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

It can be difficult to cope with special occasions when we have been bereaved of our child.

Some events are specific to them, such as their birthday or the anniversary of their death. Then there are occasions for family and friends, and for ourselves too, like our own birthdays. Other special events include public, religious or cultural festivals such as Mother's and Father's Days, Christmas, Eid, Diwali or Hanukkah. We may find ourselves particularly anxious at any of these occasions.

Significant dates and special occasions inevitably arrive each year. We won't know quite how we will feel until the time comes, but many of us have found it helps to plan and prepare in advance. Sometimes it's the lead up to the significant date that ends up being more painful than the occasion itself.

In this leaflet we look at general ideas for coping, and then some specifics for particular types of occasion.

Ideas for coping that can apply to any type of special occasion

Involving others

We each develop our own ways of coping with our grief. Sometimes we may want to openly mark a special occasion, finding ways to commemorate our child. At other times, we may want to hide away in a safe space.

If there are other people involved in the event, 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. It is also worthwhile for us to try to recognise what those around us may need or want. It can be difficult to agree to a plan which suits everyone, so we might need to be prepared to compromise.

If we live alone and/or have no close friends or family, it can be harder to cope with these special occasions, as any feelings of loneliness may be made worse.

Sharing our feelings with other bereaved parents who genuinely 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 Facebook pages or online groups.

Further advice for lone parents can be found in the TCF leaflet *The bereaved lone parent* - **tcf.org.uk/loneparent**

> *"I take comfort from reading posts on Facebook made by bereaved parents. They truly understand how I feel, and share useful advice as well as expressing sincere empathy." Amira*

Remembrance ideas for special occasions

Candles symbolising the flame of life can be lit, perhaps in a special place or at a special time. TCF organises a worldwide candle-lighting day each December.

We could create **a lasting keepsake**, such as sewing a quilt or cushion, working with wood or stone, or painting pebbles. Many of us have put together a memory box or collected photos into a book.

Writing a poem, a letter or a memory about our child at the time of the anniversary can be therapeutic, as well as being a special way of remembering.

Trees and shrubs might be planted in our own garden or, with permission, at a school, a park, or in a graveyard.

TCF Facebook groups are a good place for sharing our writing and pictures, as well as interacting with other parents who have experienced similar losses. Poems or articles can also be sent to the TCF publication *Compassion*, or we can post our writing in the TCF Facebook groups.

> *"I like to write in a memory book for my daughter in remembrance of her brother, so that they stay connected." Kasia*

For many more ideas for remembering our child, including on special occasions, see: *Handbook of ideas for remembering our child* - **tcf.org.uk/rememberinghandbook**

Coping in the worst moments

Sometimes during a special occasion, or the lead up to it, we can feel overwhelmed by our grief. We might like to try:

- Breathing more deeply and slowly
- Leaving the room and going outside if we can. If we have limited mobility, we can simply turn around and face the opposite direction. A very small change in our surroundings can be enough to break our thought patterns
- Accomplishing something, such as cleaning out a kitchen drawer, watering the plants or answering an email
- Communicating with someone. Calling or popping round for a visit may take a lot of effort, but it might just help
- Watching TV might be enough to divert our thoughts temporarily
- Trying to find a positive thought to replace a painful one. A happy memory of our time with our child can push back against the pain of thinking that they are gone.

If we're having a particularly bad moment, reaching out to someone else can be the best strategy. There are many helplines available, including:

- **The Compassionate Friends - 0345 123 2304**
  calls are always answered by a bereaved parent

- **Samaritans - 116 123**
  call free any time of the day or night

- **Cruse Bereavement Support - 0808 808 1677**

For more ideas on coping with overwhelming grief see our leaflet *Coping with overwhelming grief* - **tcf.org.uk/overwhelminggrief**

Allowing ourselves moments of joy

There is much about special occasions that may be painful and difficult to cope with. On the other hand, we may find ourselves enjoying these celebrations even if only for a few short moments.

Feeling some happiness while we are still experiencing such intense sadness can seem like a conflict, but it is perfectly possible to hold grief and joy together. Our life will never be complete without our child, yet it is still a life to be lived. Laughing or finding ourselves enjoying something does not diminish our love for our child or mean that they are forgotten. We should not feel guilt for any moments of joy we experience.

