

WE NEED NOT WALK ALONE

*For bereaved families and the people who care about them,
following the death of a child, sibling, or grandchild.*

Autumn 2023



**The
Compassionate
Friends**
Supporting Family After a Child Dies

I Wish I Knew

*I wish I knew
That our time together would be so short,
That I'd never see your face again,
Or hear you laugh again.*

Who knew that Christmas would be our last holiday together?

Or that this year's birthday would be your last?

I wish I could have taken your pain away, removed all your worries, dried all your tears.

*I wish I could go back in time and figure out exactly when your happiness changed to
sadness, your laughter to anger, your excitement to despair.*

*I wish I could have fixed all the unhappy feelings within you; I wish I could have taken all
the demons away from you.*

Aimee, you were so much better than you knew.

I hope you knew how much we all loved you.

We will never forget you.

- Deb Tobin, Aimee's Mom

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Changing Through Grief

When our children, siblings, or grandchildren die, it is hard to imagine that we might ever find something positive from our experience of loss. Over time, however, we may identify new parts of ourselves that have emerged from our painful journey of living with deep grief. This is not to suggest that we would choose loss so that we can grow or that we are glad for death so that we can grow. Yet, what develops in us along the way may be surprising.

When I attended my first local Compassionate Friends chapter meeting, I was shocked by the reality of all these other bereaved parents surrounding me who also had terrible experiences of loss. At first, it was painful listening to story after story, each of which was overwhelming, tragic, and not fair. As I continued attending and found a place of comfort with those who understood, my compassion and empathy expanded. While I always cared deeply for other people, I felt like I had even more heart space available for the sorrows, strides, and joys of others. Many who have lost a child, grandchild, brother, or sister find they have a greater capacity for compassion and understanding of others. This is often the way that grief works and shapes us without us noticing the incremental day-to-day molding.

A greater capacity to love, appreciate, and accept things in others is a frequent experience for bereaved people. Shared sorrow and shared support through grief have helped me live more deeply and presently. I spend my time focusing on more important aspects of living because I know there isn't time to be wasted on surface and superficial things. Living from a place of conscious choice to make the most of each day is now a way of being for me rather than a daily mindfulness task.

This edition of *We Need Not Walk Alone* includes a variety of writings describing the unique ways in which Compassionate Friends members have, often unexpectedly, changed. Their stories express new insights and what has grown and evolved in them along their journeys. We hope these articles help you identify the unique changes you have undergone and appreciate the many experiences that each of us brings from our pain of loss.

Warmly,
Shari O'Loughlin, MBA, CPC
CEO
The Compassionate Friends

Grandpa and Grandma

We waited all our lives,
To welcome you here.
Our first grandchild,
Never had a fear.
It was a fleeting visit,
Then you had to part.
With you, you took,
Pieces of our heart.
Eleven years, we've missed you!
What you could have been.
All those little moments,
Knowing, now it's all a dream.
We always will remember you,
We never will forget!
At least we got to hold you,
That one time that we met.

- Ian T. Rowan, Sophia's Grandpa

How does the change of seasons affect your grief, and what helps you cope?

I find the answer is yes. The transition of any season can be a difficult time for those of us whose child, sibling or grandchild is no longer here.

I have found Autumn to be a time to reflect on our precious memories with our loved ones. By doing so it provides me with Strength, Hope, Thankfulness and Gratefulness. Seasons change but our love and memories never will.

Debbie Fluhr, Avery Asa's Grandmother

Faded Fall Embers

by Carol Mallek, Steve's Mom



Fall was our favorite time of the year; the feel and scent of cool crisp air, cozy aromatic kitchens, candles, decorations, and colorful falling leaves. But most of all, the crackling flame and smell of a bonfire, a relaxing night beside it with easy flowing conversation about nothing really; our day or week that would always lead to ideas and thoughts in the future along with plenty of laughter. Little did I know it would be our last one when the embers faded that night in October. Simple moments taken for granted. If only...I could relive that last bonfire, I would not change a thing.

It's hard to believe this is the third fall season without my son. In the beginning, everything was dark, especially the first months and first year. On the inside, I felt just like the faded embers. On the outside, I looked just like everyone else going about their day. It is too easy to get caught up in the yesterdays, but we do not belong there anymore. We cannot stay there. There was no choice but to keep moving forward. I did it for him. I did it for me. I did it for my family. If only... things were like the before.

After two and a half years, I could feel my ember had reignited my inner strength, so dim at first I did not even realize it was there, glowing slowly at first. I wanted to know why. Why my kind son? He didn't deserve it. Why my family? But the truth is, it can happen to any son, any daughter, anyone's child or any family. We all know someone or some family who has experienced this horrendous gut-wrenching loss, we just never think it can happen to us until it does. It doesn't matter how it happened or if we get the chance to say goodbye, the heartache and pain of loss are exactly the same. The only way through the darkness is forgiveness. We cannot change what has happened. We cannot get the answers to the what ifs. But we can move forward. If only...I could have done something to prevent it.

Grief comes in so many forms and is different for everyone. For me, I do not focus on the ending. I prefer to remember all the good times and everything that happened in the past. He knew I was strong; I knew I was strong, and everything happened exactly how he would have wanted if given the

choice and how it was supposed to if there was no choice. Finding him that morning, of course, was the worst day of my life. But each day is an opportunity to remember something special about a loved one, and most importantly to say their name. He will never be forgotten. Something that made you laugh; made you feel good can still bring those feelings. Even if it brings tears, those are beautiful droplets like a time capsule shared together. Nothing can take that away. Of course, there are triggers. The hardest time in the beginning was at night, lying in bed when everything is quiet and still but your mind races with thoughts and memories. If only...I could see you in the morning.

It didn't matter what I was doing; working, driving, dishes, laundry or cleaning the house, he was on my mind all day long. From the moment I woke up until the moment I finally fell asleep and unknowingly let go of all thoughts. Sometimes he is in my dreams, I find it comforting. The hardest part is learning to live without him each day. But, like so many others, I too am proof it can be done. I too am proof you can get out of the dark place, even if no one else knows you are there. Each day that passes is a choice on my personal grief, I give myself strength. No one can do it for me. It happens slowly, just like fanning a dimming ember you don't realize you have gotten through the hardest thing you could ever imagine happening. But it did, and I choose light every day. I do it for him. I do it for me. I do it for my family. If only...I could talk to you one more time.

As a mom, we sort through their belongings, donate some items, give cherished possessions to loved ones and set their keepsakes aside in a box to go through later when we are ready. There is no rush. It's just stuff. Sometimes we sit quietly in their rooms or a special place, remembering the before. We go to their favorite places, like before. We still cook their favorite foods, like before. We make decisions based on what they would have wanted or chosen, like before. We honor their memories daily in simple ways, sometimes without realizing it. We honor them on holidays, their birthdays and "angelversaries". We journal our thoughts to heal, grieve, and especially to remember; that is so important, now more than ever. We put together scrapbooks, memory albums and

blankets to cherish and never forget. Because that is all we have now. Memories. If only...we could make new ones.

Like the faded-out embers of our last bonfire, I am now living in the after. It is a vastly different life; one I would never have chosen. One I honestly do not like. One I do not always recognize. I am not the same person I was before. But

Each day that passes is a choice on my personal grief, I give myself strength.

that is ok. How it happened or why really does not matter anymore. What I do know is, I need to keep going and treasure the life

I once knew and had, but I refuse to get stuck there or go back to the dark place. I refuse to get stuck in the past and not enjoy the tomorrows. I need to find out what each day has to offer. I do it and choose light. Every. Single. Day. I do it for him. I do it for me. I do it for my family. There is always something that makes you feel good or gives you hope each day. It is the smallest of everyday moments that remind us of these are the good old days memories are made of too, they are not just in our past. If only...you could see me now, you would be so very proud.

