



THE COMPASSIONATE FRIENDS

Supporting Family After a Child Dies

The mission of The Compassionate Friends is to assist families toward the positive resolution of grief following the death of a child of any age and to provide information to help others be supportive.

SOUTH SHORE CHAPTER HINGHAM, MASSACHUSETTS

NEW MEMBER ISSUE

This newsletter is one that has been prepared for newly bereaved parents. We hope that it will provide information to parents, siblings and grandparents. That it will help them to cope with the profound grief and confusion that comes with the death of a child.

PHONE FRIENDS

If you are having a bad day, or need someone to talk to, call a friend below.

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MEETINGS: at St. Paul's Parish House, 20 Fearing Rd. Hingham MA. At 7:30 P.M. on the First and Third Monday's of the month.

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TCF online support for parents, grandparents & siblings
click on resources for a schedule

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IN THE MORNING

From wherever you are you smile at me.

"Find life for both of us," you say.

"Find peace for both of us," you say.

"Find strength and love and hope for both of us,

because

you are my mother"

Sacha



WHO ARE WE?

The Compassionate Friends is a nonprofit, nonsectarian mutual assistance, self-help organization offering friendship and understanding to bereaved parents, siblings and grandparents. We are open to anyone who has lost a child at any age and from any cause.

Our primary purpose is to assist the bereaved in the positive resolution of grief experienced upon the death of a child and to support their efforts to achieve physical and emotional health. The secondary purpose is to provide information and education about bereaved parents and siblings to those who wish to understand. Our objective is to help members of the community, including family, friends, employers, co-workers and professionals to be supportive.

We have no religious affiliation. Meetings are open to all bereaved parents, siblings and grandparents. There are no dues or fees required. The chapter is funded by love gifts made in memory of a child or from businesses who wish to support us. No one is required to talk at any meeting. Listening is OK. The "Compassionate Friends" was founded in 1969 by the Rev. Simon Stephens. The first US chapter was formed in 1972 and we now have 600 chapters in this country and representation in over 23 other countries.

WELCOME

For those of you who are newly bereaved and have received this newsletter we extend our hands in friendship and our hearts in understanding. We are truly sorry for the circumstances that made you eligible to belong to this group, but we are here to share your grief. We have no easy answers but promise you understanding through our shared experiences. It takes much courage to attend your first meeting but you will be greeted with friendship and support that only those who have "been there" can provide. We have members who attended their first meeting only a week after their child died and some who didn't come until several years later.

If you feel it is too soon for you to try a meeting, you may hold on to the newsletter for future reference. You may also call us if you would like to be placed on our mailing list and receive future newsletters. If you need someone to talk to who can understand your pain, please make use of our telephone friends. Any of those listed would be happy to listen and lend their support. Information about our meetings can be found elsewhere in this newsletter. The grief is a painful, often lonely journey and lasts for what seems a lifetime.

FALLING APART

I seem to be falling apart
My attention span can be measured in seconds
My patience in minutes
I cry at the drop of a hat
I forget things constantly
The morning toast burns daily
I forget to sign the checks
Half of everything in the house is misplaced
Feelings of anxiety and fear are my constant companions
Rainy days seem extra dreary
Sunny days seem an outrage
Other people's pain and frustration seem insignificant
Laughing, happy people seem out of place
In my world
It has become routine to feel half crazy
I am normal I am told
I am a newly grieving person

Eloise Cole

WHY BUTTERFLIES?

Since the early centuries of the Christian Church the butterfly has symbolized the resurrection and life after death. The caterpillar signifies life here on earth; the cocoon, death; and the butterfly, the emergence if the dead into a new, beautiful and more free existence. Frequently, the butterfly is seen with the word, "Nika", which means victory. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross movingly tells of seeing butterflies drawn all over the walls of the children's dormitories in the World War II concentration camps. Since children are intuitive, she concludes that these children knew their fate and were leaving us a message. The Compassionate Friends has adopted the butterfly as one of its symbols—a sign of hope to us that our children are living in another dimension with greater beauty and freedom—a comfort.





