



# GRIEVING THE DEATH OF OUR CHILD DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

**The world is in the grip of the coronavirus pandemic. For some of us, the reality has come too close to home. If your child has died during this time of crisis and social distancing, we offer our heartfelt condolences. The Compassionate Friends (TCF) is a national charity whose members have experienced the loss of a child, of any age and in any circumstances. We stand with you in compassion and solidarity.**

When a child dies suddenly, the shock and disbelief we suffer as parents is overwhelming. Whatever the cause of our child's death — whether it was due to Covid-19 or for any other reason — if it has not been possible for us to be at their side, then our grief might be made even more intense. We might have had no opportunity to express our love and care in person, to be with them and to hold them in their last moments. Not being able to say 'goodbye' in the way we would wish might make us feel frustrated about the present restrictions regarding social distancing and travel. Current limitations do not even allow us to hold a funeral in the normal way.

In this short leaflet we will look at surviving the pain and grief caused by the death of a child, and the support that TCF can offer you. This is written from our perspectives and experiences as bereaved parents. (This leaflet is addressed primarily to parents, but could also be relevant to other close family members, including grandparents and adult siblings.)

## **The turmoil caused by sudden death**

Shock is often the body's first response to news of sudden death. Everything seems surreal; we begin to operate on auto-pilot because normal emotions and responses are paralysed. As we begin to comprehend what has happened, we experience a bewildering array of strong emotions. We might be in turmoil. Our imagination might run riot as we try to picture the care our child was given and how they suffered, particularly if they died without anyone they knew at their side. Although what happened is certainly not our fault and there is nothing we could have done, we might still blame ourselves, feeling as though we failed in our parental role of protecting, nurturing and making things right.

We might resent the idea that our child appears to be one of those oft-quoted statistics, when in reality they are so much more. Our child was the baby who we nursed; the toddler who walked and talked; the child who played. Depending on their age, they were the teenager or the young adult, living a full life. They were unique, with their own interests, personality and talents. They had their likes and dislikes in music, food and fashion. They had dreams and expectations, and we too had our hopes of how their life would unfold. The crushing of these hopes brings deep heartache.

It is not surprising in these circumstances to find ourselves deeply sad, mournful, lacking concentration, exhausted, despairing, confused or angry — or very likely a combination of all these. Such grief can bring with it an overwhelming sense of powerlessness. If we are a person of

faith, we may be severely tested. If we have surviving children or other close family members, we may become gripped with worries about their welfare. There is no escaping information about coronavirus at this time; constant updates can keep us in a state of agitation. News of potential treatments or of those who have recovered may lead us to feel resentment; why couldn't that good news have been regarding our child? It may be difficult to see a way forward for ourselves.

Our normal life has already been interrupted by social and travel restrictions. Grieving at this time of social separation means that our families or close friends whom we might have expected to rally around us are not available in the same way. In particular, if we are not living with a partner, we might feel desperately alone in our grief.

If any of the above applies to you, then our message is: *you are not alone*. We can assure you from our collective experience, as fellow bereaved parents, that there are ways to cope with the acute agony of grief. The immediate pain is raw; in time it becomes more manageable. We hope you will find the following helpful.

### **It is possible to survive and live with our loss**

**As parents, we are accustomed to caring for others. At this moment, we also need to care for ourselves.** Warm, sweetened drinks are helpful for shock. If we cannot face a full meal, we could try small snacks. A little fresh air and exercise will do us good, even if this is limited to a garden, balcony or next to an open window.

**Finding an outlet for our thoughts and feelings is essential.** Reaching out to close friends or family members via the phone, WhatsApp, FaceTime or other digital means is not as good as having them in the same room with us, but can be better than nothing.

**Facing the pain of grief takes courage.** We need to talk about our child's life and the circumstances of their death. There are good memories to be shared, although at first the pain of their passing, the devastation of unfulfilled dreams and shattered hopes may fill our thoughts. Speaking with other bereaved parents, either individually or in a support group, can be very helpful in this regard. It really helps to know that however dreadful this situation is, we do not have to suffer on our own.

**The Compassionate Friends (TCF) have a helpline you can call: 0345 123 2304.** The trained volunteers who answer the phone are all bereaved parents. The line is open daily from 10 am – 4 pm and 7 – 10 pm. It is operational during the lockdown.

**TCF also runs regular local support groups.** At the moment, these are being organised online. We also have a private internet forum and Facebook groups which welcome new members. You can find out more on our website at [www.tcf.org.uk](http://www.tcf.org.uk), by emailing us at [helpline@tcf.org.uk](mailto:helpline@tcf.org.uk) or by calling the number above.

In moments of crisis, if our grief feels unbearable or we simply need to unload, **we could speak to Samaritans on 116 123.** This is a free helpline, available 24 hours a day.