Do we actually heal? Maybe not, but we do evolve with time that softens the hard parts to remember and laugh at the beautiful ones. I will always treasure the first and last pictures with love. If only...you knew how much I miss you.

I still enjoy fall; the feel and scent of cool crisp air, cozy aromatic kitchens, candles, decorations, and colorful falling leaves and especially the bonfires. I do it for you. I do it for me. I do it for my family. If only...you were beside me enjoying it too.

When you were little, I used to read your favorite bedtime stories to you. Now, as I lay down each night, you have become one of mine. If only...you could give me one last hug and tell me it was the ending.

Carol Mallek lives in a suburb of Chicago and works full time, married 42 years raising three boys together. In 2021, just ten weeks after the sudden loss of their middle son Steve, her husband passed away from a seven-year battle with cancer. In 2022 she became a first-time grandmother to a beautiful granddaughter, showing the family there is always light around the corner when needed the most.



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Post Traumatic Growth

by Lynette Danylchuk, PhD and Matt's Mom

The shock and the pain blew me out of my world. All of the necessary activity of those days kept me connected with others, those who knew and cared. Then, all of the rituals of death were over.

Everyone went home. Their lives returned to normal.

Normal no longer existed for me. The regular world felt surreal. Everyone was behaving like they did before, and I was no longer a part of that world.

Surreal - real but not felt as real any more. In most cultures, people are assumed to be in deep grief for the first year after a death, and then they emerge from that state, and slowly re-integrate into their community. Space is given for grief. Grief is honored and respected.

In this Western culture, grief gets immediate attention and then it's somehow supposed to be something to move past. People do not move past their past traumas. They grow larger emotionally to be able to know, feel, and remember their traumas while also becoming more capable of being present in their current lives. This is called Post-traumatic Growth. When people are allowed the space they need to grieve, when

their grief is not curtailed, they will learn to hold both the painful reality of loss along with the love they still feel for the person who died. From there, their lives expand to hold both past, present, and future. Their emotional world deepens, compassion and wisdom grow.

I am a psychologist specializing in working with people who have been severely traumatized. What I already knew about trauma helped me enormously when my son died. I let myself grieve deeply. I didn't try to 'move on'. I knew our culture's response to death was inadequate, superficial, and, at times, harmful to the grieving person. I keened, wailed, sobbed, and cried, the intensity coming down over time, naturally. Meanwhile, I knew I needed to integrate this loss into my life and future, so that my son's legacy in my life would be a good one, in honor of him. Deep grief makes those around us very uncomfortable. They want to fix it, make it better, and that actually makes it harder because it tells the grieving person that they're 'too much'. So, the grieving person has a choice - grieve alone, or stifle the grief and maintain contact with others. This is a horrible dilemma, because when people are traumatized, they need the presence of others. They need good, warm, comforting

contact with people who know and care about them. Human contact helps people heal. When there is no one around, the grieving person suffers in isolation, or becomes numb to their own pain in order to stay in connection. Sadness slides into depression. Friendships become distant. Some people may feel the world isn't real any more, or the world is real and they're not. Those are dissociative mechanisms - derealization and depersonalization. They are like circuit breakers in the nervous system, lowering the 'charge' by disconnecting the emotions.

Many people experiencing deep grief are also very familiar with the symptoms of PTSD, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder - intrusive thoughts, avoidance, numbing out, nightmares, problems with sleep. It would be helpful to take the "Disorder" off of that diagnosis. It's Post Traumatic Stress. It's a human response to trauma. It would be inhuman to not have a response to this kind of huge trauma. The responses are normal. The problem is finding ways to help calm the nervous system and integrate the all-too-intolerant emotions of loss, anguish, and try to build a life without someone who is now gone.

One of the common traps for people who have lost others is the "I should have" trap. "I should have known." "I should have been able to stop this." This is a normal first level thought process. It happens commonly right after the death. For a short time, it may be helpful, backtracking in the mind to find clues that may have been missed, or possible solutions that weren't tried, etc. That's a way the mind tries to learn what can be learned to prevent this from happening again. It normally goes away with time. However,

sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes it gets stuck. When that happens, it's usually a wish in disguise. "I wish I had known." "I wish I had been able to stop this." The wish is real, and if it is experienced as a wish, it doesn't tend to cause distress. It expresses a truth - a wish that this loss could have been prevented. It can be harmful, however, if it's felt as a 'should'. "I should have known," and "I should have been able to stop this" turn into an assumption of omnipotence. None of us has that kind of all-knowing and all-powerful control. We are all simply human, doing our best with what we do know and actually can do, and that's limited. We do have influence over others, sometimes a lot. However, none of us has control over others. We just don't. So, we use our influence as best we can, and our knowledge and whatever power is available, and sometimes that's enough. And, sometimes it's not.

The feeling of everything being surreal that comes after the funeral, when everyone returns to their normal life, and we no longer have a normal life, marks the start of a new way of living in this world. We are part of it, and often feel apart from it. The challenge is to expand - to honor our grief, deepen our compassion for ourselves along with everyone else, and notice how we grow. Post traumatic growth is what we can do for ourselves, in honor of those we lost, so that their legacy in our lives is a good one.

*Lynette Danylchuk, PhD., is a Clinical Psychologist who has worked in the field of trauma and dissociation for over 30 years. She is a Past President of the International Society for the Study of Trauma and Dissociation (ISSTD) and has received ISSTD's Lifetime Achievement Award. She has just completed the second edition of the book she and Kevin Connors co-authored, *Treating Complex Trauma and Dissociation: A Practical Guide for Navigating Therapeutic Challenges*.*

How does the change of seasons affect your grief, and what helps you cope?

To be honest, I didn't cope well. I hated summer for a long time. But as I've continued to utilize healthy grief resources over the years, summer is no longer a season I dread. Yes, the sadness remains, but I'm now able to find joy in the summer months while honoring Matt's memory. Attending local TCF meetings helped, as well as being the newsletter editor for our chapter. These fostered healing in every season.

Angie Cherney, Matt's Mom

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The Pain Softens With Time

by Amy Conlon, Kaylee Rose's Mom

On October 7, 2006, my life changed forever. As I held my daughter in my arms, my only child, my beautiful 2 1/2-year-old was removed from the machine that had been keeping her alive for the last 3 days. Kaylee had contracted a rare strain of bacterial meningitis and was declared brain dead only 24 hours after I had taken her to the doctor for a stuffy nose and fever. How could this have happened to me and my family? Our beautiful little Kaylee Rose was gone, and I was completely devastated and lost.

I was a stay-at-home mom. My days consisted of caring for my daughter, taking her to Mommy and Me classes, going for walks to the park, and running errands with my little best friend always by my side. Now my days were empty, mostly spent in bed crying. It took all my energy just to brush my teeth. What was the point of living without my daughter? I thought about ending my life but how could I inflict this unbearable pain I was experiencing on my own parents.

My husband and I went for therapy. We went to bereavement groups. I read a lot of books about grief. We

were lucky to have a very supportive group of friends who did food shopping for us and tried to get us out of the house. Most importantly, they would listen and cry with us when all we wanted to do was talk about our daughter and share stories. I found it very difficult to go to stores alone. Kaylee was always with me...in the backseat singing along to her favorite CDs, riding in the shopping cart chatting as we did our errands.

