



The
Compassionate
Friends



Coping with
Special Occasions

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

Coping with Special Occasions

There are all sorts of special occasions that become hard to face after the death of our child. Whether an event is unique to them, such as their birthday or the anniversary of their death, a family occasion, or a public celebration such as Christmas, we may find it an anxious and painful time.

These days or time periods will inevitably arrive; it is impossible to know how we will feel when they come, although many of us have found it does help to prepare ourselves, bearing in mind that sometimes it is the approach to those specific days that can be more painful than the actual day itself.

Involving others

We each grieve in our own way and develop our own coping strategies. Sometimes we may want to mark the occasion, finding ways to incorporate the memory of our child; other times we may want to hide away in a safe space. If there are other people involved in the day, such as our partner, other children or close family and friends, it is important we let them know how we feel, and what we want to do. No one will understand how we are feeling unless we tell them, and it is equally important for us to understand what those around us, who will be facing the day with us, also need and want. In a family it can be hard to come to an agreement which suits everyone, so we might need to be prepared to compromise.

If we live alone and/or have no close friends or family to turn to for support, it can be harder to cope with these special occasions, as any feelings of being alone may be intensified.

Whether we are alone or not, sharing our feelings with other bereaved parents who can truly understand and who may have already experienced such occasions can be an enormous help. We can find the support of other bereaved parents through a meeting of The Compassionate Friends (TCF), or through the TCF online forum or Facebook pages.

(Further advice for lone parents can be found in the TCF leaflet *The Bereaved Lone Parent*.)

Our child's "special days"

When our child has died, their birthday can be a particularly sad day. It is a reminder of what we have lost and we know that, in other circumstances, it's a day we would be celebrating together. Many people want to mark their child's birthday in some way and how we go about that is a very personal decision. Some people have a family meal. Others may want to visit a significant place – perhaps visiting a grave or a place which is special to us. On the other hand, it is not unusual for some of us to try to not to think about the day, because it is too painful.

The anniversary of our child's death can be very painful. In the days leading up to the anniversary we might relive the events of that time. We can be filled with fear that we will not be able to cope on the day, although many of us have found that the lead-up to the anniversary can sometimes be more painful than the day itself.

We might want to remember our son or daughter quietly. If we are a member of a faith group, it may be possible to have our child's name read out in a service or meeting. Recognising the

importance of the day can be a comfort. Perhaps going for a walk would feel appropriate. However we decide to mark this time, it is a day to be kind to ourselves. It is important to acknowledge that there is no right or wrong way to deal with such days; it is about what feels right for us.

As years go by, it is likely that others will forget the significance of the day. For many people their lives will have carried on but for a parent the date we lost our child will always be the most significant date in the calendar. It can feel as though our child has been forgotten and this can make the day more painful. If we want to mark the day in some special way, we can explain this to others around us so they can support us in whatever we decide to do.

We may choose to mark our child's special days on social media. Some of us use Facebook to celebrate our child's birthday or to honour them on the anniversary of their death by sharing our child and their story in pictures and words. This can be done on our own personal page, within the TCF closed support group pages, or on our child's memorialised page. This gives others the chance to support us, no matter where they are.

We can go further, commemorating the life of our child in video, words and pictures on a memorial website, such as **www.muchloved.com**, **www.gonetoosoon.com** or **www.forevermissed.com**. Each of these sites allow us to pay an online tribute to our child on the days of the year that mean most to us.

Our own “special days”

There are occasions when we would normally celebrate, but it may feel wrong after we have lost a child. Celebrating our own birthday can feel very strange when our child is not there to celebrate it with us and will never be able to celebrate

being a year older. Some of us try to ignore the day, but it's very likely that our friends and family will still want to mark the occasion in some way. It's important that we explain gently how we want to spend the day. Other people may want to see that we are still able to enjoy such occasions, but if it's too soon for that, we can tell them how we are feeling and what we want from them.

Family occasions

The birthday of another of our children can be a very hard day to cope with. There will be a feeling of sadness because someone is missing the celebration and it is hard to try to cover up our sadness so that our child's siblings can enjoy their day. They too are likely to be feeling the loss of their brother or sister.

We may have the same conflicting feelings at other family celebrations, such as the university graduation of a close family member or another achievement. Each celebration will be a reminder of things our child can no longer hope for. Although we can be happy for the people at the centre of the celebration, there will always be a sadness in our heart.

Weddings should be happy events but the death of a child can cast a dark shadow over the day. It can be a reminder that we will never see our child marry, or perhaps it will be a reminder of their wedding day and what should have been. We might feel that it would be better not to go to the wedding if we imagine our presence will make other people sad. It can be a good idea to talk with the couple who are getting married and explain how hard we may find the day and try to make the decision together.

Sometimes it is possible for the celebrants to give a short and loving reference to our child. This can be a great comfort to us and to all the family and friends to know that they are remembered. However, it depends on the closeness of our relationship and whether they knew our child.

If ours is a blended (step) family, we will have to be aware that not every member of the family will share, or even be able to appreciate, our feelings of sorrow on such a happy day. The TCF leaflet *Grieving Child Loss in Blended and Step Families* provides insights that may help us prepare for a coming family event.