**Writing can be a useful and creative outlet** for our conflicting and confusing emotions; a safe

way of expressing ourselves. It does not matter whether we share our writings or they remain private.

**Physical exercise, although limited during the current restrictions, can also be a safe outlet for painful emotions.** It can provide focus and control, even if only while we are doing it. Gentle exercise such as yoga can be meditative and aid relaxation, whilst vigorous exercise can be a way to express anger and leave us feeling calmer afterwards. If necessary, we can exercise indoors.

**Above all, we should be kind to ourselves.** This means not only taking physical care, but also allowing ourselves time and space to grieve. We will need to face our grief if we want to survive it. This includes allowing ourselves to cry, if we wish; expressing our emotions loudly, if we wish; or sitting in quietness, if that is what we prefer.

**Having patience with ourselves** is one of the most important elements of being kind to ourselves. We should not feel obligated to 'keep busy' or 'pull ourselves together' when our hearts are breaking. This is probably the greatest tragedy we have faced in our entire lives. Eventually we will find our feet in life again, but there is no timescale for this.

## **Adjusting to the painful reality of life without our child**

**Finding ways of managing our daily lives in light of our child's absence is a real challenge for many of us.** It is difficult to watch the world continue as usual, whilst we are missing our child and our family is incomplete. If we have other caring or work responsibilities, we may need to force ourselves to get up each day. For those without such obligations, finding any motivation can be more of a challenge. It is important not to put any undue pressures on ourselves and to try to take each day as it comes.

**For many parents, it is important to do things that help keep our child's memory alive.** This could be from something simple such as sorting out photos or lighting a candle, to more elaborate activities such as creating a memorial website or replanting a corner of the garden in their memory. This type of activity can help us slowly adjust to the reality of our loss and our changed relationship of memory with our child. There are many ideas for activities in the *TCF Handbook of Ideas for Remembering our Child*. You can download it free of charge here:

[www.tcf.org.uk/rememberinghandbook](http://www.tcf.org.uk/rememberinghandbook)

**We will need to be creative and adaptable in our grieving.** For instance, if it has not been possible for us to attend our child's funeral, and/or if the funeral was not all that we wanted it to be, we could plan a memorial service for when restrictions are lifted. Alternatively, we could organise some type of digital 'social media' memorial, where friends and family could be invited to contribute pictures or comments.

**If we have a partner or other family members living at home,** or if we are in close contact with others, we may find that they are expressing their grief differently to us. Each person's grief is unique, and there are no right or wrong ways to grieve. However, this could give rise to some tensions between us. It is worthwhile communicating our feelings when possible.

**Although we can learn from the experiences of others, in some respects we each need to find our own way through our grief.** For instance, some of us have a religious faith which can be of immeasurable support; others might find that we question long-held beliefs. Some discover a faith, whereas some of us may wish to work out our own philosophy. Some of us find creative activities such as art, music or gardening are therapeutic and calming. It might be the process rather than the eventual product that is most helpful. On the other hand, we may sometimes wish to read something light or watch television; a bit of distraction will not be a bad idea, as the intensity of our feelings leaves us exhausted.

## Going forward

**We will never be the same after the loss of our beloved child. It will take many months, or probably years, to weave the experience into our lives so that we find our 'new normal'. We will have changed, our lives will have changed, and we may now find that we have a different perspective on what we feel is important.**

**We want to live in ways that our child would be proud of, and we may eventually become involved with charity work or find other ways to honour our child's memory. However, this is not all that our life consists of. Trying to live the best life we can, in the circumstances, includes allowing ourselves to experience joy, to smile and even to laugh. We might feel a twinge of guilt at these moments, but we really should not. We all need to feel happy, and to truly live rather than merely survive. In living this 'new normal', we are treasuring and honouring the memories of our child. As the terrible rawness of grief softens, what remains intact is our bond of love with our child, a love that continues and grows with us.**

## Suggestions for further reading

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) have published a range of leaflets to support parents in the aftermath of a child's death, covering topics such as coping with sudden death, supporting our surviving children, the bereaved lone parent, coping with child loss in blended and step families, and much more. You can find and download our leaflets here: <https://www.tcf.org.uk/leaflets>

For more on coping with immediate grief, see these TCF leaflets:

*Grief of the Newly Bereaved* - <http://tiny.cc/griefofnewlybereaved>

*Living with Grief* - <http://tiny.cc/livingwithgrief>

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## Who are the Compassionate Friends?



The Compassionate Friends (TCF) is a national charity supporting parents, siblings and grandparents who are bereaved through child loss. TCF was founded in 1969 by and for bereaved parents.

**Visit our website:** [www.tcf.org.uk](http://www.tcf.org.uk) **Write to us:** [helpline@tcf.org.uk](mailto:helpline@tcf.org.uk) **Call:** 0345 123 2304

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