About 6 months after she passed, I found myself in Target... alone, just wandering missing my little sidekick. How was the world going on around me? I started to notice ladybugs. Not real ones but on different items. Kaylee had been a ladybug for her last Halloween. I took this as a sign from my daughter that she was proud I was out of the house, trying to do something normal. She was still with me, not physically but always in my heart.

Time moved on and slowly I found my way out of the darkness. We got through all the first year "firsts." We didn't celebrate holidays any longer. It was too difficult to pretend

to be happy. Halloween was especially tortuous. We chose to go away for these holidays to places where there weren't many children. For the one-year anniversary we went to Las Vegas. I can't say it was fun, but it was a distraction.

Two years after Kaylee died, we were blessed with another baby. A baby boy who looked just like his sister but had a personality very much his own. I found joy again doing things with Timmy that I used to do with his sister. We started to celebrate holidays and birthdays again. After all, he was entitled to experience all the happiness his sister had. We have always talked about Kaylee and as my son got older, he would acknowledge that he had a sister "who is in Heaven." It made me very proud and sad at the same time. After all, he should have his sister here with him.

As the years passed, we started traditions to honor and celebrate our daughter's life. On her birthday, I pick Timmy up from school early and he picks out balloons and a little stuffed animal to bring to the cemetery. One balloon always gets tied to the chair on the porch where she had sat watching the neighborhood kids play and waiting to say hi to the mailman. We go to dinner at Kaylee's favorite restaurant, Friendly's. I think my son looks forward to Kaylee's birthday just as much as his own! Her anniversary is a bit more somber. I allow myself that one day to sit in her room and look through all her photo albums and memory box, given to us from the nurses who took care of her in the hospital. We go to the cemetery, reflect, and remember the little girl who brought us so much joy. Joy we once thought we would never experience again.

Kaylee will be gone 17 years...a lot longer than she was here, which bothers me, but I choose not to dwell on the negative but rather what losing her has taught me. It has made me stronger than I ever thought was possible. I no longer worry about the small stuff. If I can survive losing my child, I can get through any challenge in this life. I know the importance of being at all of my son's school functions, sporting events, and driving him to endless practices. I never had the chance to do those things for Kaylee.

Ladybugs have become my sign for my daughter. When I see one, I know in my heart she is near and always with me. Kaylee is still a part of our family. We used her savings bonds to buy our son a dog...a gift from his sister. He named the dog Kacey after Kaylee's initials (KC). My son wears the number 2 on his jersey for his sister because she

was 2 when she died... something he decided all on his own when he was young and first started playing sports. I share my story and my journey with other

newly bereaved parents with the intention of providing some hope. Hope was all I had 17 years ago. It is possible to smile and laugh and find joy again even when it seems so far out of reach.

I remember hearing at a bereavement group early on in our grief journey "time will soften the pain." I didn't believe it all those years ago, but I know it to be true now. Of course, I still have those days when the pain sneaks up on me and I think about all I have lost, all the memories and milestones I have been cheated out of. During those days I want to stay in bed and cry all day, but I don't. Instead, I think about how I was blessed to have been given my daughter, even though it was only for a short time. I wouldn't trade those 28 months I had with her for anything. The grief and pain of losing a child will always be with us but it won't always be so sharp.

As time moves on, we move forward. We learn how to honor and remember our child. As a bereaved parent it's our job to keep our child's memory alive. The best way we can honor our children is to learn to go on living while we keep them safely tucked within our hearts.

Amy Conlon lives in Bethpage, NY with her 14-year-old son. She started her grief journey in 2006 after the sudden loss of her 2 1/2-year-old daughter, Kaylee Rose. Since then, Amy has shared her story with other bereaved parents with the intention of providing Hope. Amy works as a Benefits Administrator and in her spare time can be found on the baseball field and basketball court cheering on her son.

The best way we can honor our children is to learn to go on living while we keep them safely tucked within our hearts.

Helpful Insights to Self-Care in Grief

by Linda Triplett, Adam's Mom



I have just passed the 26th year of missing my son, Adam. He was a pilot and died while giving a lesson to a student. He had an engine problem and could not survive when they landed. Adam was only 23 and married just three short months. He was the kind of kid that everyone loved the moment they met him.

I would like to share some insights that I have learned over the past years and hope there is something that helps you on your grief journey.

First, I learned that I wasn't crazy when I couldn't remember the smallest things that first year, and beyond. I called it "cotton brain." What helped me was to start writing in a journal. When sleep wouldn't come, I would write to Adam. I poured out my heart about how much I missed him, how angry I was that the plane failed to perform to keep him safe. I told him about my day, all the insignificant things that I would have told him if he were sitting next to me. And most of all, I told him over and over that I loved him and missed him.

Another thing was to acknowledge my grief, give myself grace to grieve my huge loss. I could not worry about what others thought if I showed my sorrow. I had to let go of the "advice" I received from others. I also found that some of my friends were not able to handle being around someone so sad, so they left. I needed to find new friends that "got it." The Compassionate Friends was a particularly valuable resource.

A friend that had a couple of years into grieving the death of her daughter gave us invaluable advice. She told me, "You can't lean on a broken fence when you and Mark (my husband) are broken." That is when we began looking for a grief counselor to help us navigate through our grief rather than expect help from each other. I highly recommend doing the same. It is a huge relief to be able to share anything in your heart with someone and not be judged, but instead just be listened to. Not everyone finds the one that will work for them right away. I think that if the first one does not work out, keep looking until you find one that does, like trying on a pair of shoes! You rarely find the right ones that fit with the first pair you try on.

Soon I realized how important it was to take care of myself, not only mentally but physically too. In those first months I could have cared less about my well-being. But I knew from resources that I read that if I did not, I could become a statistic that affects so many because of the impaired immune system. Illness can be one, also accidents increase causing some nasty physical consequences, sometimes for a lifetime. Did you know that when we experience a death of a loved one, it is a brain injury? Because of this, we do not think rationally when it comes to taking care of ourselves; however, our traumatized brain needs us to. Going for a walk is a great stress reliever or take some "me" time to just sit outside and listen to the birds. It can give a much-needed break for your mind and body. And sometimes we just need to have a good cry. It releases the tension that builds up.

Another significant help is to laugh. It is natural to feel like we should not because we are somehow not missing our kids if we do, but it is not at all the truth. Nothing could make us miss them any less. Try tuning in to a classic Carol Burnett show. It's so good for the soul to laugh even for a moment.

I learned I needed laughter as much as feeling the grief of missing Adam to have healthy healing.

And my final insight and the most important one for me was to not only look at my loss, but also count the blessings that our beautiful children left us. The most wonderful way to honor them is to go on living. To say their names and to share our stories. If we do that, we could be helping another hurting heart because we "get it." I look back at those first entries in my journal and see how far I have come and know that although I did not believe I would survive, I did! I miss my son and always will, but I have found joy in life again. I can talk about Adam now and smile at the precious memories that we shared.

*Linda and her husband Mark live in the Twin Cities area of Minnesota. They have a daughter, two grandchildren, and a great grandson. Her son, Adam, died in 1997 in an airplane accident at the age of 23. Her heart's passion has been to help other moms and dads grieving the death of a child by sharing her journey. She was able to do that through her book, **Healing Reflections for a Grieving Mom's Heart**.*

How does the change of seasons affect your grief, and what helps you cope?

