well as emotional: we have fed them, bathed them, changed and dressed them, cuddled them and held them in our arms. Even when our children are older, the memories of physical care are part of the bond between us. Whether we have been through a long, all consuming battle with an illness, or suffer from the trauma that a sudden death brings, the circumstances in which they died will affect how we feel.

When our son or daughter dies, we may want to go on caring for them as long as possible. Mothers who are able to hold their dead child and wash and dress them may get some comfort from this final act of care. Even though some of us may find the task too daunting, it is hard to be deprived of these opportunities, for whatever reason. Some mothers find the giving up of their child's body an agony, and the hurt continues for a long time.

If our child was an adult, we may not get the choice to continue physical caring; they may not have lived near us, they may have married or had a partner, so that we are no longer 'next of kin'. Although we may not see it at the time, the necessary procedures that follow on the death of our son or daughter in preparing for their funeral could be looked on as our continuation of caring.

### Our other children

If we have other children, they continue to need our care, and in fact, if they are very young, their ongoing requirements can present us with the need for structure in our daily routine and that could be helpful to everyone in the household.

Older children may need our care and support now more than ever, for they are probably confused and hurt. Their lives too have been changed.



Many children look back at the time immediately after the death of their brother or sister and say they felt as if they had lost their mother and father too, as though their whole family had disintegrated. We may know this is happening, yet be unable to prevent it. We can be so disabled by our grief that we find it difficult to be a mother to our other children. Sometimes we struggle to protect our children from the full extent of our grief, because it seems a burden too big for them to shoulder.

But this can leave them feeling even more alone; if we do not share our tears with them, they feel shut out. It is better to weep together than be separated by closed doors.

Our children's grief compounds our sense of guilt and our failure as a protector relates not just to our child's death but also to the fact that our other children are wounded as a consequence of that death. In reality, we can probably help them less with this than with any other pain they have experienced in their lives so far.

As mothers, our feelings of failure and guilt over the death of our child may give us an urge to overprotect our surviving children. We may even find it difficult to allow them to lead a normal life, to let them out of our sight. This is true especially if the death of our child was due to murder, or a terrible accident: we fear the same thing may happen again.

It may not be logical, but our protective mothering instinct is in overdrive and cannot be easily controlled. If a brother or sister died as a result of an illness, their siblings may have carried their own secret fears that they too are going to get sick. As mothers we need to try to understand their thoughts and allay their fears, but in our own distress we may not find these things easy.

## Others in the family

We may be trying to support other members of our family at this time. Our own parents have lost a grandchild and will be grieving; as they see their daughter suffering, there is what can seem like a double burden.

We might feel that they need protecting from seeing the depths of our grief; but in fact most of us are helped by sharing rather than by pretending. Like our own children, we may feel we have lost our own parents, that they are unavailable to us because of their grief.

## Childless mothers

Some of us may have no living children. Our hopes and dreams for future generations are ended. When we have lost our only child or all of our children, our new life is suddenly empty and frightening.

It takes time to adapt to our altered circumstances. Over the years it is hoped that our memories, though bittersweet at times, will become sources of comfort.

## Coping alone

For a single parent there are other burdens. Not only do we have to be mother and father to our surviving children, but also we have no one to be with us in our worst times.

We may find that this loss reminds us of other, earlier losses, perhaps even the loss of our child's father, and we may feel doubly bereaved. In this situation, we need the support of other adults, whether family, friends or professionals. If we are now childless, the isolation may feel unbearable, and we may question our continuing identity as a mother.

## Difficulties grieving together

We may find that we experience difficulties in our marriage or partnership. Even when we have been close, the pain of grief can drive a wedge between us. We think we should be able to share our loss, to support each other, but often it is not like that.

We may grieve in different ways, one needing words while the other needs silence, or perhaps action.

We may find our partner's tears unbearably painful and may hurt so much that we are unable to hold their pain as well as our own.

As mothers, we may be used to being the person who 'makes things better', the one who sorts things out. Fathers may feel they failed in their perceived role as provider and protector. We may each try to sort out the other's problems, rather than cling together and let ourselves grieve.

If our relationship was difficult before, it may get worse rather than better, at least in the short term. However, shared suffering and a growing understanding of each other's grief can help to strengthen a relationship.