AN OPEN INVITATION TO THE NEWLY BEREAVED

AN OPEN INVITATION TO THE NEWLY BEREAVED

If you have never come to a meeting, you are probably wondering what this group of people - who you don't even know, can do for you. At our meetings, even if we have just met, we seem to know each other. There is almost an instant conspicuous bond that those of you who haven't attended could not imagine. We've all had chunks of our hearts torn out. Yet those holes get smaller with the loving touches, friendly smiles and kind reassuring words from each other. Together we help ourselves through the agonies and bouts of deep depression. The world can be a lonely place for the bereaved. But for us, The Compassionate Friends can be very comforting. Come crawl, walk and even run with us.

We survive the unthinkable—
We survive for others--
And then, very slowly, we survive for
ourselves
Because only though the good we do for
others in her
name will the beauty of spirit, mind and body
that was our daughter – live forever.

Kay Lokoff TCF, Valley Forge, PA

HOPE

Hope is not an easy word for grievors.
But we, more than most others
Need to understand
What hope can mean for us.
Hope means finding the strength
To live with the grief.
Hope means nurturing with grace
The joy of remembrance.
Hope means embracing
With tenderness and pride
Our own life
And the gifts left to us
By those we have lost.

“Sascha Wagner from “Wintersun”

TO A COMPASSIONATE FRIEND

THEY told me that life never gives you more than you can handle. Lies, I can't handle this.

THEY told me, in a year I would be my “old self” again, they were wrong, “it” died with my son.

THEY told me to get my act together and start living again, all I see is his death.

THEY said, if I were a true believer, this would be a time of joyous celebration. DAMN them! I couldn't give him life, now I can't give him heaven.

YOU didn't say, “You'll handle this, you're strong.” You said, “Go ahead and cry, I'll wait till your ready.”

YOU didn't say I'd be my old self again. Your old self died too. You helped me find my new self.

YOU didn't tell me to get my act together. You said “Take things, slowly, a day at a time. The pieces will fit when you're ready”

YOU saw that my faith was shaken, you didn't preach.

YOU reminded me that HE in whom I believe is patient and understanding. His love would preserve until I found my way back.

Thank you, friend for showing me Compassion.

Perhaps I can do for someone what you have done for me.

Edith Fraser

TCF, Winnipeg, Canada

GRIEVING IN PAIRS

How many times have people said, well, thank God you have each other." How many times have you felt "each other" to be entirely inadequate at meeting your needs?

Alarming statistics are available telling us of the rocky road parents' encounter in their marriage after the death of a child. We sometimes see in ourselves a touchiness or quickness to become irritated that wasn't there before. It always seems that my "bad" day is my wife's "good" day, or the day she wakes up crying was the day I had planned on playing tennis. Or sometimes, even more difficult, we both have a bad day and find no help from the other in pulling things back together. How can one person hold up another when he is himself face down in the mud?

Every person grieves differently. This is a rule that even applies within a family. And the needs of every individual are different. While you may need to talk and talk and talk, your spouse may need some time alone to reflect inwardly. You have both been through the worst experience of your life. And while at times you can face recovery as a team, sometimes you must develop the patience to be able to wait out certain needs alone or with someone else. Realize that no matter how it is shown, your partner hurts too.

Gerry Hunt
TCF, White River Junction, VT

SOME WAYS TO HELP A GRIEVING SPOUSE

- Assign top priority to your marriage and relationship.
- Cultivate transparency, openness and honesty.
- Accept the pain that you feel. Be willing to share it and listen to your spouse's expression of the pain that he or she is feeling.
- Be patient with your spouse and with yourself. Recognize that your spouse is probably not at the same place in the grief process as you, and that is OK
- Don't expect your spouse to be your only source of healing.
- Keep working at communicating. Give special attention to your affection for each other. Learn and practice the gestures of love.
- Remember to stay in touch physically; the importance of human touching and hugging is hard to overestimate. Allow or create space in your relationship. Everyone is entitled to a degree of privacy with their feelings, including their grief.
- Allow yourselves to enjoy life and each other. Be willing to laugh together as well as to cry together. Work at finding some fun things to do together.
- Help each other to remember that life is more than the child who died. As important as your child is to you, and as much as you feel pain over his or her death, your marriage and relationship involves far more than your child.

Howard Cupp
TCF Norman, OK

GRIEF IS A JOURNEY

We move from seeing the person by sight to seeing them in memories...

At first they are too painful, and every memory breaks our hearts.

Gradually they help us establish the significance of our loss...