We can honour and remember our child in moments of both happiness and sadness.

> *"I know that my son would be so happy to see me laugh whilst talking about the silly things he used to do." Jacqui*

Particular types of events

Our child's special dates

> *"I make a donation to a charity on my child's birthday. It makes me feel I am doing something for them." Lev*
>
> *"I take myself off to our local town on my son's birthday and have a hot chocolate with all the trimmings in honour of my chocoholic son!" Angela*

There is no right or wrong way to deal with significant dates such as our child's birthday or the anniversary of when they died. It's about what feels right for us, and this may change as the years go by.

Our child's birthday is an important date on our calendar. We might dread the prospect of what was previously a joyful occasion. Some parents carry on marking their child's birthday, perhaps by eating a favourite meal, or visiting a special place. Others find the date too painful, and want to ignore it as far as possible.

Similarly, the anniversary of our child's death will be a difficult time. In the weeks leading up to the anniversary, we might find ourselves reliving the events surrounding their passing. We might fear that we won't be able to cope on the day. It's worth noting that some parents find the lead-up to the anniversary worse than the day itself.

Many of us have found that it is better to have a plan, as this can help us feel less vulnerable when the day and all of its terrible sadness arrives.

We might want to spend the day remembering our child quietly, going for a walk or being in nature. An annual ritual such as the planting of a tree or lighting a candle can bring comfort. We may want to bring a birthday card, flowers or a small memento to their grave or to another special place. If we are a member of a faith community, it may be possible to have our child's name read out in a service or meeting.

It may help to go somewhere that holds a memory of our child, such as the place where they were born, somewhere we'd taken them on holiday, or a local beauty spot they had loved. On the other hand, some of us will prefer to be somewhere that has absolutely no connection with our child.

> *"On Jack's birthday his mum and I find it better to go to a place completely new to us, somewhere he'd never been either. It seems to ease the pain just a little." Dave*

We might choose to mark our child's special days on social media. This gives other people the chance to support us and remember our child too, no matter where they are. This can be done on our own personal Facebook page, Instagram or other social media pages, on our child's memorialised Facebook pages, or within the TCF support groups on Facebook.

We may find as years go by that it will be up to us to remind our friends and family when it is our child's anniversary date or their birthday. It is not that our child is not remembered, just the date itself.

> *"Arranging to meet at the park with my daughter's friends gives them a chance to mark the date even if they can't attend. They send a message or a photo, and that is a great comfort." Katy*

Some years may feel more significant than others. For instance, when it has been five years since our child's death, or when they would be reaching a particular age. We might want to plan a suitable commemoration. The process of planning can help occupy our thoughts and give us some sense of purpose and control.

Whatever we decide to do to mark our child's special occasions, we should try to remember to be kind to ourselves.

Our own special days

> *"I do a sponsored walk around the time of my birthday. I enjoy walking. Having a focus, doing something meaningful and being outdoors all seem to help get me through what is otherwise a difficult day." Martin*
>
> *"At first, I hated my birthday after my child died, but then I started to see it differently. If I had not been born, neither would my child. So, I started making tentative changes, allowing myself to enjoy it. I often eat the treats we used to share on my birthday, and that feels right." Rosa*

Celebrating our own birthday can feel strange when our child is no longer there to celebrate with us, and will never again celebrate their own birthday. There is nothing wrong with enjoying ourselves, but it might take a while for us to come to this point.

If we have been bereaved of our only child, or all of our children, we may feel especially bereft and lonely on our birthday. If this is our situation, then finding ways to be kind to ourselves is vital.

Some bereaved parents want to ignore their birthdays. This might create tension with friends or family who still wish to mark the occasion in some way. If it feels too soon to celebrate, we can tell them how we are feeling. We should not feel obliged to participate in celebrations that do not feel appropriate right now.

Some of us may drink or take other substances to try to ease our grief. This might numb some of our pain for a short while, but we usually find that as soon as the drink or drugs wear off, we feel as terrible as ever – or even worse, if that's possible. Finding better ways to cope with these times is a challenge we each need to figure out for ourselves.

Mother's and Father's Days

Mother's Day and Father's Day are well-publicised commercial events which can be stressful for bereaved parents, even if we have other children who wish to celebrate with us. If we have been bereaved of our only child or all of our children, these dates are heart-breaking reminders of the void left by their loss. In addition, if our own parents are still living, we might feel upset by conflicting emotions.

