



The
Compassionate
Friends

**Grieving For Our Child
Who Experienced
Mental Health Problems**

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

Grieving For Our Child Who Experienced Mental Health Problems

No parent is ever prepared for the death of their child. Even if we have lived for years with our child's unpredictable behaviour and mental health problems, including perhaps self-harm and suicide attempts, their death will be a profound shock. No matter how they died, our grief is complex and intense. We may have a lot of troubling memories to cope with.

The impact of our child's mental illness

When someone suffers from serious mental illness, they might have periods of feeling deeply unhappy or highly anxious. They may become so low that they can barely function, finding it difficult to wash, dress or even speak. This depression could suddenly switch to feeling high, not sleeping, and acting unpredictably and irrationally. They may have trouble judging what is real or not. They might hear voices or see things that no one else can. Their illness could cause them to behave in ways that later bring about regret and shame. These problems can sometimes be caused by or lead to substance misuse.

To witness our child tortured in any of these ways will have been a torture to us.

No matter how much we love our child, their actions may have frustrated us. They might have refused treatment, claiming they were perfectly all right, when they were in fact very ill and incapable of taking care of themselves. We might have watched in dismay at

the signs that they were becoming ill again. They may have been so unwell that they became a danger to themselves, and as a loving parent we could have found ourselves supporting a difficult decision for them to be admitted to hospital, even against their will.

Our child's illness may have led them into situations where the police became involved. They could have been arrested or imprisoned. It is a sad fact that a high proportion of people in custody are known to be suffering from mental illness.

They may have been withdrawn and isolated, cutting themselves off from their friends and family. Our child may have been living rough or estranged from us, so that we went to bed each night not knowing if they were safe.

In our relationship with them, things might have been said or done that were extremely hurtful. These might have been 'the illness speaking', but nevertheless, these words and actions may now haunt us.

All of this means that even before our child died, we might have been emotionally and physically exhausted from coping with their illness. If we have other children, we may be troubled by how our child's needs and now their death has affected them. We may feel extremely isolated in our grief. Friends and even family members who struggled to show understanding and sympathy for our child's problems while they were alive may be unable to support us now that our child has died.

Coping with our grief over both our child's illness and their death could be a long and difficult process.

Unanswered questions and feelings of guilt or anger

We may have feared the possibility of our child's death for some time. Alternatively, their death may have been sudden and unexpected.

Tragically, suicide is common among people who suffer from serious mental health problems, and our child may have previously tried to take their own life. If they died by suicide, this could have been planned or it could have been impulsive. There are often no warnings or clues that someone is planning to end their life, and they might even have acted as though things were getting better.

On the other hand, their death might have been accidental, perhaps a desperate attempt to find a few hours of peace through drugs, alcohol or other means.

No matter how our child died, many of us feel guilty, turning over in our minds whether there was anything we could have said or done to prevent what happened or to help with their mental health issues. We may look for explanations – a broken relationship, inadequate mental health treatment, the adverse influence of our child's friends or other people they had met. We may blame ourselves, wondering whether our parenting, our own relationships or way of life might have contributed to the development of their illness. At times we may feel angry with our child for dying. Such anger might seem illogical, but nevertheless, it is one of the emotions many of us experience in our grief. Questions run endlessly through our minds. Unfortunately, we can rarely find answers or peace in the search.

If our child had spent years struggling and suffering, we may sometimes feel relieved that their long nightmare is over.

Such fleeting thoughts cause us still more pain, as deep down we wish with all our heart that our child was still alive. It is natural to feel relief that we must no longer cope with the almost constant chaos caused by their illness. It is also natural to feel glad that someone we love is no longer suffering. However, none of this lessens our grief, and in fact, such feelings can leave us quite confused.

Our suffering can be increased by the criticism of thoughtless people. Sometimes we may feel that even close family and friends are blaming us in some respects. On the other hand, they may tell us we are being too harsh on ourselves. This advice is well-meant, but it has the effect of silencing our pain. We may find that the people around us are either unwilling or unable to understand the complex layers of our grief.

Coping with our grief

It can be a struggle to function from one hour to the next in the early traumatic days that follow the death of a child. We will need to learn to be patient in our sorrow, setting ourselves small realistic goals that we can focus on. These will help us take our first faltering steps back into the world.

To avoid being overwhelmed by our grief, we will need to make the effort to take care of ourselves. Exercise, music, relaxation therapies, being outside in nature, spending time on craft or other creative activities can all help take down the level of our pain, even if only for a short time.

It may help us to write down our thoughts, even if we show no-one the results. This could be in the form of a diary, journal, articles or poems. Writing a letter to our child, expressing our feelings, can also be part of the grief process.

Creating a memorial to our child can help us to honour their life, especially if we focus on the moments that we treasure. This could take the form of a book of words and photos, an online page with tributes, pictures and videos, or an event to which the people who were most important to our child can be invited.

Some of us eventually find meaning and a new purpose by campaigning for greater understanding for people who suffer with poor mental health, or by getting involved with a relevant charity.

If we have other children or full-time work, we might have precious little time to involve ourselves in such activities, but simply getting out of the home to somewhere green, perhaps a place that meant a lot to our child, can be very helpful.