Funerals

Funerals we attend after our child's can be highly emotional and much more difficult after we have faced our own child's funeral. It might be held in the same place and bring back memories of our child's service. While we try to think of the person we have come to commemorate, our hearts and minds may be filled with memories of our child, which can be overwhelming, although some of us have found that the readings, the music and the company of other people we are close to is uplifting and comforting. Explaining our fears in advance will help others to understand if we have to leave quietly should things become too much.

Holidays

Whether or not a holiday can be enjoyable after the death of our child is very personal. Some people find it a great help to be away from home, especially at times when others are celebrating such as Christmas. For others home can be a safe haven and it can be hard to leave for any length of time.

Holidays can recall happier times when our family was complete. In the early years, we may feel unable to go on holiday at all, or there may be favourite places that we choose not to visit for a while. On the other hand, we may want to retrace our steps and feel close to our child as we revisit a location of happy memories.

It may be sensible to take our first holiday somewhere close to home, so that we may return early should we wish. If we have surviving children, we might feel an obligation to give them time away in a place where they can escape their own grief and memories for a while. Sometimes, relatives or parents of their friends may kindly volunteer to take our children with them when they go on holiday.

Christmas and cultural festivals

Christmas, New Year and other cultural and religious festivals in our communities can be especially difficult. Everyone appears to be obsessed with celebrations, and the preparations can last for months. These confront us at every turn, in shops and streets, on TV, radio and in magazines; many of our schools practise for months for end-of-term events. We may feel alienated, isolated by our grief.

Such events cannot be the same as before, because our family is not the same – not complete. If this is the first year, it will be painfully different from previous years. Do we decorate a tree, send cards, give presents, attend a place of worship, join in the festive meal, go to a family party? It is the right of every one of us as a bereaved parent to decide to do none of these things in order to protect ourselves from unnecessary emotional pain. On the other hand, although it may be difficult, we do need to consider the needs of our other children and grandchildren, especially if they are young. For their sake we may feel we should continue with important traditions of trips to the shops, a pantomime, or a visit to see Father Christmas.

Especially in the first years, some families find it easier to do something totally different. We might plan to go away, so that we do not have to fill our home with customary decorations. The downside of this idea is that it takes us away from

friends, who can be a great support; we may be amongst complete strangers whose jollity upsets us. Also, some of us love the traditions of the seasonal events and we will hold fond memories of all our children being excited about the preparations. If we stay at home, our surviving children may be able to visit family or friends, enjoying a taste of normal celebration while giving us some time to be alone with our thoughts and feelings.

Some of us find it a comfort to mark our son or daughter's life at Christmas in some way, perhaps by buying them a special ornament for the tree each year. Others find it easier to spend Christmas doing voluntary work, perhaps at a homeless shelter or helping at an animal rescue centre. The feeling that we are making a difference to others can make the season feel worthwhile and that we have honoured our child.

Other special occasions

Two other occasions with special significance appear on our calendars: Mother's Day and Father's Day. These are now big commercial events, with large sales of cards and gifts for a child to choose something to give to each parent. For bereaved parents, these days can be stressful, even when our surviving children wish to celebrate with us. If we have lost our only child/children, these days can be particularly difficult as they remind us of the void left by their loss. In addition, if our own parents are still living, we might feel upset by our conflicting emotions.

Some of us may find trying to ignore Mother's and Father's Day is the best option; others may develop our own ways of marking the day. Although our child is not here to offer us their good wishes for these days, the love shared between us continues.

Remembrances for special occasions

Candles symbolising the flame of life can be lit, perhaps in a special place or at a special time. It can be in the home, at the graveside, in a religious service, or at a meeting of The Compassionate Friends. TCF has a world-wide candle-lighting day each December.

Trees and shrubs might be planted in our own garden or, with permission, at a school, a park or in a graveyard. Carefully selected plants can be presented to an organisation in which our child was involved. There is also a specially named 'TCF Rose'.

Voluntary work or fund-raising for organisations can be of special significance for a family. We could commission a unique gift, or offer to buy equipment for a hospital. Books, or musical instruments, or kit for sport activities are welcome at a school, especially when the reason for such contributions is made known.

Writing a poem, a letter or a memory about our child at the time of the anniversary is therapeutic as well as a special way of remembering. Poems or articles could be sent to the TCF publication *Compassion* or we could post our writing on the TCF internet forum. Using the TCF Facebook groups is a good way of sharing our writings/pictures and interacting with other parents who have shared similar losses. Exchanging ideas through TCF meetings, *Compassion* or the website will help us to develop our own ways of coping with special occasions.

Many find craft activities therapeutic. Perhaps making a mosaic, creating a memorial area in our garden, sewing a quilt or a cushion, working in wood or stone could create a lasting memory and be a loving thing to do. Many families collect a variety of items together to keep in a memory box or scrapbook.

All special occasions are part of the tapestry that makes up our family history. Some are joyous, others are sad. After the death of our child, we will have a shadow, a yearning for what might have been, an added poignancy. It is important to allow ourselves to handle these days in a way that suits us. This may change from one year to the next. We may establish new traditions, involving the memory of our children within them. It is important for us that we recognise the extra strain that these times of the year can bring and to be kind to ourselves. We can survive these days, difficult as they may be, and carry our loving memory of our child with us into the future.

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**

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General Enquiries

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To find out more about TCF visit

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

Remembering Sam Hill

Forever 16

Loved always xx

Founder: The Revd Canon Dr Simon Stephens OBE

President: The Countess Mountbatten of Burma