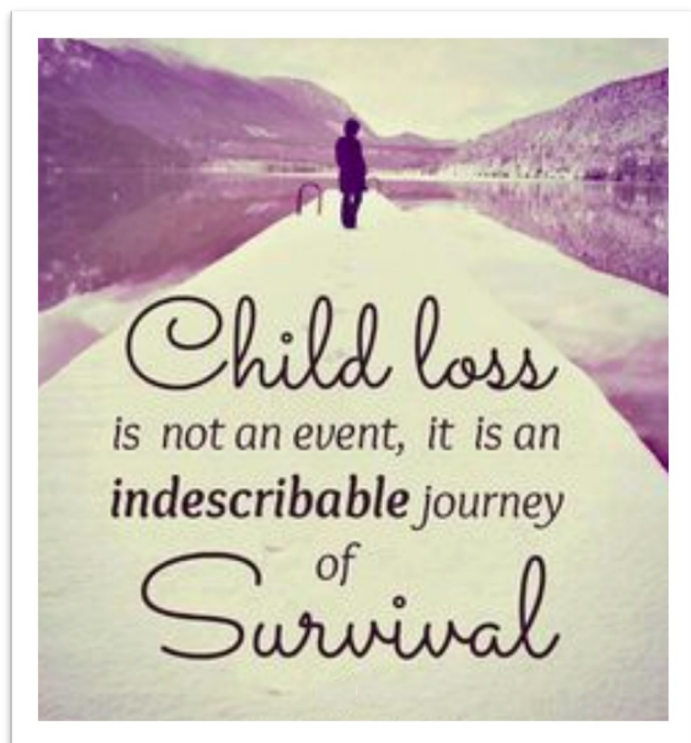
## Children born after the death of their brother or sister

Some of us may give birth to further children after our child has died. We may be surprised by how our feelings are interwoven, how the past death is also part of the new birth. Some mothers experience vivid flashbacks during pregnancy or labour.

Although we are looking forward to the birth of our new baby, we may find ourselves suffering extremes of anxiety and fear, our confidence is gone and we are full of doubt and worry. This can make the early weeks and months fraught and may make bonding with the new baby very difficult.

We know that we will be kept busy when our new baby arrives, and the tiredness from this will add to the weariness that the earlier bereavement has brought, but in some way the need for a new routine can help us and give a new structure to our days.

Sometimes friends and well wishers can be extraordinarily insensitive in thinking, and even saying, that the new baby will somehow wipe out the earlier loss, that everything will be 'all right' when we have a replacement. It is hard to have to explain that the new baby can never replace the child who has died. We welcome the new child as a blessing and a joy – but we welcome them for themselves, not as a substitute.



***“At last I know  
I’m not alone in my  
grief – others had to  
go down this road  
and they under-  
stand my feelings”***

***– TCF member***

## The way forward

We need to survive. We need to be there for our children, our partner, our family, for our friends and indeed for ourselves. We need to survive in order to bear witness to the fact that our child lived, that he or she was special, precious and loved.

In order to help us survive we need to recognise that the loss of our child is not something we need to bear alone; we can get help from other people—family, friends, professionals or support organisations such as TCF.

At least in the early days of our bereavement, if we give ourselves space, let other people cook the meals, take our children to school, listen to us as we talk about our dead child, then we will gradually grow stronger and better able to carry on.

The death of our child leaves a gap in our lives that can never be filled, and they are always with us in our thoughts and hearts. We each find our own way through our grief, learning to live in these changed circumstances whilst cherishing the memory of our dear child whom we miss so much. In this new place, we can discover that it is possible to find joy in our present and future. At the same time, our love for our child endures and flourishes. They remain our dearly loved child forever.

## A Father's Grief

Many strong emotions are aroused in a family when a child dies; fathers feel the same emotions as mothers, but how we experience these, how we deal with and express them can differ greatly from how a mother grieves.

### How grief affects us

Grief affects all of us in different ways; we may feel shock, despair, anger and guilt. These do not appear in any set order; sometimes one feeling dominates the others. This is natural. We can suffer from lethargy, sleeplessness and illness, making it a struggle to face the obligations of each day.

For a while nothing else seems to matter other than our loss. Yet at other times we may feel guilty because we have laughed out loud, or have not thought of our grief for just a brief moment. We may struggle to find the words to describe how we feel.

As adult males we may feel that we are expected to protect those around us and to be "strong". As a result, we may not acknowledge or show our real emotions because we are concerned about what others may think. Sometimes we may feel the need to suppress our own grief so that we can be there for our family. However, we need to allow ourselves to acknowledge our thoughts, feelings and the tremendous sorrow we carry and to permit ourselves to 'break down' and cry. It is okay to not feel okay, and to express these feelings.