If we had our own mental health problems prior to our child's death, these might be made worse by what has happened. Our GP is a good starting point for help and advice if we wish to access further support.

Finding support

We will soon discover which family members and close friends are able to provide help and support at this time. We may need to be prepared to lose some friends who are unable to cope with our situation, but we may also find that we make new friends. We are often surprised by people's responses, and support can come from unexpected quarters.

Being in conversation with people who understand because they have had similar experiences can be extremely helpful.

Meeting other parents through **The Compassionate Friends (TCF)** can help give us strength to carry on; we will be able to talk freely to

others in a safe environment. This could be in person and/or via a digital forum. Details of how to get in touch with TCF can be found on the back page of this leaflet.

For those of us who would rather not talk directly with other parents at the moment, reading about other parents' experiences on a forum or through comments left on a Facebook group can provide a reassuring reminder that although every parent's experience is in some ways unique, we are not alone in our grief.

Other national organisations that can be helpful:

Sudden provides support for people bereaved by sudden death.
Helpline **0800 2600 400** | [sudden.org](https://www.sudden.org)

Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide
Helpline **0300 111 5065** | [uksobs.org](https://www.uksobs.org)

Drugfam provide supports to families affected by a loved one's drug or alcohol problems.
Helpline **0300 888 3853** | [drugfam.co.uk/bereavement](https://www.drugfam.co.uk/bereavement)

The **BEAD project** (organised by CRUSE) aims to provide information, support and hope for anyone bereaved through alcohol or drugs.
[beadproject.org.uk](https://www.beadproject.org.uk)

Mind offers information and advice on mental health problems.
Helpline **0300 123 3393** | [mind.org.uk](https://www.mind.org.uk)

Issues with health services

We may have issues with the health care our child was given.

No matter how many well-meaning individuals there are within the NHS, there are sometimes issues with the GP referral service, or delivery of hospital or community mental health care. For instance, we may feel the treatment that our child was offered did not help them. If our child had to move from the children's mental health team (CAMHS) to the local adult service, there may have been problems with the upheaval this change brought. If our child was under the care of adult mental health services, we may have been excluded from discussions about their problems, care or treatment. Alternatively, our child might have reached out for help from a doctor or another professional but then struggled to access the support they needed.

In addition, we may feel that our child's physical health needs received insufficient attention.

Any of this might leave us feeling let down, angry and frustrated. Sometimes it can help to have a conversation with those who were involved in our child's care. If this does not bring resolution, we might consider making an official complaint. If we decide to do this, we should be aware that the complaints process can be lengthy and complex. It will require us to focus on the most difficult aspects of our child's life and care, and this can prolong the acute pain of our grief. On the other hand, the process has the potential to improve health services for future users. This could help us feel that something positive has come out of the tragedy of our child's death.

For more on this, see the TCF Leaflet on ***Making a Complaint About the NHS.***

Concerns about surviving children

If we have other children, the impact on them and on the family dynamics can be enormous.

There might have been times when they felt neglected due to all the attention their sibling had needed. Some of the things our troubled child said or did could have confused, angered or even frightened them. They may have resented their sibling and said things they now regret. As a result, their grief may be complicated by guilt.

Younger children are unlikely to understand mental illness and they may wrongly conclude that they must be in some way to blame. No matter their age, they might feel responsible in some way, perhaps believing that they failed to save their sibling from dying.

Our surviving children may need encouragement to speak about their feelings. It is important to talk about what has happened, in a way that is appropriate to their level of maturity. Support from those outside the immediate family circle can also be immensely helpful at this time, and is something to be welcomed and encouraged.

For more on this subject, see the TCF Leaflet *Our Surviving Children*.

Our life now and into the future

As the weeks and months pass, we will try to pick up the threads of life again. Things will never be the same. At first, and often for some time, it may seem impossible to imagine finding peace of mind. We may struggle to understand what happened, both in terms of our child's illness and the circumstances of their death. Perhaps we will never have the answers we seek. Yet as time passes, we may find ourselves drawing ever more comfort from the good memories and better times in our child's life. As we adjust to their absence, we continue to carry them in our thoughts, with our love for them always in our hearts.

Further reading

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) have published a range of leaflets to support parents who have experienced the death of their child. Some of the following titles could be helpful at this time, depending on your circumstances:

- *Living with Grief*
- *Preparing our Child's Funeral*
- *Remembering our Child (Leaflet and Handbook)*
- *Bereaved through Drug or Alcohol Use*
- *When our Child has Died of a Long-term Illness*
- *Coping with Judgemental Attitudes*
- *Prolonged and Intense Grief*

Leaflets for those whose child died from suicide or in other unexpected ways:

- *After Suicide*
- *Sudden Death*
- *Coping with Legal Proceedings Following the Death of Our Child*
- *Factsheets about Inquests: Inquest Factsheets*

TCF leaflets can be downloaded from this link:

[tcf.org.uk/leaflets](https://www.tcf.org.uk/leaflets)

Printed copies are available free of charge for bereaved parents from the TCF office (details on the back page).



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UK Helpline:

0345 123 2304

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)

In loving memory of our son Jack 1989-2015
and our daughter Alice 1992-2004.
Forever in our hearts.

Founder: The Revd Canon Dr Simon Stephens OBE

President: The Countess Mountbatten of Burma