Some of us try to ignore Mother's and Father's Days. For instance, it is often possible to opt out of marketing emails, and to avoid eating out during that weekend.

On the other hand, we may develop our own ways of marking the days. Although our child is not here to offer us their good wishes, the love shared between us continues. Acts of remembrance or perhaps giving ourselves some sort of treat on their behalf might feel appropriate. We might want to display an old card or note of love from our deceased child. These are small ways of acknowledging that we are still our child's parent, even though they are sadly no longer here with us.

> *"I like to perform a random act of kindness on Mother's Day in honour of my son. Something simple such as paying for a stranger's coffee. It gives me a lift on a difficult day." Julia*

Other children or grandchildren

If we have other children, whether our own or our partner's, or if we have grandchildren, we may find ourselves needing to organise or participate in celebrations for their sakes, even when we don't feel like it.

The birthday of another of our children can be a challenge. We might be grieving and desperately sad, as they may also be, but we won't want to spoil the day for them. They may not want to be reminded of their grief at this moment. Younger children may simply focus on the fun of their special day. Coping with our own mixture of feelings while managing the

celebrations will be a challenge, and we may need to ask for help and support from friends or family.

The birthday of our child's twin (or multiple) can be a dilemma. We are grieving for our deceased child, but at the same time we also want to celebrate their twin's birthday. They too may be undecided about what they want to do on this occasion. It may be worthwhile having a conversation together about this.

An engagement, wedding, birth, university graduation or other special event in the life of one of our remaining children or grandchildren is a cause for celebration. However, it will also be painful, for ourselves and for them too. Our child's absence from the preparations for these significant occasions and then on the day itself will be felt deeply.

It feels very important that our child is properly mentioned at these occasions, yet finding appropriate ways of acknowledging our child at a special event can be difficult, as we do not want to take the focus away from the one being celebrated. We might want to discuss beforehand some ways of including our child, perhaps by raising a toast, or mentioning them in a speech. There may be differences of opinion about how best to do this.

A significant celebration can also be a significant trigger for our grief. Although we may put on a brave face, we could find that we need to step aside for a few moments. Planning carefully where we sit and who we sit with we can avoid us feeling trapped, anxious or panicky.

Special events in the lives of our other children or grandchildren can also bring some light and joy into our lives. Allowing ourselves to celebrate is a good thing when we feel able to do this.

> *"My son's wedding was just six months after his sister died. He and his wife put a chair with a framed photo of her and flowers. It was a lovely thing to do." Susan*

Family and friends' occasions

Happy occasions for our friends and family can cause us anxiety and bring our grief to the forefront. Their celebrations for a university graduation or other achievement will be a reminder of things our child can no longer hope to achieve. Although we can be happy for the people at the centre of the proceedings, there will always be a sadness in our heart. It can be difficult not to compare their joy with our grief.

Weddings of family and friends, particularly those of an age similar to what our child would have been, can be very painful. These occasions can drive home the reality that we will never see our child marry, or they will remind us of our child's wedding day and what should have been.

We might not always want to attend such events. We may fear that our presence will put a cloud over the day for other people. Depending on our relationship with the organisers, it could be a good idea to talk about this with them. Explaining how hard we may find the occasion may help us make a decision together about attending or not, or we may decide to attend for only a short while rather than the entire event.

> *"The marriage of my late son's fiancée was too painful for me to attend. I showed my support by looking after her much-loved dog during the ceremony." Marek*

Sometimes the celebrants will be happy to give a short and loving reference to our child. This public acknowledgement can bring us some comfort, but not everyone will find it appropriate. If we go expecting our child's name to be mentioned, we will probably feel very glad if this happens, but we may need to prepare ourselves that it may not.

If ours is a blended (step) family, not every member of the family will share, or be able to understand, our feelings of sorrow or anxiety on such occasions. See the TCF leaflet *Grieving child loss in blended and step families* for more on this topic see **tcf.org.uk/blendedfamilies**

Funerals and memorial services

Funerals we attend after our own child's can be highly emotional. Whether or not they are held in the same venue, the funeral will bring back memories of our child's service. Even if we are trying to think of the person we have come to commemorate, our hearts and minds may be overwhelmed with memories and sadness for our child. On the other hand, some of us find it comforting to hear the readings, listen to the music and be near the other people we are close to.