Blame, guilt and anger can also arise in our grieving. We may blame ourselves for failing to keep our child safe from harm. We may instead turn our anger outwards as we seek someone to blame for our loss.

Finding ways to cope safely with our feelings is important for our wellbeing and for those around us. Many of us find being active helps, whether exercise, sport, or doing things with our hands such as gardening, cooking, art, woodworking or repairs. We may find that being around other bereaved fathers or others who have experienced loss, even if we are not always talking directly about our feelings, strengthens us through the solidarity of our shared experience of loss.

Those of us living with a partner may feel so overwhelmed by grief that it becomes almost impossible for us to lessen the pain and sorrow felt by the other. It would be unusual for a father and a mother always to be in the same mood, at the same intensity of grief. This can create problems when one partner feels the other is insensitive to his or her feelings. We will be reacting at different times and in different ways to various and complex emotions.

Misunderstandings can drive a wedge between us—the more we are able to communicate with each other, the better. It can help to remember that our partner is the closest ally we have in surviving the death of our child, as they are living through the same terrible loss. It is important to accept that we both need to deal with grief in our own way.

Our relationship with our child was different to their mother's who had a physical bond through pregnancy and childbirth that we do not share. However, if we have been the main carer for our child it may make their loss even more acute.

Sometimes it may feel that the support from others is directed more to the mother than to us as the father. We may need to be more direct to seek out support, reassurance and understanding of how we are feeling.

Some of us are part of a blended family which may make it harder to express our feelings about the loss of our child.

For those of us without a partner, we may have no close adult with whom we can share our pain.

If we have other children, they have lost their sibling and they need special care from us. We need to support and guide them in any way we can, according to their age, by including them when we talk about their brother or sister who has died; sharing our thoughts about how each of us feels about ways of remembering him or her.

If we have been bereaved of our only child, or all of our children have died, we may suffer an intense double grief: both the loss of our child and, if we have no grandchildren, the loss of our family's future. We may find that we withdraw from the world or throw ourselves into activity, but still struggle to find meaning in our life. It may take us some time to find our footing and a way forward.

### Our household



## Returning to work

We may be compelled - or wish - to return to work soon after the funeral of our son or daughter. We may feel that we must continue to provide for our family, and some of us may be fearful of losing our jobs. Sometimes the workplace can feel like a 'retreat' from the pressures at home.

If we are fortunate, our employer will allow us to ease back into our job, perhaps initially on part time or on a reduced workload. Some of our colleagues will express their sympathy, but also embarrassment, awkwardness and anxiety. Try to seek out those who are willing to listen when we find a need to talk about our child or our feelings.

Some fathers do not go out to work. We may work from home or be unemployed, disabled or retired. Whatever the reason, we will be around the house for much of the day and this can bring less opportunity to interact with other people. To avoid becoming isolated it can help to see or have regular contact with family or friends or to force yourself to go to social or sporting events.

## Looking after ourselves

Our physical well-being is often a great asset in dealing with the emotional and mental aspects of grief.

There can be much benefit from some form of physical exercise that leaves us tired and ready for sleep. Even though we may feel that we have no energy to participate in such activity, if we push ourselves to do so, we can find relief from stress and feel better afterwards.

There should be no guilty feelings in resuming our former interest in some enjoyable leisure activities. We may prefer activities that are shared with family or friends, or we may need to choose options that give us space to focus on ourselves alone.

## Remembering our children

As the bereaved father, it may fall to us to deal with the formal requirements following the death of our child. If we are the next of kin of our adult son or daughter, we may be the one to carry out the complex and time-consuming legal formalities whether or not there is a Will. This is an additional stress during grief and assistance from a legal professional may be of benefit or required in complex cases.

We may also need to decide, in consultation with our partner, what to do with our child's possessions—including any digital assets in social media pages and blogs. Some of us will want to preserve as much as possible; others will want to clean out. For many of us it will be a middle ground and how we feel about retaining their possessions may change over time.