In time, our memories become our most precious possessions

The memories wrap themselves around our being, and our loved one is reborn inside our hearts.

That is called...

"The Journey of Grief."

Doug Manning



I SAID I COULD NOT DO IT, BUT I DID

Exactly 8:04AM, Friday July 9, 1971, was the last time I looked at my eight year old daughter with her eyes open. I walked beside her as they rolled her down the hall to the elevator that would take her down to the operating room for her simple, routine tonsillectomy. At exactly 1:30 that afternoon I was told that she was dead. I said I could not live a day without her. I said I could not do it. **BUT I DID.** During the drive home I said I would never be able to walk into that house without her. I said I could not do it. **BUT I DID.** As I walked into that empty house, someone quickly ran and shut her door—the door to her room where she kept all the things she loved, the room where she played and slept. I said I could never go in there again. I said I could not do it. **BUT I DID.** When they said, “Come let’s go to the funeral, the Rosary, the Mass. I said I could not do it. **BUT I DID.** When, a few weeks later, a dear friend came to my door and said “Come, let’s go out and enjoy lunch,” I said I could not do it. **BUT I DID.**

For months that followed, I knew my life would never be the same, and it wasn’t. All the things I said I could not do; did get done. All the life I could not live did get lived-differently, but I did live. Now comes today-16 years later. Palmer Ann would have been 24 years old. I had to stop and think about that too. I stood before her portrait today and stared a long, long time and yes, I remembered the pain with total recall of July 9, 1971. I reached out, touching what’s left of my memory of her, and I offered up a prayer of thanksgiving to God—a prayer of gratitude, for giving me such a beautiful 8 years with a lovely daughter, and most of all, the opportunity to be able to stand there and realized that I said I could not do it. **BUT I DID. YES I DID.** And each month when I come to a Compassionate Friends meeting, with you the new member, I share the pain that I know you are feeling—that hopelessness of the future. I smile quietly to myself, because inside I know a secret—you will be okay. You will touch again, laugh again, and live again. After all I said I could not do it **BUT I DID AND YOU WILL TOO!**

1987, Betz Crump

THREE FROM SASCHA

Look at yourself in the mirror
Say to yourself “It is hard to lose a child”
Say to yourself “It is reasonable to hurt”
Say to yourself “Healing takes time”

THE STEPPING STONES OF GRIEF

Come, take my hand, the road is long. We must travel by stepping stones. No, you’re not alone. I’ll go with you. I know the road well, I’ve been there. Don’t fear the darkness. I’ll be with you. We must take one step at a time. But remember, we may have to stop awhile. It is a long way to the other side and there are many obstacles. We have many stones to cross. Some are bigger than others...SHOCK, DENIAL and ANGER to start. Then come GUILT, DESPAIR and LONELINESS. It’s a hard road to travel but it must be done. It’s the only way to reach the other side. Come slip your hand in mine. WHAT? Oh yes, it’s strong. I’ve held many hands like yours. Yes, mine was, one time, small and weak like yours. Once, you see, I had to take someone’s hand in order to take the first step. Oops! You’ve stumbled. Go ahead and cry. Don’t be ashamed I understand. Let’s wait here a while and get your breath. When you’re stronger we’ll go on, one step at a time. There’s no hurry.

Say, It’s nice to hear you laugh. Yes, I agree, the memories you shared are good. Look, we’re half way there now. I can see the other side. It looks so warm and sunny. Oh, have you noticed? We’re nearing the last stone and you’re standing alone. And look, your hands, you’ve let go of mine, and we’ve reached the other side. But wait. Look back. Someone is standing there. They are alone and want to cross the stepping stones. I better go: they need my help. What? Are you sure? Why yes, I’ll wait. You know the way, you’ve been there. Yes, I agree—it’s your turn, my friend-to help someone else across the stepping stones.

Author Unknown

YOUR COMPASSIONATE FRIEND

I can tell by that look friend that you need to talk,
So come, take my hand and let's go for a walk.
See, I'm not like the others, I won't shy away,
Because I want to hear what you have to say.

Your child has died... and you need to be heard
But they don't want to hear a single word.
They tell you your child's "with God, so be strong."
They say all the "right" things that seem wrong.