The changing of seasons affects my grief causing feelings of sadness and anguish, especially during the fall season with the remembrance of my son's death. Knowing that winter is approaching causes depression, loneliness, and the heartbreak of my loss. What helps me cope during the season change is getting into a routine of exercise, rest, and building fun activities that promote healthy habits and self-care. Staying connected to my family and friends helps most of all.

JSue Williams, *Bernard's Mom*



Just a Stepmom

by Barbara Davies, Roy's and Taylor's Stepmom

From the time I was old enough to play “house,” I knew I wanted to be a mom. However, time passed, and it seemed it wasn't meant to be. I was almost 40 when the love of my life walked through the door. Not only did he share my faith and my love of music, he also came with four children as a package deal. I gratefully became a stepmom.

As the years passed, we were a typical blended family dealing with typical family issues. We adapted easily to co-parenting as we all focused on what was best for the kids. Sometimes when I look back on those days, I am amazed at the love we all shared.

All four kids had very distinct personalities. Megan, our oldest, was and still is, a dreamer. She marches to the beat of her own drum and makes no apologies for it. Roy, a year younger than Megan, was a friend to all. He was outgoing and fun and never met a stranger. Once he came to pick me up at the airport. I found him sitting with a child of about 6 years old and his mother. Neither of them spoke English but Roy was communicating with them and making them laugh.

Taylor is next in the family tree. He was born 10 years after Megan. Taylor had such a gentle spirit. He loved all animals, and all animals loved him. He loved old-time country music, and his laughter and smile were contagious.

Finally, we have Kelsey who came along a year after Taylor. She loved going for rides with her older brother who called her a chick-magnet. The girls flocked to him when he brought his little sister along. Kelsey feared nothing as a child and has become even stronger as an adult.

As we approached the worst day of my life, we were just a typical family. Megan and Roy had both graduated from high school and were working. Roy was full-time at the same company I worked for. When our paths would cross in the office everyone knew he was my son, and I was his mom. When he decided to enroll at Ohio State University, I could barely conceal my pride. However, I was devastated when he announced he was moving out. Roy had decided to take an apartment with a friend and start making his own dreams come true. He continued to drop by the house

occasionally to do laundry or pick up the latest leftovers, but I missed him.

Then came January 13, 2008, the day my world stopped. Roy was in his apartment alone when he died. He was just 20 years old. The coroner determined that an artery to his heart didn't develop properly and ultimately his heart just stopped. Natural causes.

Everyone was devastated. How could this be true? How could he be gone? We stumbled through the next days in a fog. We wrote an obituary for our 20-year-old. We planned a funeral. We stood in line and accepted condolences for hours. We listened to stories about Roy and hung on every word. We were broken.

It was at the funeral that I was first reminded of my status. It was subtle and I didn't really notice at first. Caring friends and family hugged me and whispered in my ear, “How is your husband holding up?” and “Let me know if we can do anything for him.” I was treated as the caretaker of the family instead of a grieving mom. I suppose I accepted this as how it was supposed to be and kept my pain to myself as we tried to figure out how to continue living. My focus was on supporting my grieving husband, but I was dying inside.

The second worst day of my life was April 16, 2012. Taylor was 15 years old and had developed what appeared to be a rash on his shoulder. He went to school that morning and to the doctor at noon. Taylor died at the doctor's office. The coroner said Taylor had been born with a blood disorder that had been dormant his entire life but became active due to a recent virus. Natural causes.

Another funeral. Another receiving line of friends and family. This time, I was even more clearly defined as the stepmom. Again, I accepted my role as a step away from those who suffered this great loss.

As time moved on after both losses, I found myself feeling almost like an imposter. Grief was tearing me apart inside, but I was questioning my feelings. Maybe I was being selfish. I should be focusing on my husband and his loss. This wasn't about me. I did not give birth to Roy or Taylor. I was just a stepmom. Society said I should not be grieving so hard. When I encountered someone who heard I lost a stepchild, the questions inevitably began. “How old was Roy when you married his dad?” “Did he live with you?” “Were you close?” It seemed they needed to quantify my grief before determining if they would grant me sympathy. One associate at work actually said, “At least he wasn't your own kid, right?” I suppose that was meant to make me feel better. It did not.

I looked for books about the loss of a stepchild but very little is available. I tried counseling but I don't think the counselor understood. What I found most helpful was The Compassionate Friends. As I have heard many others say, The Compassionate Friends saved our lives. This group of strangers listened and understood. They comforted my husband and they comforted me. They taught me it was OK for me to grieve.

As the years have passed, I have learned a great deal about grief. We eventually moved into the leadership of TCF and have been honored to help others as they learn to navigate their own path. Helping is healing. Truer words were never spoken.

After the sudden deaths of her stepson, Roy, in 2008, and her stepson, Taylor, in 2012, Barbara found her voice with The Compassionate Friends. She is moderator of the TCF-Loss of a Stepchild Facebook group and lends support to others facing this complicated place in the family. Barbara and husband, Roy, were Chapter Leaders of the Nashville Chapter. They have been workshop presenters at TCF national conferences, chaired the Butterfly Boutique twice, and hosted Regional Conferences in Nashville.

It seemed they needed to quantify my grief before determining if they would grant me sympathy.



Keeping Memories Fresh Despite the Passage of Time

by Dr. Bob Baugher

“How long has it been? Bereaved parents are often asked this question. I ask it of you, “How long has it been?” Now answer this question: “How long does it feel like it’s been?” A common answer is, “On one hand it feels like yesterday. On the other, it feels like a long time ago.” Why do we experience our lives like this? How can something five or ten years ago feel recent and something that occurred last week feel forever ago? Let’s look at the concept of time and try to make some sense of it, with the added bonus that we can gain some insight into our own bereavement process.

Scientists tell us that time can be measured in two ways. One is by a unit of measurement such as seconds, days, years. For example, how old are you? Virtually everybody answers this question in years. But, did you ever consider how many days old you are? Parents whose child died at less than one month focus on their child’s age in terms of days or weeks of life. If you are near the age of 27 years you

have lived approximately 10,000 days. If you just turned 41, you are nearing 15,000 days. How many of those days in your life do you remember? If you consider life in terms of seconds, the average American lives about two billion, 500 million seconds (75 years). For many bereaved parents, one of the long-term sources of grief is the fact that their child was deprived of years and decades of living.

Another way to measure time is by events. How many events of your child’s life do you remember? How vivid are they? What are the triggers of these memories? As the months and years pass, many parents fear forgetting events in their child’s life.

I have a suggestion to help you call up positive memories of your child whenever you wish. First, take out a pen and paper and write every memory that immediately comes to mind. Don’t worry about details for now. Just write. Next, find a label for each of the memories.

For example, a mother whose seven-year-old daughter died writes out on paper four memories that immediately come to mind: her daughter’s first day of school; hunting for Easter eggs in her new dress; riding her bike on her sixth birthday; and sand castles they built on their trip to the ocean. She creates the following labels: First Day at School; Easter Dress; New Bike; Sand Castles. Next, go through each memory and create as much detail as possible for each memory. Describe the setting, what was said, colors, temperature, smells, sounds, touches. Make a story out of the event.

Next, I want you to associate each memory with a different finger on your hands. For the woman above, she would grab the forefinger of her right hand, close her eyes and re-experience the First Day at school. Next, she would grab her middle finger and associate it with the Easter Dress story, and so on. Then she would practice by associating each of ten stories with a different finger, bringing up the full memory of each event. Practicing this for a few days can create a very powerful list of quite wonderful memories that you can access at will.

