



# GRIEVING COUPLES



The Compassionate Friends  
Victoria Inc.

## GRIEVING COUPLES

A worldwide organisation.

“Supporting parents, brothers, sister and grandparents  
after the death of a child at any age”



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### **GRIEVING COUPLES**

In a loving relationship, we try to support and care for each other, through good times and bad. Usually, when one of us hits rock bottom, the other can try to be the mainstay for a little while, to help the other along. But when our child dies, we are both cast into the same dark place, struggling with the worst thing we have ever faced. We are there together, but we may discover that we are also there alone. We may experience and express our grief so differently that we fear our relationship is falling apart, just at the time we need it most. We may discover differences between us that we were unaware of before this tragedy struck. Realising that many couples struggle in this way can make the differences less damaging, though not less painful.

Where the relationship has been strained, the death of our child may exacerbate the difficulties, but for some couples the opposite may happen and we become closer than we have been for many months or years, as we struggle together to survive our family tragedy.

### **How we grieve**

The nineteenth century stereotypes, of men feeling constrained from weeping and talking about their suffering, while women were allowed to do so, are not so simple in reality. Two of our most basic needs are to cry and to talk. It is hard when our reactions are not in step, and we find ourselves feeling unsupported at our time of greatest need. When one of us needs to talk, the other may be fighting to hold themselves together and simply be unable to respond. We need other people to be there for us, to be our support, and having other family members and friends does help. But even when we have such support we can sometimes slip into an attitude of blame and resentment towards our partner. Grief makes all of us more extreme in our reactions, so it is not surprising that it exaggerates our differences too. Each of us carries our past history of earlier losses and bereavements, and the ways we have learned to cope may only now become apparent to our partner; the differences between us may increase our sense of isolation.

Our sexual relationship can also become more difficult, with one of us in desperate need of closeness, comfort and the release which sex can bring, while the other feels that this is totally inappropriate. For some of us, our sexual relationship is the one thing that remains constant in these troubled times. For some, sex may symbolise our shared love for our family, while for others it is almost an insult to our dead child, the pleasure becoming a source of guilt and distress. We need not to expect too much of each other, or of ourselves, but understanding and a common ground can be very hard to achieve, and may take a considerable time.

Our spiritual insights may be different, too, even if before we thought we shared common beliefs. One of us may find support and strength in our long-held faith, with prayer becoming a mainstay of our grieving, while for the other religion becomes a focus for rage at a God who could allow our child to die, and our beliefs fall apart, at least in the short term. Alternatively, one or both of us may have been sure that this life is all that there is, only to



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find that we are now drawn to religion in our search for meaning or for comfort. If one of us changes radically, it can drive a wedge between us. Or we may have philosophical, agnostic or atheistic views, and find support in these.

Blame and guilt are often an integral part of our feelings as parents; we blame ourselves for our child's death, for not having been able to keep them alive. Some of us need scapegoats for the insupportable tragedy, finding in them a focus for our sense of anger at the destruction of our family unit. Each of us may have quite different concerns, and find it very difficult to accommodate the feelings of our partner.

The time span of our journey through grief may also be quite different. One of us may have hardly begun after six months, while the other feels an urgent need to 'get on with life'. We cannot easily adapt our own journey to our partner's time frame. The things we do to survive are often very different: some may like to write, talk, gardening or cooking.

Our surviving children, if we are fortunate enough to have them, can be a source of shared strength and focus, or a strain and a tension. The desire to continue to function as a family can bring us all together, but it can also seem almost impossible to sustain. The children need us to help them in their loss, just as we need them, but that does not mean that they are always easy to help. One or other of us may be unable to cope with the children, with the other having to do it all. Additional difficulties may arise where step-parents and stepchildren are concerned.

It helps if we can talk with our children about their feelings and include them in deciding what to do about their brother or sister's clothes, books, sports equipment and bedroom. We should try to avoid making hurried decisions about her or his belongings, and take as much time as we need, not being influenced by what other people think we 'should' be doing. It may be useful to discuss this aspect with members of TCF to know the different ways in which they managed this.

### **Surviving**

Each of us had our own special relationship with our child, we are still their mum and dad, and they have their own place in our hearts. If we can avoid competition in our grief, and record the story of our son or daughter's life and death in a way that honours the role each of us played, then we have a real basis for conversation, for shared memory.

It helps too if we can avoid making assumptions or judgments about our partner. Silent withdrawal is a valid means of coping with our grief, even though it may be hard for our partner to bear. We need to be aware of each other's mood-swings; we may feel we are on an emotional see-saw - when one is up, the other is down. We need time and privacy to grieve as individuals, and also time together without the other children.



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All of us have to re-enter the world at some point; we have to go back to work, restart our social life, go on holiday, acknowledge that we are allowed to know enjoyment again however unimaginable this may seem at first. External circumstances dictate some of these, as do the needs of our surviving children, but our inclinations may not be in harmony. If we try not to blame each other for 'hanging on' or for being unfeeling or hasty in our suggestions, then perhaps we can resolve some of these differences without increasing our distress.

We need to have realistic expectations of what we can achieve, together and separately. We may need to look closely at our partnership, to give each other space, and to pursue different paths without being afraid that this will drive us apart, to recognise that one may be better able to cope with some things, the other with different ones. Adjusting to our 'new normality' can be difficult.

The Compassionate Friends offers help in a variety of ways. One or both of us may find comfort and strength in talking to other parents who have battled through similar difficulties and survived them. It can help to meet with others who understand our need to talk, to retell the story of our loss and go over the narrative of our child's life. Contact may be through group meetings, the [telephone](#) or [email](#), the website, the [annual Gathering](#). There is a bi monthly magazine and a wide range of [leaflets](#), and an extensive [library](#) which includes books on the particular aspects of grief which can cause difficulty to couples.

### **The way forward**

It is sometimes said that a relationship is like a dance: we have to find a tempo that works for us both, but then each of us has our own steps. Our grieving will probably have intensified our awareness of each other and our sense of 'together yet alone'. The need to remember our child and to share memories will always be there. But our lives do continue, and the insights into our relationship that have been so painfully discovered as we grieve may enrich our partnership in the years ahead. As a family we are changed forever by the death of our child, but the shared memory of our son or daughter is a most precious treasure for always.

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