They're just hurting for you and trying to say,
They'd give anything to help take your pain away.
But they're struggling with feelings they can't understand,
So forgive them for not offering a helping hand.

I'll walk in your shoes for more than a mile.
I'll wait while you cry...and be glad if you smile.
I won't criticize you or judge you or scorn.
I'll just stay and listen 'till your night turns to morn.

Yes, the journey is hard and unbearably long,
And I know that you think you're not quite that strong.
So just take my hand 'cause I've got time to spare,
And I know how it hurts friend, for I have been there.

You see, I owe a debt you can help me repay.
For not long ago I was helped the same way
As I stumbled and fell through a world so unreal.
So believe when I say I know how you feel.

I don't look for praise or financial gain,
And I'm sure not the kind who gets joy out of pain.
I'm just a strong shoulder who'll be there 'til the end-
I'll be your Compassionate Friend.

Steven L Channing
In loving memory of Kimberly Suzanne Channing

DEAR FRIENDS AND COWORKERS

I want to thank all of you for your kindness and support during the last few months. I have experienced a loss that is devastating to me. It will take time, perhaps years for me to work through the grief I am having because of the loss of my daughter, Laurie. Although Laurie was our oldest child, she was the child of my third pregnancy, so she was very much wanted by the time I gave birth to her. She was also the child who was most like me, both in appearance and personality. Perhaps because of this, I actually feel I have lost a part of myself. I would gladly have given my life in exchange for hers, had I had that option.

I will cry more than usual for some time. My tears are not a sign of weakness or a lack of hope or faith. They are symbols of the depth of my loss and, I am told, a sign that I am recovering. I find that I become angry without there seeming to be a reason for it. My emotions are all heightened by the stress of grief. Please be forgiving if I seem irrational or unfriendly at times.

I need your understanding and your friendship more than anything else. If you don't know what to say, just touch me or give me a hug to let m know you care. Do not be afraid to mention Laurie's name—she is gone from this life but she will never be gone from my memory or my heart. And please don't hesitate to call me—it is reassuring to hear from supportive friends.

If you, by chance, have had an experience of loss that seems anything like mine, please share it with me. You will not make me feel worse. And if I get emotional or tear up—you are not making me cry—I am crying inside all the time anyway!

This loss is the worst thing that could happen to me. But, I will get through it somehow and I will live again. I will not always feel as I do now—I will laugh again.

Thank you all for caring about me. Your concern is a gift I will always treasure.

Sincerely, Marcia

Marcia Davis, TCF
Contra Costa County, CA

ABOUT FEELING GUILTY

Do you blame yourself?
Are you strangled by the burden of things you did not do and things you should have done, as if these were the things that killed him?
What can you do with this relentless torment?

Dear Griever,
Take time to remember that grief makes us all look for escape routes where there may be not escape. Death is not in your hands. Grief makes us look for reasons where there are no reasons. Blame is not the answer. Hold onto your heart now with the tenderness your love deserves.
From WINTERSUN by Sascha

*And if I go while you're still here
Know that I live on,
Vibrating to a different measure
Behind a thin veil that
You cannot see through.
You will not see me so you must have faith.
I wait for the time when we can soar together again,
Both aware of each other.
Until then, live your life to the fullest
And when you need me,
Just whisper in your heart
... and I will be there*

*Emily Dickinson
Forever Remembered*

WHEN MY SIBLING DIED I FELT

- That a part of me died and I was all alone
- Very angry at everything
- My childhood had died too
- Angry and sad that my family life as I had known it was over
- Terrified that I would lose someone else I loved
- Cheated that I didn't have a brother
- Angry at how it happened
- Alone
- Terrible
- I wanted to cry
- I felt angry, depressed, confused, drained, worried
- Why did it happen to him and not someone else?
- I wanted him back

WHEN MY SIBLING DIED SOME PROBLEMS I HAD WERE:

- Most people thought my parents were the only ones suffering
- I was afraid to cry in front of my parents – I didn't want to upset them
- People thought I should be over my grief in a week
- I felt guilty when I felt happy about something
- People refuse to talk to you about the death of a sibling – they think you will go crazy
- People asking me how my parents were doing and not bothering to ask how I was doing
- Parents yelling at you because you don't show any emotion about your sibling's death and you don't care at all
- People saying they know exactly how you felt when it never happened to them
- When things don't go right I think about my brother and things just get worse
- My parents are overprotective of me



WHEN SIBLINGS ARE GRIEVING

Don't overprotect us. We are trying to fit back into our lives and overprotecting us makes it harder. Many feel that being social I being strong. Don't hide your grief from us. Show us that you grieve, too so we will come to you when we are hurting.