Picture a father standing in line at the grocery store. His 15-year-old son died two years ago and he has recently put together a list of ten of his favorite memories. As he stands in line, he says to himself, “I’m going grab my little finger and, for a few seconds, think about the time we went windsurfing.” As he grabs his finger, he sees his son being shown the fundamentals by the instructor, practicing on

land, bending his knees, shifting his weight, getting into the water, climbing on the board, and attempting to stand.

He smiles as he sees both his son and himself fall off the board again and again. He nods as he next has a beautiful scene in his mind of his son proudly standing and gliding across the water with the sun and blue sky in the background. He reaches the check stand, pays his bill and walks out of the store somewhat comforted by a memory he knows he can bring up whenever he wants.

Give this technique a try, but make sure you create crystal clear memories of events in your mind.

Our brain functions in such a way that, as we are aware of the passage of time, we understand that some memories are “older” and more distant than others. However, if we practice on bringing up memories from time to time, we can reinforce the images and transcend the time gap between then and now. As you know, memories are all you have. Why not use them?

Hugs,

Dr. Bob

Dr. Bob Baugher is a psychologist and certified death educator who teaches at Highline College in Des Moines, WA. He is the professional adviser for the South King County Chapter of TCF. Bob is the author of grief-related books and several articles on coping with bereavement. For the past 25 years, he has been invited to present workshops at most TCF national conferences.

How does the change of seasons affect your grief, and what helps you cope?

Having lost my first daughter December 1st, while everyone is getting ready for Christmas, I struggle. I lost my second daughter February 2nd so while everyone is getting ready for spring it is hard. I have found that reaching out to others, trying to help them navigate this trip none of us thought we would be on, helps me.

Lisa Jones, Jennifer Lynn and Jennifer Ann’s Mom



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Grief Takes Time or Does It

by Paige Engle, Adam's Mom

At first, there's a flood of "I'm so sorry" variations as soon as you mention the loss of your child. It's only been a few weeks since you said goodbye. These common condolences, while considered thoughtful, seem to fall quite short. Maybe it will get better with time.

Soon you hear, "I know how you feel; I lost my _____," when asked why you may be a bit melancholy. You know they mean well, but how could they possibly know how you feel? Why do they think losing a _____ is the same as losing a child? Maybe this, too, will get better with time.

After a while, either said, implied, or even in our own thoughts, we "should be over it" seems to echo. What exactly does that mean? We should no longer miss our child? No longer hurt because they are gone? Does being over it mean we've stopped crying? We shouldn't talk about our child? We shouldn't be grieving anymore? It seems to most often be the latter. It must be time now.

While for a lot of things the old saying "time heals all wounds" holds true, but it definitely does not when it comes to grief and a loss as significant as your child. It isn't time that heals us. In fact, we don't really "heal" at all because the grief never goes away. It just changes. Everything changes.

At some point in our lives, in school, or maybe after our grandparents pass, we learn there are 5 Stages of Grief. We are taught about each one: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance. The way they are explained lends to the belief that we go through each stage and move on to the next. So why is it taking so long?

The reality is that we don't go through each stage one by one. We bounce around, never "completing" any of them. Sure, almost all of us start in the Denial stage. What parent lives longer than their child? That can't be right. Once you realize it is true, you've completed that stage. Except a few weeks, months, (or even years) later, you find yourself questioning that all over again.

We all certainly get into the Anger stage pretty quickly as well. We're mad that we have to plan their services, pick out flowers, something for them to lie in, their clothes—the list goes on. Then angrier still that we cannot hug them again. Or hear their voice. Being angry all the time isn't good for anyone, so eventually that calms down. We have now completed that stage. Then, after a while, something stirs it up again—usually a family event or a holiday. Here we are, angry that they are not here to celebrate with us.

Grief is fluid. There is no time limit. It simply changes.

Okay, but if we stop complaining about "x, y, and z", we can have our child back, right? How about if we take their place? Too much? Fine, I'll do "blah" if it just doesn't have to hurt so bad! Obviously, none of that is going to work. I can't speak for all, but I know for myself that after 18 years, I'm still trying to make a deal.

There's no escaping the intense sadness and depression that come with losing a child. This stage, we have to watch a bit closer. Many of us tend to get "stuck" in this one. It's okay to be stuck for a while in this stage. Just make sure you have something to hold on to. For me, TCF has been one of those things I hold on to. Family. Friends. While there are times I

can let go a little, I can find myself needing to hold on again and again. Seeking professional assistance can be necessary as well. It's not a bad idea to keep a list of assistance sources, as we may need more than one from time to time.

I'm not sure I like "Acceptance" much when it comes to grief. In my mind's definition, I see acceptance as being okay or allowed, while acknowledgement is simply a statement of fact. In reality, they mean the same thing, but somehow it's easier for me to acknowledge that my child is no longer here

than to be okay with it or allow it. Neither is the equivalent of "being over" the loss or completing the Stages of Grief. Soon enough, I will be right back in Denial again.

Grief is fluid. There is no time limit. It simply changes. Everything changes. We change. We have to.

Paige is the mom of four adult living children, one angel son, and grandma to four beautiful grandchildren. She spent over 40 years in the healthcare field, leaving as an Alzheimer's and Dementia LPN after an accident left her unable to continue her nursing role. Her nursing career assisted in caring for her second child, who passed away in 2005 at almost 18 years due to congenital heart disease complications following surgery at birth.

How does the change of seasons affect your grief, and what helps you cope?

Each change of season whispers to me of time passing without Robert and Johanna. I miss them when spring warms to summer; I miss them when leaves begin to fall; I miss them at the chill of approaching winter; I miss them terribly when nature renews herself in spring, but they aren't there to share it. But the memories of them whisper to me, "Yes, we were here, and now we are always here."

Clayton Samels, Robert and Johanna's Dad

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As Grief Takes Hold

Search for Happiness

by Ronald Ross

Losing a child or a loved one unexpectedly, you know immediately that your life is changed forever. So when something like this happens, it shakes you to your core. There is no getting over it; the only way forward is to manage through it. It's like driving into an unexpectedly dense fog on the road; instantly, you can't see anything. You don't know how long it will take to make your way out of the fog; for long periods, you wonder if you will ever see the clear road in front of you again. Grief is the complex despair that sweeps through you like nothing you could ever imagine. You exit it as a different person when you profoundly loved and lost.

When you experience acute grieving and prolonged mourning, the sadness is intense. You look at the intensity of Grief and don't see any light. There seems to be no escape from these feelings. But the intense feelings and emotions become easier to bear as time passes and you do the right things to heal. A bereaved parent will live in a fog for many months and feel that happiness is no longer possible. When

feelings are raw, this is your mindset. When you are in deep Grief, it is so powerful that it is scary. You become reluctant, to tell the truth. You fear that people will think you have lost your healthy state of mind. So what did I do? I will tell you this. I embraced my Grief, accepted it, and understood that my emotions would emerge unexpectedly. It will pass in time once you embrace it and stop avoiding it. You will begin to feel better. The second thing that helped me tremendously was to "count my blessings." We are all blessed in many ways. Even though our hearts are broken, many things to remember bring joy. You may have other children. Are they healthy? There are many things to consider, and once you start realizing all your other blessings, it may ease the pain of losing your child just a little bit.

Moving Forward

My belief was not moving on but only moving forward. Moving forward is taking something with you. Moving on

indicates leaving something behind. You realize that you will never leave the memory of your loved one behind. These are unbearable expectations. Everyone's journey is unique. It is unhealthy to avoid Grief and suppress the emotion. You accept the wailing and tears. The stages of Grief are not necessarily the same for everyone. There is no time limit, no formula that one must follow. I remember praying for a time limit to my Grief. You want to know when the pain will end. Everyone grieves differently, and there should be no guilt about how you handle the sadness. It takes time to pick up the pieces and start living. No two relationships are the same. Your relationship with your loved one is unique. It gave me peace knowing that I would take all the time needed to survive and get well mentally and physically.

