



When a child dies, families mourn and begin the long and very painful journey of grief. Many different emotions may be experienced by bereaved families that can include shock, disbelief, loneliness, depression, fear, panic, despair, anger, hopelessness, guilt, shame, and regret. These feelings are all a normal and natural part of the emotional reaction called “grief”. Feelings of grief may be overwhelmingly intense and each family member may process them differently. Some prefer to keep feelings inside, while others are able to express their grief openly and frequently.

## When a Child Dies... *The Compassionate Friends Can Help*

### The Compassionate Friends USA

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) is a national nonprofit peer-to-peer support organization whose mission is to assist bereaved families following the death of a child of any age and from any cause, and to provide information to help others better assist the grieving family. Highly personal comfort, hope, and support is offered to every family who needs TCF following the death of a child, sibling, or grandchild. Those who are further along in their grief share their experiences with the more newly bereaved. Healthier coping techniques and new possibilities for the future can be identified over time when bereaved individuals are able to share their pain, their sadness, their fears, and their hope with others who understand.

### Members

The Compassionate Friends is available to all families free of charge that have experienced the death of a child from any cause, at any age. The term “member” is used loosely by TCF - there are no individual membership dues or fees of any kind.

The Compassionate Friends is funded through donations by individuals, businesses, philanthropic organizations, and annual Chapter contributions. Additional support is provided by the TCF Foundation, established to accept larger donations in support of TCF, Inc. TCF is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization; all donations are tax-deductible.

### TCF USA’s National Organization

The Compassionate Friends is run by a small national staff that oversees an extensive chapter network and significant online community. TCF has over 500 chapters located in every state, Washington DC and Puerto Rico. Many states have multiple chapters. The Compassionate Friends website has over 400,000 visits each year and offers educational materials, grief information, chapter locators, and news of upcoming events and opportunities. TCF USA’s main Facebook page reaches over 300,000 people. Additionally, TCF has online chat support that offers a safe and nonjudgmental online support atmosphere for those wishing to talk about their grief. Over 40 private Facebook pages exist that address different types of loss and reach over 100,000 bereaved people.

In addition to providing significant support to volunteers who lead TCF chapters and online groups, TCF USA hosts many national programs. A national conference is held annually that attracts as many as 1,500 attendees and includes additional leadership training for Chapter volunteers and Regional Coordinators. TCF’s Walk to Remember is hosted in conjunction with the national conference and allows families to join together in a walk of remembrance for our children, grandchildren, and siblings who are gone too soon.

A national Worldwide Candle Lighting is held annually on the second Sunday of December. Started in 1997, this is a worldwide event where bereaved parents, siblings, and grandparents are encouraged to light a candle in honor of their loved one at 7:00 pm in their time zone, which creates a virtual wave of light for 24 hours across the globe. This event honors all children who have died so that their light may always shine.

TCF USA provides grief information and support through a variety of additional means. More than 30 brochures are available through the national organization that address different aspects of loss and grief. A free bi-monthly e-newsletter is provided to over 30,000 people, which provides information on current activities going on within the organization, grief information and hopeful supportive

articles. *We Need Not Walk Alone* is TCF's magazine that is published 2 to 3 times per year and provides inspirational articles, poetry, perspectives, and hope for our grieving community.

One of the most important activities provided by the national staff is responding to the thousands of calls, letters and e-mails received each year from bereaved families, friends and professionals seeking support and guidance. Over 7500 free bereavement packets are provided annually to newly bereaved families lighting the way during a family's darkest moments.

## TCF Local Chapters

The Compassionate Friends reaches individuals through over 500 local chapters, that are made up of parents, grandparents, and siblings who have been bereaved for various lengths of time. Those who have been bereaved longer volunteer in leadership roles, helping and comforting the newly bereaved members.

Chapters are found in small towns and in large cities. Monthly chapter meetings range in size from just a few people to more than a hundred where larger ones are broken into smaller sharing circles for discussion. Chapter meetings may be held once or twice per month. Virtual meetings that were necessitated by the pandemic continue in many locations that provide hybrid meeting options to meet their members' needs. Chapters regularly publish newsletters, host local private Facebook groups, maintain lending libraries, provide telephone support, and conduct remembrance programs and other activities at no charge to members.

In conjunction with the national Worldwide Candle Lighting, many chapters hold local remembrance programs. Many chapters also sponsor concurrent walks on the same day as the national Walk to Remember on the last day of TCF's annual national conference.

## Chapter Meetings

Sharing with others who have experienced similar losses, is the very heart of TCF chapter meetings. Chapter meetings are havens where members can feel free to talk about what they need to process individually on their grief journey. What is shared remains confidential and discussion areas may include talking about their child who has died, the desperate feelings that accompany tragic loss, feelings of hopelessness and despair in their lives, processing guilt, shame, and regret, and other subjects that many others may find difficult to hear. Members support one another's journeys and one another's children in ways that people outside of The Compassionate Friends often find difficult to do. When members are bereaved longer, they are able to share the progress they are making and ways of coping that they have found helpful. Because of these connections with other bereaved families, hope for the future is more readily found and the ability to reinvest in life again is experienced further on. Many TCF members create lifelong bonds and friendships with other bereaved members in their chapter who they might not have ever otherwise known.

The Compassionate Friends is not a therapy group nor are Chapter meetings therapy or counseling sessions. Chapter meetings are led by peers where members learn they are not alone in facing this terrible tragedy and they see that others attending the meetings have also faced the isolation and desperation the loss of a child can bring. Chapter meetings are beneficial to those who are coping effectively with their loss as well as those who may feel great difficulty in coping. While there are no instant solutions, easy answers, or a timetable for grieving, TCF provides comfort and a sense of direction through the cumulative knowledge, understanding and grief experience of its members. By sharing their story and their journey, bereaved families are able to find coping techniques, hope, healing, and the ability to reinvest in their lives.

## Origin of The Compassionate Friends

The Compassionate Friends was founded in England in 1969 by Reverend Simon Stephens, a newly ordained assistant chaplain, at the Coventry and Warwickshire Hospital. When young Kenneth Lawley and Billy Henderson died within a few days at the hospital, their parents met, and a mutually supportive relationship developed. Reverend Stephens saw the special way these parents were able to help one another and concluded that they could provide better support to one another than he could ever provide. Simon Stephens worked with them to form The Society of The Compassionate Friends that would offer support and understanding to other bereaved parents throughout England.

The first TCF Chapter in the United States was organized in South Florida in 1972 by Arnold and Paula Shamres following the death of their 10-year-old daughter, Gabrielle. They learned about The Compassionate Friends group in England through a Time Magazine article and sought Reverend Stephens' help developing one in the US. Incorporated in 1978 as a nonprofit organization, The Compassionate Friends has grown to include over 500 chapters across the United States. The Compassionate Friends has a presence in approximately 30 countries around the world, making it the largest peer support bereavement organization in existence today.