Information is important. We want to know what has happened or is happening, but we are often afraid to ask for fear of hurting you more than you are already hurt. Please give us the opportunity to ask questions and please answer them truthfully. We often feel we are being ignored when we are left with other people, especially when these people won't talk to us about what is going on. Parents and family can help us when they help others to be open

Grief is an individual experience, sometimes when we are hurting badly we need to be left alone. Please honor this need.

Grief is not a placid experience; it is full of ups and downs. Sometimes we are happy when you are sad, and sometimes we are sad when you are happy. Help us to accept that this is all right.

Advice and easy answers to difficult philosophical questions don't help. Don't tell us something just to say something. It is OK to tell us that you don't have all the answers.

Don't tell us we won't understand when we ask questions. We understand more than you think we do. The Sibling Group TCF, Arcadiana LA

I FIND IT HARD TO TALK TO MY PARENTS ABOUT THE LOSS OF MY SIBLING BECAUSE:

- I don't want to upset them
- I hurt more when they hurt
- I hate to see my mother cry
- I would rather grieve by myself and keep it to myself
- I don't get along with my mother that well
- They don't know how I felt
- I think they will start to cry
- I didn't find it hard to talk to my parents

Young Adult Group
TCF Delmar, NY

MESSAGE FROM TCF FOUNDER THE REV. DR. SIMON STEPHENS

I know that many of you are still in the valley of the shadow, and you still feel, I expect, very much alone. At times such as these, of course it is difficult to catch a glimpse of the butterflies, because the darkness of the mind and soul can cloud our vision. It is difficult to be strong. It is difficult to be brave when others laugh and smile in the sunshine. It is difficult to be strong when your heart is well and truly broken and when the love and light of your life has been rudely and sometimes violently eclipsed. But I believe that with each passing day, each helping hand, and each kind word, the darkness of the valley begins to surrender itself to the light of a new dawn.

Of course, as we all know from our experiences, miracles rarely, if ever, happen overnight. As we all know, there may be many false dawns to a new day. Important family anniversaries can plunge us into despair and then when the dawn, almost in our grasp, slips away. We find ourselves slipping back once again into our own personal darkness, and once again we begin the hard work of grieving.

But as Compassionate Friends will tell you in Australia, England, Canada, New Zealand, USA, South Africa, and the nights really do get shorter, they really do. If you remain resolute to your course, then sooner or later, you will be rewarded with a glimpse of the sun as it rises over the valley's brim. And I suspect that in the peace of that early morning hour, you will see the butterflies dancing in the sun's rays and those butterflies, of course, are your children's love. And I can promise you this, as founder of TCF, that very suddenly the darkness will lift from your mind and the weight will lift from your heart and you will behold your child in his or her newly found freedom of eternal love. And then, you will know, in your heart, that all is well.

It is my prayer and earnest hope that the love and the light which is The Compassionate Friends gift to you will be a source of inspiration and courage to you in the months and years to come, for *We Need Not Walk Alone*. It is true; together we can make it, through the valley into the sun's rising.

God bless The Compassionate Friends everywhere. May He bless and protect you and all you love, and may you always walk into the sunlight with your child at your side.

*Excerpted from Rev. Simon Stephen's address
At Tulsa TCF Conference, 1987*

HOW MANY CHILDREN DO YOU HAVE?

Shortly after my son died, I realized that this question was going to be bothersome. Each time someone asked me about the number of children, I struggled with the answer. I soon decided I was not going to let this become a problem. I thought about how I felt about my choices of answers and chose the one that met my needs in the beginning. I had a surviving daughter, but I know for me to say "one would seem denial on my part that my son had lived, and that wasn't right for me.

In the beginning, when I still needed to tell people that my son had died, I would tell in detail about his accident when the question about how many children came my way. As the months passed and I had told the story enough times, I found that it wasn't necessary to go into detail anymore. My needs had changed, and I rethought my answer. Now, when I am asked how many children I have, I answer, I had two children."