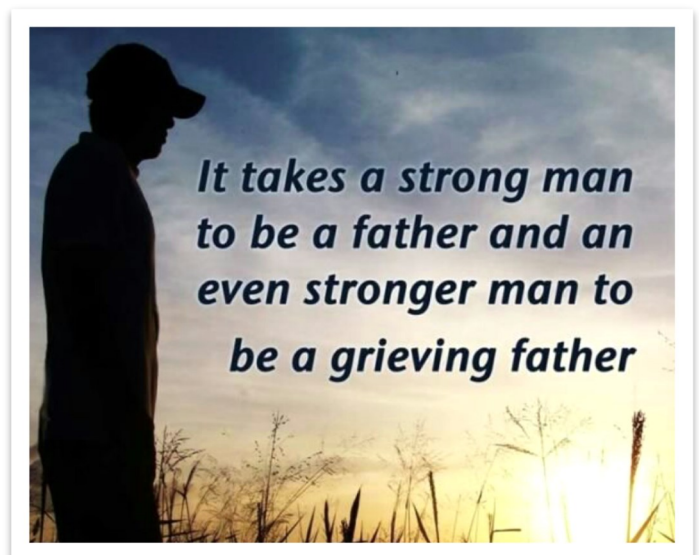
We may choose to spend some time on activities and projects centred on the memory of our child. This could be putting together a photo album or building something as a remembrance. We may also wish to honour and remember our child in more private ways.

Birthdays, anniversaries, holidays, Father's Day and other days of celebration are hard for us. The first few years can be particularly painful. In fact, whenever there is a family gathering of any kind, there will always be a member of the family missing, which brings an underlying feeling of sadness at these events. Anticipating and planning these dates can help manage the emotions on the day.

## Our future

Our child is gone from our daily life, and we miss them. We will feel their absence acutely at times and our deep sadness and sense of loss can hit us unexpectedly. Yet we will also discover over time that our feelings are not always so raw. Most of us find that we are gradually able to resume other activities and find pleasure in them, all the while carrying our loss.

We will remember them with love and carry their memories with us always.



## A Sibling's Grief

If our brother or sister dies when we are teenagers or young adults, we are able to understand our loss but not always able to grieve in the same way as adults; grief can be different for everybody so there is no right or wrong way to grieve. We are old enough to think about the situation like adults but not necessarily able to choose our own way to grieve, even though we try to cope in the same way. Sometimes, we might want comforting as if we were a child; at other times, we just want to be independent and cope on our own. Our grief may differ from that of others because of the individual relationship we had with our sibling.

We have the problem of whom to turn to for support. We need comfort, understanding and sympathy from those around us but we are not always able to find these. It is difficult to approach our parents when their own pain is so raw, and we may feel they are already dealing with so much; we might think that our own emotions are not important compared with theirs, but in fact it can be very helpful to our family to discuss how we're feeling. Sometimes we focus on relationships outside the family, but most of our friends have likely never been in this situation to know how to deal with us, and we may be looking for them to accept that we could be changing because of what's happened.

### After the death

After our sibling has died we might be in shock, numb, in denial, and struggling to believe what has happened. We may even want to join those we've lost or feel we're going crazy when we still expect our brother or sister to be near us; we may withdraw into ourselves. We can feel neglected by everyone; that only our parents' grief is important; or guilty that we are the surviving sibling. It is a major event that can change the relationships within our families; for instance, we may now have become the eldest, the youngest or the only child.

### Compensating after the death?

We can be exhausted when we use up energy by trying to appear 'normal'. Our bereavement can make us over-protective of any remaining siblings or of our parents; we can feel guilty about many different things, including any arguments we might have had with the sibling we have lost. We might feel tired and restless, and have poor concentration, angry that our sibling has been taken from us, and we might be

fearful for our own safety or for that of other members of our family. These feelings are natural and we should not suppress them. Help and support can be obtained to deal with these issues instead of going through them alone.

### Making choices?

Experience of death can teach us about life. We can learn to care about the things that are really important to us, learn about the things that matter in our lives. It can force us to evaluate the choices we have to make and, maybe, to choose different options from those that our friends would select. We grow up, thinking we are learning about all the things we might have to deal with in our life, but we learn nothing about what we might have to face if a sibling dies. Most people we will meet will not know how to deal with our loss, and they will often make comments that may seem cruel or uncaring, but this is more to do with their ignorance and fear of the unknown rather than through any wilful desire to hurt. Few people will understand the way losing a brother or sister can make us feel and it can be frustrating when people assume how we feel and what is important to us as a result of our loss. Others won't even mention what we might be going through because they are not sure what to say; by explaining our feelings we can help them to understand more.