Your bond to your loved one

People close to you mean well, but sometimes you might be offended. It is essential to understand that people mean well. I needed to tell people how close my relationship was with my child. Your attachment to your child and the nature of the relationship is unique. Your bond is exceptional, and the beauty of your relationship is a gift. You realize the joy of your relationship and accept the depth of your Grief. You cannot follow someone else's roadmap in dealing with Grief. It does not work, and it may not fit you. So I decided to visit my daughter's gravesite on a regular basis. Pictures and videos were my way of healing from Grief to remembering all the special moments. But you can't get overwhelmed looking at pictures and videos excessively, to the point of

harm. You choose your own path. You can't compare your Grief to another person's Grief. Your time is your own; it becomes a precious thing to embrace.

Expressing your emotions

Expressing your innermost emotions is a healthy way forward. You must believe this is a strength, not a weakness. Appropriately express your Grief and do it your way, whether in private or to a trusted friend or family member. You cannot numb your emotions or run away from deep feelings. You will find that you usually feel better after a good cry. If you suppress it, you may fail in the long run. You will feel much different, and you will see yourself changing. So how do you see yourself? You are a bereaved parent now and are not the person you were before your child's death. As a result, people will see you in a different light. That can be good, but you may realize that others may avoid you. Grief scares many people, and it is difficult in our culture for some people to feel comfortable talking about or even acknowledging the death of their child. You will realize that you must carve out a new identity, but it may take time to redefine yourself.

*The pain of losing a child is only compounded by the crushing weight of knowing you must live the rest of your life without them. In author Ronald Ross' debut, **No Greater Pain**, he speaks to parents everywhere who have suffered the devastating grief of losing a child. Ron shares his vulnerable feelings about losing his daughter, and desires to help others who have suffered a similar significant loss through his personal experience, readings, and research.*

How does the change of seasons affect your grief, and what helps you cope?

Winter is the most challenging season, as that is when my sister was murdered, but to cope with any grief that I might be dealing with in any given season, I discover something new in my day. I look around and see something new, even if it is something that I have looked at many times, like the outside of my house or a tree I have walked past 100 times.

Zander Sprague, Lucy's Brother

Wave Dancer

by Ellen Connors, Kasie's Mom



As the Gulf Coast sun sears my skin to a medium-well doneness, just short of red, the hot, dry coastal wind almost instantly dries the film of sweat on my lip. It's the perfect beach day to fly a kite, the wind so strong that my rainbow kite needs no coaxing to leap from my hands in its hurry to kiss the feathery clouds above. I can't release the string fast enough, and it slices into my finger, stinging as my sweat meets the raw wound. I switch hands, and plunge the offending finger into my mouth, tasting metal. Simultaneously, my head turns as my focus is redirected, instinctually reacting to a sound that transforms mere background noise into something achingly familiar, the tinny, high pitched squeals of a small child. The sound tugs at my heart, like the kite string tugging at my wrist in it's war with the wind. My eyes fall on a young family, ensconced under a beach tent just yards away from me. A mom, a dad, a little boy maybe 6 years old, and a toddler, clearly quite new to walking and finding the shifting sand a rather unforgiving path. The sun bounces flippantly off the children's white blond heads, their little bodies the color of coffee ice cream, evidence of their frequent visits to the beach. Not far away, another child, a little girl, maybe 3 or

4, dances at the edge of the foamy surf, where the ocean fringes the wet sand in disjointed loops. She is the middle child, I assume. Her sweet cries of delight reach my ears over the sound of crashing waves. I watch her, my kite momentarily forgotten.

The child's innocent delight stirs my heart each time a sloppy wave swallows her tiny feet, threatening to topple her. Giddy with joy, she's oblivious to everyone and everything else on the beach, and I'm mesmerized. Transfixed, I cannot look away. Her eyes squint against the bright sun, and her silky blond hair lifts and flutters like dandelion seeds just released from their mooring. Her skinny legs protrude from a sagging, too big bathing suit that's pinned together in the back. As I silently witness her unadulterated joy and exuberant little-girlness, she takes my breath away. For a moment, I am surprised at this reaction, at the lump in my throat, but then I know. The little wave dancer reminds me so so much of my Kasie, my middle child, my gone girl, and I am overcome with longing. A physical ache stirs me to run to her, kneel down, kiss her salty cheeks and wrap her in a hug. I want to take her

home with me and keep her safe. At the very least, I want to remind her young mother: "Treasure your children and these simple moments, and every moment of every day to come, the good ones and the bad ones. Don't wish them away. Don't squander them until the moments somehow become years and you wake up one day and realize they've slipped through your fingers like sand through a sieve. God doesn't grant do-overs". But of course I don't say these things. I don't make a sound, nor try to hug the little girl. She is not my Kasie. My Kasie is gone.

Abruptly the sun slips behind a cloud, raising goosebumps on my arms, and my reverie is broken. Looking down at my hand, I notice the kite string hanging slack from my fingers. My kite has disappeared. Reluctantly I turn my attention from the beach family, and search the sand. In moments I spot the very tip of my errant kite ensnared in fronds of sea grass that separate the beach from the boardwalk, and I begin the long walk to retrieve it, winding the string as I move, like a fisherman reeling in a catch. The little beach pixie still giggles behind me, although the sweet sound dims as I walk away. Suddenly, like a lightning bolt from the heavens, I hear her mother's voice, "That's too far, Kasie! Come back here, closer to mommy." I turn in time to see the little girl in waist deep water, slowly moving closer to shore. The mother's gaze is riveted on her child until she is sure the girl is safe. I am stunned, and frozen in my tracks. It can't be! Did I hear what I thought I heard? No way! Her name - the same as my daughter's?? Kasie. Perhaps not spelled the same, but still. What are the odds? Astronomical! I'm

so tempted now, to make contact with mom and daughter. I can hardly resist. Oh my God, I want to so badly! Should I? Yes. No. Yes....No. They'd surely think I was a nutcase.... or maybe not. But in the end, I don't. It wouldn't be proper to interrupt the family's innocent beach day with the tragic story of my daughter's death. What would I even say? Even if I could find the right words, how would they receive it? Like a bad omen?

In mid thought, a sudden reality hits me and I am overjoyed. In the cosmic randomness of our wild and wonderful universe, this beach scene with little Kasie and her family was surely a sign. Some may say the common name is just coincidence, but I am as certain as the tide. My Kasie is okay. She wants me to know this. Her scars are healed and she is happy. This certainty soothes my splintered heart like a balm. My step becomes just a little bit lighter. For a brief, blessed moment, all is right with the world. "Thank you, my sweet Kasie," I whisper. Thank you for visiting me from beyond the veil of time and death. I cannot wait until I can wrap my aching arms around you again. Until then, please wait for me, watch over me, and watch over your little namesake on the beach. Both of you are so precious, so priceless, and so loved.

Ellen Collins is a retired mom of 3 and grandmother of 7, residing in Upstate New York. Her 32-year-old daughter, Kasie Danielle, died by suicide in September 2018. The Collins family has precious memories of happy vacations on Orange Beach, AL. This story is true. It occurred while Ellen was flying her kite at the beach in February 2019. Ellen is the founder of The Kasie Care Project, created in honor of her daughter, www.kasiecareproject.com.