The criteria I use in determining if I go any further is whether the person asking is going to be a continuing part of my life. If so, they need to know about my son, and I tell them. Otherwise, we will be constantly dancing around that fact. Better, I think, to have it out in the open. It then loses its ability to interfere with the relationship. If, on the other hand, the person asking is simply passing through my life, then I feel no need to go any further than "I had two children." Seldom does anyone catch the hint, instead of have, and pursue it. If they do, or if they ask follow-up questions about ages and professions, I tell them first that my 26-year old son was killed in an accident. Then I tell them about my daughter. I am comfortable either way. If they are embarrassed, I see that as their problem. Just to show you how different we all are, however, my husband feels comfortable answering, "We have one child." That is what is right for him, and that is what he should say.

You decide what is right for you—then say it. That way you defuse that powerful question and it loses its ability to traumatize. Don't let it be a problem.

Mary Cleckley, TCF Atlanta, Georgia

As Long As I Can

As long as I can, I will look at the world for both of us.
As long as I can, I will laugh with the birds, I will sing
with flowers, I will play to the stars, for both of us.
As long as I can, I will remember how many things on
this earth were your joy. And I will live as well as you
would want me to live, as long as I can.

by Sascha.

(Sascha's son Nino drowned at age 3;
years later, her daughter Eve died by suicide
at age 21.)

SIBLINGS AND BEREAVEMENT GUIDELINES FOR PARENTS

DO NOT allow a breakdown of discipline on your home; be calm and relaxed in your disciplining.

DO NOT condemn children for laughing and playing during the early stages of bereavement

DO explain that a reasonable amount of quarreling is normal between siblings

DO NOT push children to go to the cemetery. Let them take the lead. Some adults need more time to work things through than others. The same is true for kids.

DO remember your children are suffering just as you are suffering. They also fear the strength of their own grief.

DO NOT turn your normal, good-bad child into a saint just because he/she died.

No one can compete with a ghost, especially one who no longer possesses any bad qualities. Living children may react opposite to all the "goodness" in order to gain attention.

DO try to explain as naturally as possible that there is a lot we do not understand about death and repeatedly emphasize that death is beyond anyone's control.

DO NOT avoid talking about your dead child. She or he existed. Let the surviving children remember that.

DO NOT hide your own grief. Encouraging a child to air his or her sorrow can be the greatest gift other than your time that you can give.

Harriet Sarnoff Schiff



This newsletter is sponsored by
the Leary family in loving
memory of their son, John Leary
who died at the age of 31.
Shown here with his baby boy.

1-4-3

LOVE NEVER GOES AWAY

Darcie D. Sims

"Why does it hurt so much? Why is this grief so incapacitating? If only the hurt weren't so crushing." Sounds familiar? All of us have known hurts before, but none of our previous "ouches" can compare with the hurt we feel. Nothing can touch the pain of burying a child. Yet most of us have discovered that the sun still comes up. We still have to function. We did not die when our child did, even though we wished we could have, so... we are stuck with this pain, this grief, and what do we do with it? Surely we can't live like THIS forever! There are no magic formulas for surviving grief. There are a few recognized patterns for grief, but even those are only guidelines. What we do know is that the emptiness will never go away. It will become tolerable and livable....someday.

TIME...the longest word in our grief. We used to measure TIME by the steps of our child... the first word, first tooth, first date, first car...now we don't have that measure any more. All we have is TIME, and it only seems to make the hurt worse. So what do we do? Give ourselves TIME... to hurt, to grieve, and to cry. TIME to choke, to scream. TIME to be "crazy" and time to remember. Be nice to yourself! Don't measure your progress through grief against anyone else's. Be your own timekeeper. Don't push. Eventually you will find the hours and days of grief have turned to minutes and then moments...but don't expect them to go away. We will always hurt. You don't get over grief...it only becomes tolerable and livable. Change your focus a bit. Instead of dwelling on how much you lost, try thinking of how much you had. Try letting good memories come over you as easily as the awful ones do. We didn't lose our child...HE (SHE) DIED. We don't lose the love that flowed between us...it still flows, but differently now. Does it help to know that if we didn't love so very much; it would not hurt so badly? Grief is the price we pay for love. And as much as it hurts, I'm very glad I loved. Don't let death cast ugly shadows, but rather warm memories of the loving times you shared. Even though death comes,

LOVE NEVER GOES AWAY!