### The empty space

We may want to fill the space that has been left by our sibling but may have to take care that we don't try to be like the brother or sister we've lost. We have to continue to be the person we want to be and learn from the type of person our sibling was. Some of us feel the need to do as much as possible to make up for the things our sibling won't get to do, but it is important not to put unnecessary pressure on ourselves by trying to do too much. It can be very hard to carry on with the 'pointless' everyday tasks such as going to school, college or work. Some might wonder why we should bother with work when it seems so unimportant in comparison with what has happened. Others may welcome the routine that this commitment offers; we like to keep something that we are sure of in our life. There may be times when we can go through periods when we feel we've taken a step backwards in our grieving process. When we feel that we've been coping and then something happens to make us doubt it, it can be scary.

## How many siblings do I have?

When we move on from school to college or work we will undoubtedly be faced with the question, "How many brothers and sisters do you have?" It's not an easy question to answer. It sometimes feels inappropriate to go into the whole family story when your brother or sister has died, but it can also feel horrible to answer without mentioning the person we love and we've lost. The answer can be different each time, but it will always make us pause for a moment.

Some schools and places of work have a counsellor or support system to help with our feelings of grief, or an area that we can retreat to when we're having a hard day and are feeling low. In addition, organisations such as The Compassionate Friends (TCF) have phone and online chat contacts (who may have gone through similar events) to listen and to talk with us.

## Forgetting

Some bereaved siblings experience fear of forgetting the person they've lost. There are different ways to help keep the memory alive, including writing letters or poetry, or keeping a diary. We may also gather keepsakes for a memory box; such as photographs and music. We might want to fundraise for a charity linked in some way to our brother or sister. Volunteer work can be a way of helping not only others, but a way of helping ourselves by keeping us busy, allowing ourselves a break from feelings of grief, or as a way of encouraging us if we look back and fear we didn't give enough help to our sibling when he or she was alive.

## Special Occasions

When we've lost a sibling there are special occasions that can be very distressing, both the anticipation and then the day itself. We can discuss with other members of the family and decide a way to spend the day. It might be beneficial for us to carry out activities as a sign of remembrance, such as taking flowers to a special place, lighting a candle, or by spending some time at one of our sibling's favourite places. We might choose to plant trees or flowers, to listen to favourite songs or to spend time with others who knew our sibling. To mark the day in a special way can bring comfort. We may need time alone to give thought to how much our sibling meant and still means to us.

## Social media

Most of us spend time in the digital space and we are already aware of the potential pitfalls. Still, we might be more vulnerable following the death of our sibling. Even well-meaning comments could upset us. Taking a break from online platforms may help us avoid potentially upsetting content.

There is also a question of what to do with our previous communications with our sibling via social media. While it can be a wonderful thing to be able to 'hear' their voice through their past posts, messages and photos, looking back through these can be very painful.

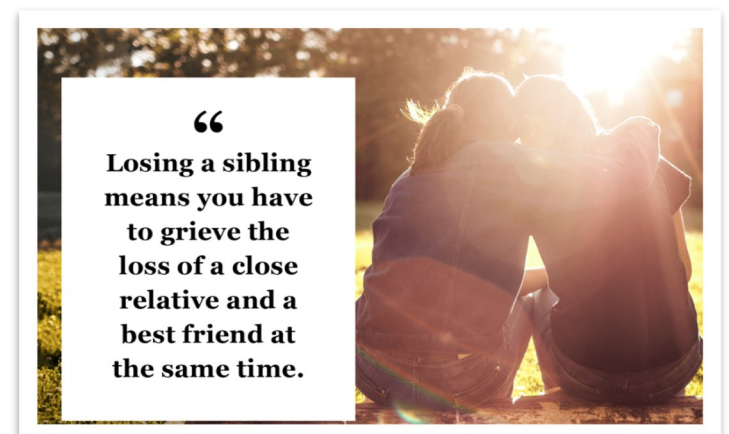
Social media platforms are potentially a useful creative outlet where we can remember and pay tribute to our sibling. Besides posting pictures or videos at different times, we could also use social media to highlight charities or subjects that we are interested in. On the other hand, this might feel uncomfortable to be so public about our sibling and our grief.

Like with all aspects of our grief, it is our own choice how we handle this.

## Going forward

While there may be times when we want our grief as a 'bereaved sibling' to be acknowledged, there will also be times when we just want to get on with living and perhaps forget about what has happened for a while. That's fine too. We need to live our own life and not always be defined by the death of our sibling.