Explaining our concerns in advance can help others understand if things become too much and we decide to leave early.

Cultural and religious festivals

Throughout the year there are dozens of public, religious and cultural events and festivals. Some of these are inescapable. Preparations can last for months, and seem to confront us at every turn.

Our own feelings about these events may not be the same as they used to be. We may find the celebrations leave us feeling more isolated in our grief, or they may provide a welcome pause from the daily grind of life and a chance to reflect.

We may be unsure how much to be involved. Will we want to give presents, attend a place of worship, join others in a meal or a fast, go to a family party? We may decide to do some or none of these things in order to protect ourselves from emotional pain. On the other hand, although it may be difficult, we may also 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 our usual traditions.

If religion or culture are part of our identity, we may need to balance our feelings of grief with our obligations. We might decide to continue our usual involvement, even if it is difficult, to avoid feeling guilt for not fulfilling our duties, and also to avoid hurting others. We may find reassurance and comfort in the familiar rituals. This balance may shift as the occasion comes around year after year.

Some of us find new ways of marking our child's life at major cultural or religious celebrations. This could be by starting a tradition, by volunteering, doing a random act of kindness, or making a donation in their memory.

> *"In my faith tradition, the women of the family are expected to perform certain cleaning tasks and food preparation for festivals. Even though I didn't feel like it at the time, I am glad that I made the effort. It has helped restore the rhythm of life to our household." Rebekah*

Overall, Christmas makes the biggest splash on the calendar, being a secular, religious and commercial event that also builds up long beforehand. Visit the TCF website closer to the time for specific advice and support available.

It is worthwhile preparing ourselves for the arrival of the New Year. The very idea of facing a new calendar year without our child can feel significant. The first occasion we step into a year without their presence may be particularly painful. We may want to plan how to occupy ourselves at this time.

Holidays

Holidays may have been special occasions on our calendar. Figuring out what to do about holidays now that we are bereaved of our child can be a challenge. Much will depend on our personal circumstances and whether we are alone or expected to holiday with family members or a partner.

In the early years, we may feel unable to go on holiday at all, or there may be favourite places that we can't face visiting for a while, or we may want to retrace our steps and feel close to our child as we revisit locations of happy memories.

Home can feel a safe haven. It may be sensible to take our first holiday somewhere close, so that we have the option of returning early if we need to.

Going forward

Special occasions are just one part of life's rich tapestry. Some will be joyous and others sad, but most will bring a mixture of emotions. After the death of our child, special occasions have an extra poignancy. We will yearn for what might have been. It is important to allow ourselves to handle these days in whatever way works best for us. This may change over time. We may gradually establish new traditions, incorporating precious memories of our child.

It is worth recognising the additional strain that special dates now bring, and to try to be kind to ourselves. We can survive these days, difficult as they may be, and we can even sometimes welcome and celebrate them, all the while carrying the loving memory of our child with us into the future.

Further Reading

For more ideas for remembering your child, please see the TCF Handbook, *Remembering our Child*. You can download this free of charge at **tcf.org.uk/rememberinghandbook** or obtain a printed copy by writing or emailing The Compassionate Friends (see back cover for contact details).

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) has published a range of leaflets on different aspects of grief following the death of a child. Some look at particular relationships, ages or circumstances of death, whereas others are more general.

Find them here: **tcf.org.uk/leaflets**

The Compassionate Friends

Call our National Helpline
0345 123 2304

Open from 10am - 4pm and 7pm - 11pm every day.
Calls are always answered by a bereaved parent.

Or email
helpline@tcf.org.uk

For more information and support visit
tcf.org.uk

Find us on social media
@tcf.org.uk
@TCFcharityUK
@thecompassionatefriendsuk

General enquiries
0345 120 3785
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TCF library
0345 120 3785
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Dedicated to the memory of my eternally loved daughter Jill McMahon, 1987-2020.
Remembered by all as having "the kindest of hearts".
This world is so much darker without you Jill.
Love Mum x

Founder: The Revd Canon Dr Simon Stephens OBE President: The Countess Mountbatten of Burma
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