Rituals

Rituals are planned activities, symbolic in nature, that help us through times of chaos. Immediately after our child died we were in shock, totally unable to think of what to do, but the ritual of the funeral gave us a prescribed activity which helped us through those first few days. Society has created rituals so that we have prescribed action when a situation arises that we don't deal with regularly. In other words, rituals give us something to do when we don't know what to do.

A good example of times that are chaotic and where we don't know what to do is our child's special days, birthdays, holidays and death dates. A common statement is "what will I do on that day?" On any other day in our grief we know what we will do. We'll work, care for the house or any other of our usual activities, but we are at a loss when it comes to our child's special days. We are especially uncomfortable because we feel that these days should have special activities but we don't know what they are.

By using the concept of rituals, we can make the special days easier to get through. We can plan specific activities involving our child symbolically that will take away the chaos of not knowing what to do on that day. We did this on the holidays and special days after the death of my granddaughter Emily, and it worked very well for us.

For Emily's birthday, nine months after she died, we came together as a family as we had done at Christmas time. Dorothy, Emily's mother, decorated as she would have for a birthday party. While we called it "Emily's Birthday Party," it was, in reality, a celebration that she had been born and given us so much joy. Those of us present wrote notes to Dorothy sharing our feelings about the gift Dorothy had given us in Emily. We cried and comforted each other, and together we affirmed the rightness of openly expressed grief. On Emily's death date in August each of us wrote "messages" to Emily on small pieces of paper and put them in Helium filled balloons. We took them outside and released them. Symbolically we were sending them to her in Heaven. Back in the house we shared our "messages" with each other and talked about past experiences we had had with Emily that the others might not have known about. Dorothy gave each of us a letter "from" Emily which we shared as a group. (As it had before, these letters brought forth tears from all of us, but we had expected it would and it was okay.) Other years may not be as planned or as elaborate as that first year, but the point is that these planned activities gave us something to DO and sustained us in the chaos of that special day.

I do suggest some caution in planning your own activities. It is wise to let those who will be with you on that special day know what you will do or what you expect them to do. Some people won't be able or want to participate. We must give them that option. Also, we'll want to share this special activity with only those

with whom we are comfortable sharing tears and painful memories.

With a little thought and ingenuity you'll be able to come up with your own ideas for activities that will symbolically involve your child and help you to openly face the fact that this day was a special one for your child, and that, although he/she is dead, the day is still special. In addition, it will give you something to do when you don't know what to do.

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Ideas for Writing Your Story or Journal

Recently, several new TCF members have asked me for suggestions about what they can do at the early stages of grief and what helped me in my experience in those earlier days of grief when my son, Bobby, died. In thinking about that, I remember my journal and what a meaningful and effective way of venting that was for me. As you may know, very often our close friends think we should be "moving on with life" or "letting go," etc. Unfortunately, for me, they just didn't get it. So, I looked back through some past newsletter issues and found an article on ideas for writing your story or journal. I hope you find it helpful: Bereaved parents who have written about their loss unanimously agree that writing unleashes enormous stress and pain. In my own experience, I recall one night when I locked myself in the bathroom and wrote a long letter to my son, Bobby. It was my chance to express my feelings without having them diminished by well meaning and caring people around me trying to be helpful. I will never forget the pressure that letter released for me. Although the letter was not saved, the positive result was everlasting. Have you ever thought of writing your story or keeping a journal? You may find it helpful to clarify your thoughts about your child by recording your feelings in the form of a letter. Write a letter to your child, expressing your thoughts and feelings about the following:

- A special memory that I have about you.
- What I miss the most about you and our relationship.
- What I wish I'd said or hadn't said.
- What I'd like to ask you.
- What I wish we'd done or hadn't done.
- What I've had the hardest time dealing with.
- Ways in which you will continue to live on in me.
- Special ways I have for keeping my memories of you alive.

Choose one or several ideas that have significance for you or start at the top of the list and work your way down. These topics may serve to help you come up with your own ideas, specific to your situation and relationship. Give yourself this exercise as a gift. If you would like to share your writing at a TCF meeting, please do. You never know how many other parents will be touched and benefit from your experience.

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