Gradually, we will find our way to living the best life that we can. Our loss might feel overwhelming at times, but the intensity of grief does diminish as time passes – it becomes a part of us. We can become stronger and live full lives, while still also remembering our sibling. They are absent, but still loved and precious in our memory.



## A Grandparent's Grief

The death of our grandchild can overwhelm us with grief and have a profound and complex effect on us.

At the same time as being a grandparent, we are also a parent who is unable to protect our own child from the pain and desolation of bereavement as they in turn mourn the death of their son or daughter. This is a double burden, where helplessness and frustration can add to the pain of grief. We will most likely feel deep sorrow not only at the actual loss of the grandchild at whatever age, but also that an important link in the continuity of the family chain has been lost.

Over the past forty years or so, there have been radical changes in the structure of the nuclear family in our country. Working mothers, a more mobile population, increased divorce rates, and second marriages have all affected the nature of many family relationships, including that between grandparents and the grandchildren.

The intensity of our grief may be affected by how close the relationship was with our grandchild, and his or her parents. Sometimes, because of distance or circumstances, contact will have been limited, but we may still mourn intensely; we may also suffer the added burden of others not realising how much we are grieving and of our need to talk about our loss.

Following the initial shock, some of our physical reactions may be of weariness, of changes to appetite and sleep patterns. These reactions, and feelings of anxiety, lack of concentration and depression are common but not everybody will experience all of them. In addition, grief tends to come in waves, and without any pattern or predictability.

### Helping ourselves

Many grandparents suffer feelings of guilt. One of the most powerful is survival guilt: that we are alive when others - much younger than us - have died. A grandparent may feel guilty about the things they did not do for, or with, their grandchild. Talking about these worries can help us as grandparents to realise that nobody is perfect and that each person does the best they can in the circumstances.

Anger may be another feeling that we experience. It is not always rational, but

nevertheless it is there and needs to be faced. Anger is a strong emotion and may be directed at life, or at any individual person or authority we feel is responsible for the death of our grandchild.

It will help if the anger can be expressed safely, perhaps through physical activity or exercise, by talking to an understanding friend, or through writing. Such writing could be as a letter in which we pour out all the anger and frustration; once expressed, the letter can be destroyed.

### Helping our child

The way our child expresses his or her grief may be different from our own and should be respected. It will not help them to be told what they should, or should not, be feeling, thinking, or doing. It will help if we can listen and empathise with them when they express their feelings of anger, anguish and despair. Emotional support at this time can be of great comfort.

If possible, grandparents could offer to help with the practical demands of family life, such as in the care of other grandchildren who will be grieving too, and who may be feeling very 'left out'.

Looking after any family pets, or perhaps doing a little work around the home, could relieve some of the pressures on our daughter or son; this could be especially so if our child is a single parent for whom those pressures might be greater.

"Grandparents who have not lost a child cannot know the depth of the grief their child is experiencing. We may have lost parents or spouses, but the intensity of parental grief is so much greater. We talk of how we felt when our parents or spouses died and say we know how it feels. We do NOT know how it feels if we ourselves have not lost a child. We are most helpful if we admit this to our child"

- Margaret Gerner is a TCF member in Missouri USA, and is a bereaved parent whose son Arthur died at the age of six. She also became a bereaved grandmother when her three-year-old granddaughter Emily died.

Some people, especially men who feel more comfortable in the traditional role with the 'stiff upper lip' approach, have problems expressing their emotions, and sometimes find shared activities more helpful.

Whatever the circumstances, it is important to pace ourselves so that we do not get overtired. We need to cope with our own grief and to find time to replenish our energies.

If the relationship between us and our child has been difficult, it may not be easy to speak about our thoughts, and fears. Bereaved parents may find someone outside the immediate family, perhaps a trusted friend, in whom to confide. They may find comfort in speaking to another bereaved parent.

### Helping our other grandchildren

If there are other grandchildren in the bereaved family, we may find we are able to offer them much-needed stability, comfort and support, especially while the normal patterns of family life are disrupted and disorganised.

