

## Returning to work

We may have to return to work soon after the funeral of our son or daughter. We feel that we must continue to provide for the family, and some of us may be fearful of losing our jobs. Sometimes the workplace can seem a relief from the pressures at home. At other times, we may feel that it is impossible to go back to the same job. If we are fortunate, our employer will allow us to ease back into our job on a part- or flexi- time arrangement. We may need to move to a different area of work if we are dealing face-to-face with members of the public, and are finding it difficult passing for normal.

Amongst our colleagues, there will be those who find it difficult to deal with us. We will be greeted with expressions of sympathy, but also embarrassment, awkwardness and anxiety. Thankfully, there can be those who show kindness, even when we are not easy to be with; they are willing to listen when we feel a need to talk about our dead child, both in the early days of our return to work and after much time has passed.

Some fathers do not go out to work. We may have chosen to work from home, for all or some of our employment. We may be unemployed, disabled or retired. Whatever the reason, we will be around the house for much of the day, and this can bring other problems. There will be less opportunity to interact with other people.

Some employers are very understanding about a father's needs at this time. Bereaved fathers may throw themselves into their work with increased intensity in an attempt to forget the death of their child.

In a few weeks he may appear to have adjusted to a normal work routine, but the turmoil and anguish are still within him.

## The future

Our physical wellbeing is a great asset in dealing with the emotional and mental aspects of grief. It can be beneficial to engage in some form of light exercise which will leave us tired and ready for sleep. At times we can think that we have no energy to participate in activities, but if we push ourselves, we can find relief from stress, and feel better afterwards.

There should be no guilty feelings about resuming some enjoyable leisure pastimes. However, we may benefit from finding some different interests to help us achieve a new

normality in a life without our child. There are ways in which bereaved parents can find comfort after the death of a child. Contact with friends who are prepared to accept that we may not be very good company at times can help. We may lose some friends who cannot cope with the situation, but this we have to accept.

Over time we find that our circle of friends is changing. Sometimes support comes from unexpected quarters. Many of us are helped by writing down our feelings, in whatever form suits us. It does not matter if we do this just for ourselves or publication. It is important that we realise that, for years to come, there will always be occasions when we will become choked with emotion and our eyes will fill with tears. We will gradually get back to times when we can involve ourselves in activities, in spite of our loss.

## Where do I go from here?

The Compassionate Friends offers support through monthly support group meetings, a message bank service allowing you to talk with a bereaved parent, monthly workshops, a quarterly newsletter, its Compassionate Friends SA Facebook Page, Balloon Release, Walk to Remember, and The Compassionate Friends Worldwide Candle Lighting.

The Compassionate Friends SA acknowledges TCF UK and TCF USA as sources for the production of this brochure.

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# A Father's Grief



**The Compassionate Friends**  
SOUTH AUSTRALIA

*Bereaved families  
caring for each other*

The death of our son or daughter has an effect on us as no other death can. However much we have loved anyone else who has died, we are now facing a death which contravenes the laws of nature. Sons and daughters are supposed to bury their parents, not the other way round. We go into a state of shock. The unthinkable has happened: *our child is dead, and we are still alive. How can such a thing be?*

In most western cultures the typical male role learned from family and media suggests that a man must be strong and should not show tenderness, softness or tears. This is apparent within a family where many father (and grandfathers, uncles) do not cry. This is frequently reinforced by friends who say "You are really coping very well - keep a stiff upper lip" or "someone has to be 'strong' through this. It's good that you can carry on and look after all that needs to be done". It may be acceptable for a father to cry at the funeral service but not for much longer, at least in public. Few people realise that grieving the death of a son or daughter continues for a considerable time.

Men usually share what they do, not what they feel. They do not find it easy to ask for help, whereas most women are open with their emotions and able to share on a more intimate level with other women, either privately or in a group.

## How grief affects us

Grief affects us in many ways, including shock, despair, anger and guilt. There is no set order for when they are felt; sometimes one feeling dominates the others. It can be difficult to summon up any real interest in other concerns, apart from our loss. Nothing else seems to matter. At times we may feel guilty because we have not thought of our grief for a while, or have laughed at a funny situation. We may swing between numbness and hypersensitivity, and feel so mixed up. Grief is healed by bringing feelings to the surface where they can be talked about, understood and resolved. If those feelings are left buried they cause prolonged turmoil, bitterness, depression, family problems and even ill health. Fathers like all bereaved people need to realize that it is necessary to grieve, and to 'be kind' to themselves.

We can suffer from lethargy, sleeplessness and illness, making it a struggle to face the obligations of each day. Fathers and mothers face similar emotional and physical problems after their child's death, but how we fathers deal with them can differ greatly from how mothers grieve. To use restless activity as a

way of escaping from grief is not helpful. Instead, try to be with the family and talk with them, discuss the differences in the way men and women grieve. Children may think that, because their mother is seen to express her grief more freely, she loved the child who died more than their father did, they may then see this difference as applying to themselves too.

As adult males, we may feel that we are expected to keep a lid on our sorrow, to protect those around us. Yet we need the space and time when we can sob our hearts out. Traditionally, expectations of behaviour differed for women and men: women could cry in public, but men were expected to control themselves. However, nowadays it is more acceptable for men to show their emotions.

The natural anger and resentment over the death of his child may smoulder on inside a father. It may be anger related directly to the cause of the child's death - the police, the hospital, the driver, the doctor. It may be a general kind of anger that lashes out at anything in its path. It may be anger with God. One way of releasing anger safely is through physical energy. Vigorous sport is one way. Gardening or do-it-yourself are other safe outlets.

## Relationship problems

It would be difficult for a father and a mother to be in the same mood, at the same intensity of grief, at the same time. This can cause problems when one thinks that the other is insensitive to his or her feelings, and it can drive a wedge between us. We have to remember that our child's mother should be the closest ally that we have in surviving the death of our child, as she is facing the same loss. It is important to accept that we are both entitled to deal with grief in our own way.

Many marriages and relationships are broken by a child's death. We must try to prevent this happening, because we will be losing the only other person who can share all of our grief. Some of us are part of blended families where a father and a mother, each with their own children, are living together in one household. There are some different problems to face following the death of a child in this situation. If we are on our own for any reason, we often face additional worries, and will have no close adult with whom to share our pain. If in these circumstances we have children to look after, our everyday problems could include running a house as well as holding down a job.

## As father to other children

Our surviving children have lost a sibling, and need special care from us. We have to support and guide them in any way we can, according to their age, and try to include them when we talk about their dead brother or sister.

## Legal obligations

As bereaved fathers, we will probably have to deal with the funeral arrangements for our child. If we are next of kin to an adult son or daughter, there may be complex and time-consuming legal formalities, whether or not there is a Will. This is stressful and difficult, and will probably need a solicitor's advice.

## Coping with special occasions

Birthdays, anniversaries, Christmas and other days of celebration will be difficult for us, especially in the first year. We need to plan for these occasions, perhaps by doing something different from previous years. In fact, whenever there is a family gathering of any kind, there is always going to be that missing member of the family, and we will have an underlying feeling of sadness at these events.