How does the change of seasons affect your grief, and what helps you cope?

Winter is a gloomy season for me. The trees are bare, flowers have died, and it's cold. I'm also reminded that we are about to start all over, with birthdays, anniversaries, and the holidays all over again. This season usually makes me more depressed; however, what helps me cope is reminding myself that I didn't give up, and that my children would never want us to give up. They would want us to continue.

Dawn Tufte, Alex, Melody, and Spencer's Mom

Finding My Way

After Losing My Infant Granddaughter

by Carol Green, Stella Rose's Nana



A New Meaning for Autumn

Autumn, to me, is when my granddaughter, Stella Rose, was supposed to go home and begin a lifetime of making memories with our family. Her September due date was the same as her father's (my oldest son's) 38 years ago. But at 26 weeks gestation on a Thursday, June 8, 2023, she was delivered by emergency c-section, weighing 15.5 ounces.

Stella's daily goals were to "rest and grow." For two weeks she was doing so good. Then suddenly she wasn't. Her tiny lungs could not keep up with her will. And she passed away on a Monday, June 26, in the arms of her heartbroken mother and father.

The Worst Part

The worst part for me has been seeing my son and his wife go through such immense sorrow, compounded by delivering the devastating news to their twin nine-year-old foster/soon-to-be-adopted sons, who were SO excited

to have a baby sister. After three miscarriages, then five months of joyful anticipation, to lose the baby they longed for, and now to carry on amid their shattered hopes and dreams is just gut wrenching. There is nothing anyone (not even grandparents) can do or say to change it, fix it or make it better. Together, as a family, we mourn.

Finding My Way – Coping Emotionally

By nature, I am a positive person, but the shock of Baby Stella dying paralyzed me for a month as I tried to find my way out of feelings of despair and hopelessness. Nothing mattered anymore. I just wanted to be alone with my thoughts and tears. I was advised to "take care" of myself and to "take all the time you need." But what does that even look like when there are so many things we have to do every day, like it or not. I took a summer break from teaching piano and kid-sitting, which allowed creating time for myself to heal, whether it meant reading TCF posts or to just sit and be still, stare out the window, look at pictures on

my phone, remember and cry. I hated what just happened. I clenched my fist and screamed that I hate this life. I could not "accept" that our Stella Rose didn't make it. After all, she was in the care of medical experts who grow babies for a living. It's what they do. Right?

Eventually, I found my way out of the darkness and began to count my blessings and to reflect on everything for which I have to be thankful. I thought about this life, everything to love about it, my family and all the people I love who depend on me and are counting on me to not die of a broken heart. I needed to find the strength to heal, to be here and whole again for them. This experience has taught me that grief is not something we "get over." It's something we "GO through." It's where joy and sorrow share the same space. There cannot be grief without love. You are incredibly sad and your suffering is tremendous, because of the magnitude of your love for the person you lost. I hope you can find joy again as you reflect on the happy memories and blessings.

The Continuing Journey Through Grief – Practical Things to Do

Some things that have helped me process this grief include (a) reading about other people's losses and talking with those who understand, esp. the TCF Loss of Grandchild FB group, (b) writing my thoughts and feelings in a journal, (c) educating myself and understanding the emotions that accompany grief, (d) caring for our pets, which have become comfort companions, and (e) getting outside in nature. I hope some of these things-to-do help you as well.

Thinking of Those Who Will Walk This Path Behind Us

My mother used to say, "when you feel blue, stay busy, keep your mind active." I have found that the most healing has come from getting my mind off my own sadness and extending kindness to someone else, making the most of my time and being productive—doing activities I enjoy and doing things for others which gives me joy.

In preparation for the funeral, my son and his wife requested a knitted hat and baby booties (they wanted to keep the pair that I made for them when they told me the grand news). Besides, the newborn size would be way too big for our girl. I was grateful for the assignment, which helped me cope with that whole awful week and gave me something meaningful to do. I added a matching dress as well as sewing a swaddle and mother-daughter bonding hearts out of my daughter-in-law's favorite floral print.

You may not sew or knit, but you probably have another talent to share that would help a broken-hearted family get through the most difficult days of their life. If cooking and baking are not your thing, you could organize a meal train. Despite our grief, we still need to eat. Helping someone else helps ourselves.

The hospital chaplain presented my son and his wife with a memory box containing Stella's belongings from her brief stay in the NICU and explained that it was handcrafted by a mother who lost triplets. A grieving mother who I don't even know turning her attention to consoling other hurting families touched my heart and gave me an idea.

To help myself in the healing process along this grief journey, I'm now on a mission to make 19 sets of micro preemie hats and booties to donate to the NICU "In Loving Memory of Stella Rose, Isaiah 40:26," representing her 19 days of life when we kept her company while she rested and grew in her isolette, the time we were rearranging our schedules and our lives in preparation for her autumn homecoming, which we fully expected. Our daughter, a NICU nurse, told me that most parents don't think their baby is going to pass away. And when that tragic day comes, while dealing with their shock, disbelief and unfathomable sorrow, they are certainly not prepared for a funeral. There aren't a lot of pretty or handsome clothes for a one-pounder. So, I hope my small contribution helps families who will, sadly, go through what we just did and be better equipped to honor their baby with a dignified "goodbye." In the meantime, this task gives me purpose and another good reason to get out of bed every day.

The best thing we can do to honor our loved one is with our own life well lived, making the most of opportunities to help someone along the way. As the seasons look different for each of you, Autumn, 2023, will look very different to us and for the rest of our lives as we remember, with love, Stella Rose, our family's shining star. I pray that something here helps you to courageously face each new day with joy and purpose.

Carol Green is a wife and homemaker, mother of four adult children (three married), and Nana to one granddaughter, two soon-to-be adopted twin grandsons, and an angel granddaughter. After 17 years of coaching volleyball, Carol is a piano teacher and childcare provider. She enjoys sewing, knitting, embroidery, cooking, breadmaking, playing the piano, raising Monarch butterflies, dog training and sharing her interests with others. It's her heart's desire to help others suffering a loss.



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Shattered Healing

by Kris Leitner, Grant's Mom

When my son died, hidden places within me began to reveal themselves. It was as though chambers of secret rooms, that had long housed unhealthy ideologies, protective attitudes, negative beliefs, and a lifetime of acquired heartache began to want out.

I was overwhelmed with emotion and there was nowhere for the feelings to go anymore. Those rooms were dark, obscure, and full to capacity. When the fracture began, it didn't take too long for a full shattering to occur. It exposed everything that had been concealed and it demolished the me that I knew.

A cloud of confusion and despair surrounded every facet of my life. I felt so exposed. I was overwhelmed to the point of utter despair. I also learned that rock bottom has a basement, and it is deep.

MY grief was in control. It was running rampant within and without. It was difficult to accept...but I had to face the anguish. I realized that I had work to do if I wanted control of my life again.

As I was contemplating what I needed to do, I had a monumental epiphany. Before my essence could begin to heal, I had to find a place for the grief. That realization helped me discover that grief is multifaceted. It had attached itself to every part of my life.

The task seemed insurmountable. I also knew if I was going to survive and truly live again, I had no choice but to find strength to combat the grief.

As it subsided and I could see a bit better, I have come to understand that grief is a teacher. It is very personal. Grief is a mirror. It is also a connection to my son. It is chaotic and messy. And ironically, it holds truth. Grief is sharp and painful and exposes the places within us that we need to heal and forgive ourselves for.

Most importantly, I have learned grief IS controllable. With time, understanding, patience and the truth, I made a place...a seat at the table, if you will, for my grief.