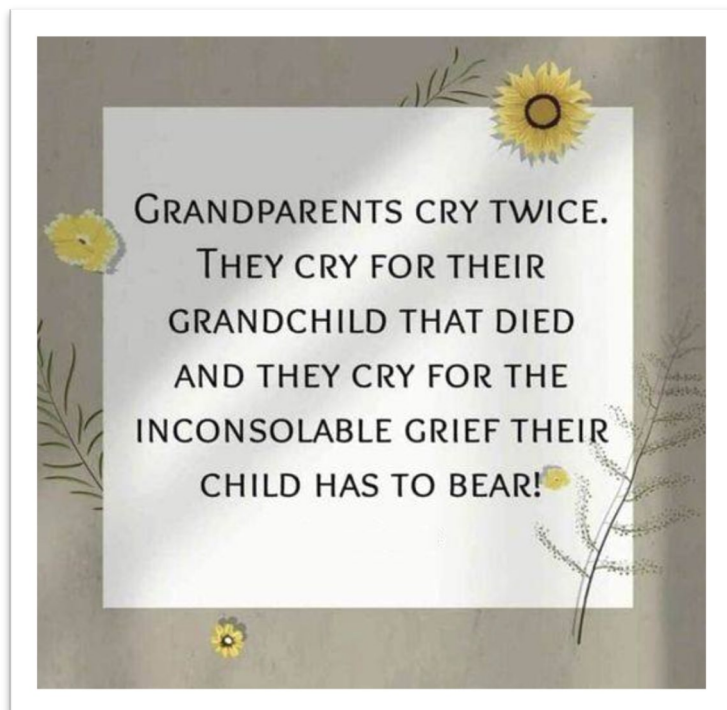
For both grandparents and grandchildren this will be a significant time, and new bonds might well be forged which could last a lifetime. It is important to recognise that we and our grandchildren can gain great strength and companionship through being with each other, sharing in activities even if not talking about our grief directly.

Brothers and sisters of the deceased child will have many fears and worries at this time, varying according to their age and understanding. It is best to answer their questions as simply and honestly as possible, even though this is painful and difficult for them and for us.

Grandparents living at a distance will be able to help and comfort their child and grandchildren with letters, cards, phone calls and emails. 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 daughter or son will need our understanding at family occasions, when the absence of a much-loved child is felt especially acutely.



In later years, on birthdays, anniversaries, family weddings, or births, and with other deaths, recognition of the loss and the pain will be appreciated.

Even ordinary dates such as when the child would have started school, gone to college or started work, can be emotional. Of course, as grandparents, we too can find our thoughts at such times painful, and perhaps a reminder of the sad 'if only's' that can change our lives.

Wherever possible and appropriate there can be much to gain from sharing our feelings and by being comfortable in leaning on 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.

## What happens at a support meeting

At our support meetings, recognise that it is difficult to make the first step in coming. We try to make you feel at ease. Our support meetings aim to provide a supportive space so you feel comfortable sharing your pain and where you are at in this stage in your difficult journey, and to raise any issues you would like to discuss.

Some people attend meetings before they voice their feelings. We know that it may be hard for you to mention your child's name or the circumstances of their death. Inevitably, someone in the group will say something that is tuned into the exact way we are feeling – then the realisation hits that one is among friends who really understand and care about us and our feelings.

Some people are more vocal right from the start and find willing listeners who neither criticise or pass judgement on them. Some of us have most likely had the same feelings of anger, despair, longing, panic and a multitude of others.

Now a word about crying—please don't stay away because you are afraid you will cry! We have all cried, many times, and will do so again. Perhaps we have attended several meetings and not shed a tear. Then, something is said, or a memory comes back that brings a tear to our eyes.

The Compassionate Friends understands the gamut of feelings that accompany grief from tears to laughter. We are all human, and our emotions are many and varied. There are humorous things that come up in everyday living and thankfully, we are able to see that humour and enjoy it.


In the course of discussions, you may hear the answer to a question or problem that has been plaguing you. Several parents may tell how they handled the question of what to do with their child's belongings, clothes, toys, books etc; or how they have got through the holidays, birthdays, and other difficult days. Maybe you will pick up something that will be helpful in dealing with your other children's problems; how to deal with a seemingly caring relative or friend, the hurtful remarks, or how to answer the question, "How many children do you have?"

Sometimes, what has helped one may not have worked for another, but the importance is the open and honest discussions and a chance to decide for yourself.

Grief is normal. It means that you have loved. It is the necessary process by which we adjust our lives to the absence of our loved one.

To help give you more of a feel for our meetings, here are a few of the ground rules that we ask those attending to respect:

- **You may share as little or as much as you feel able to, at your own pace.** There is no pressure to talk, you may want to just listen.
- **Tears are OK** - they show that you cared for your loved one and that you care for yourself.
- **We ask that we all listen when someone is speaking.** We try not to interrupt, this is their time to speak about whatever they wish. If the person speaking needs to pause for a moment to speak again, we wait.
- **We try not to judge or compare when others are sharing, just listen and understand.** We have all experienced different losses and we all grieve differently. We allow others to express the feelings and thoughts that they are having at this time in their grief.
- **We are not here impose our views on others, but rather to support each other using our individual strengths.** Others present may have beliefs and opinions which may or may not agree with our own. We are free to share what has helped us, but we need to be wary of jumping in with advice and suggestions unless it is asked for.
- **What is said in the room, stays in the room.** It is important that what we say about ourselves or about others remains confidential. We are sharing a precious part of our lives, and we need to know that our right to confidentiality is respected.



***“Compassionate Friends is about transforming the pain of grief into the elixir of hope.”***

***– Simon Stephen,  
TCF founder***

## History of TCF

In 1969, in Coventry, England, the Rev Simon Stephens founded The Compassionate Friends whilst assistant to the Chaplain of the Coventry and Warwickshire Hospital. Rev Stephens witnessed the deaths of many children as a result of accidents or incurable illness. He saw that whilst everything that could be done for the children physically was done, there was no support for the grieving parents.

Medical staff didn't have the time or the 'heart' to help.

The inspiration for the formation of our freely available self-help group came from the chance meeting of the parents of two boys (near the same age) who were brought to the hospital at about the same time. The two families started to talk to each other and a relationship of support and understanding grew. After the children died the friendship continued and the parents found that, at least with each other, they could speak openly about their children and know that they were being listened to. They could share their feelings and cry without fear of embarrassment to themselves or anyone else. And, because they were allowed this freedom, the shared burden was no longer intolerable – they were able to help each other through their grief. These two families started to meet with other parents whose children had died in the hospital and the value of the talking, listening and sharing, in the 'healing' of grief was proven.

In time, bereaved parents in Coventry asked Rev Stephens to work with them in establishing a group for parents who needed to share their grief. The Coventry parents wanted other parents to be able to experience the support, understanding and caring that they were able to get from each other.

From these simple beginnings, The Compassionate Friends was born. The first Chapter in the United States of America started in Florida in 1971. In Australia, a Chapter began in Melbourne in 1978, the following year Sydney held its first meeting, and TCF commenced in earnest in Queensland in 1985 and has been supporting bereaved families ever since.

Today, The Compassionate Friends Chapters can be found in many countries throughout the world.

Many bereaved parents can only feel comfortable and at ease in the company of other bereaved parents.

Rightly, they feel that another bereaved parent can understand the depths of their anger and despair.

With each other, they can talk openly without fear of ridicule or embarrassment. The Compassionate Friends provides bereaved parents a haven of understanding and empathy, and the opportunity to grieve in their own way, in their own time, with support, caring and hope.

Although our Founder is a clergyman, and some Chapters use donated church facilities, The Compassionate Friends has no religious affiliation.

## The TCF Credo

We need not walk alone.  
We are The Compassionate Friends.

We reach out to each other with love, with understanding and with hope.

Our children have died at all ages and from many different causes, but our love for them unites us.

Your pain becomes my pain just as your hope becomes my hope.

We come together from all walks of life, from many different circumstances.

We are a unique family because we represent many races, creeds and relationships.

We are young, and we are old.

Some of us are far along in our grief, but others still feel a grief so fresh and so intensely painful that we feel helpless and see no hope.

Some of us have found our faith to be a source of strength, while some of us are struggling to find answers.

Some of us are angry, filled with guilt or in deep depression; others radiate an inner peace.

But whatever pain we bring to this gathering of The Compassionate Friends, it is pain we will share just as we share with each other our love for our children.

We are all seeking and struggling to build a future for ourselves, but we are committed to building that future together.

We reach out to each other in love and share the pain as well as the joy, share the anger as well as the peace, share the faith as well as the doubts and help each other to grieve as well as to grow.

We need not walk alone.  
We are The Compassionate Friends.

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## For More information

Scan the QR code or visit our website for more information or to make a donation.

We are a registered Charity and all donations over \$2 are tax deductible.



**The Compassionate  
Friends Queensland**

Supporting bereaved parents & their families