Within me I have discovered the power to move forward, despite this unimaginable task I have been given. As I move through the process of finding a new way to live, I am also discovering that grief has become a part of how I love my child, despite his physical absence. On the other side of my grief is love and that love helps me connect to precious memories. On the other side of my grief new bonds of friendship have been formed...with souls I would have never encountered, and old ones have been strengthened and been a great blessing. On the other side of my grief, I have

found perspective...I have discovered a boundless reservoir of strength...I see the true beauty of life because I have seen the depths of utter despair...

My 21-year-old son, Grant, died unexpectedly in 2014, the middle of my three sons. In 2016, I lost my father, then my brother. My writing has been my salvation - my way to share what I've learned about grief and loss. I've been a member of the Modesto Area chapter since 2015 and on the steering committee since 2017. I began as the secretary and am now the newsletter editor and a co-leader.

Connect with Other Bereaved Parents, Grandparents, and Siblings Every Day on TCF's Online Support Community

The Compassionate Friends offers virtual support through an Online Support Community (live typed chats). This program was established to encourage connecting and sharing among parents, grandparents, and siblings (over the age of 18) grieving the death of a child, grandchild or sibling. The rooms supply support, encouragement, and friendship. The friendly atmosphere encourages conversation among friends; friends who understand the emotions you're experiencing.

MONDAY

10 AM EST | 9 AM CST | 8 AM MST | 7 AM PST
(open depending on moderator availability)
Parents/Grandparents/Siblings

10 PM EST | 9 PM CST | 8 PM MST | 7 PM PST
Parents/Grandparents/Siblings

TUESDAY

8 PM EST | 7 PM CST | 6 PM MST | 5 PM PST
Loss to Substance Related Causes

9 PM EST | 8 PM CST | 7 PM MST | 6 PM PST
Bereaved Less than Three Years

9 PM EST | 8 PM CST | 7 PM MST | 6 PM PST
Bereaved More than Three Years

WEDNESDAY

9 PM EST | 8 PM CST | 7 PM MST | 6 PM PST
Parents/Grandparents/Siblings

THURSDAY

8 PM EST | 7 PM CST | 6 PM MST | 5 PM PST
No Surviving Children

9 PM EST | 8 PM CST | 7 PM MST | 6 PM PST
Parents/Grandparents/Siblings

9 PM EST | 8 PM CST | 7 PM MST | 6 PM PST
Parents/Grandparents/Siblings

FRIDAY

10 AM EST | 9 AM CST | 8 AM MST | 7 AM PST
(open depending on moderator availability)
Parents/Grandparents/Siblings

8 PM EST | 7 PM CST | 6 PM MST | 5 PM PST
Pregnancy/Infant Loss

9 PM EST | 8 PM CST | 7 PM MST | 6 PM PST
Parents/Grandparents/Siblings

SATURDAY

9 PM EST | 8 PM CST | 7 PM MST | 6 PM PST
Parents/Grandparents/Siblings

SUNDAY

8 PM EST | 7 PM CST | 6 PM MST | 5 PM PST
Suicide Loss

9 PM EST | 8 PM CST | 7 PM MST | 6 PM PST
Parents/Grandparents/Siblings

Visit www.compassionatefriends.org/find-support/online-communities/online-support/ for more information and to register.

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How Did They Die?

by Chelsea Willis, Camden's Sister

I walked from my car to my apartment at the end of a work day and stopped to converse with my neighbor as I do on occasion when they are outside their place. Our conversation shifted to them commenting on the tattoos that I have on my arms. They pointed at one saying, "That one looks military." I replied, "It's the tattoo my brother had on his chest." He smiled as he said, "Are you trying to emulate him?" "No," I retorted. "I am trying to honor him." "He passed?" "Yes." "Military?" "No." "I am sorry. How did he die?"

Four years after my brother's death, this question leaves me frozen like a deer in headlights. Do I answer truthfully? If so, do I give the oversimplified version that feels misrepresentative and inaccurate or the reality of what occurred? Do I say I would rather not talk about it? How will they respond in either instance?

The myriad mental calculations that I, and all griever, have to make in a split second in response to grief-based

questions is astounding. Given our relationship and my emotional capacity at the moment, I decided that I would engage with the question. I began, "I still struggle to succinctly share how he died but..." Their response wasn't the most enraging reaction I've had, and yet also not the most compassionate. My response then became about them. I know this happens to those of us grieving the death of a loved one. We muster up the courage to share our truth and walk away feeling unseen and misunderstood. We wonder if we should've avoided the situation by deflecting. We regret opening up, deciding we can't be open with that person, or telling ourselves we won't share when the next person comes along because it simply isn't worth the risk, exacerbating our isolation.

I proceeded to cross the street and head into my apartment after this conversation and felt in a funk. I was caught off guard by this brief yet intense interaction, this moment where I chose to vulnerably explain the violent, painful

truth of my brother's death. I felt deep sadness and tears filled my eyes. I frequently think about this question that others often ask griever: "How did they die?" Most of the time, this seems to be one of the first questions we are met with when someone learns about the death of our loved one. In my opinion, this question seems to be too casually asked. To me, this feels like an invasive, private, and likely trauma-inducing question. There are plenty of folks for whom I have ignored this question when asked or told them that I'd rather not share about it. I don't trust the average person's voyeuristic curiosity with these gory details of my brother's final moments. This is too sacred a piece of my story, and frankly sometimes too retraumatizing to relive over and over, to give to just anyone.

This task to determine who is and isn't safe at any moment is exhausting. It feels impossible to be vigilant all the time, nor do I want to be, and yet that is our collective reality as grieving folks. Our grief is worthy of protecting and not everyone can hold it with us in compassionate, validating, and nonpathologizing ways. At the same time, I am tired of worrying and prioritizing other people's comfort when opportunities for sharing about my grief arise. Rather than playing into the fantasy that I'm "fine now" or that I'm somehow okay with not talking about my sibling or the grief, I don't want to shy away from questions and the brutal reality I live with. I want people to know and to understand the gruesome details of loved one's final moments that bereaved folks struggle to integrate into their lives. I want people to feel uncomfortable as a possible route to build their capacity to sit with me, with all of the bereaved, in their discomfort. I want to model that I can and I want to talk about this huge part of my experience, now and forevermore. I am tired of either being silenced or silencing myself.

The other thing about this question, "How did they die?," that non-bereaved folks likely won't understand is what it requires of me to answer that question. This question still makes my heart race and my throat dry up. Even in TCF spaces when I'm invited to share at the start of the meeting. Even in sibling loss spaces where it should feel safest. I'm never ready when it comes, and if I'm honest, I sometimes chastise myself for not being more prepared and expecting this question to arise. I have had to work immeasurably hard through countless therapy sessions, hours of writing and processing, and literally practicing responses and talking about how I want to respond to this question with my therapist and my partner.

And when I do share honestly and openly in the few sentences I have decided upon, I have to recover from the sharing. Depending on the time of day when this is asked, I may have trouble sleeping afterwards because I am having a hard time redirecting the mental images flashing in my brain about his death. Answering this question emotionally drains me; I have to focus on deep breaths and re-grounding myself to the present moment afterwards rather than zoning out and disconnecting from the pain. I may cry or become stoic and silent. Regardless of how I respond, my entire being - body, soul, spirit, and mind - are recuperating from the toll that it takes to answer one seemingly innocuous question that is the antithesis of simple and painless. It is a question that brings a surge of the raw and excruciating moments we live with, and the complex and unbearable emotions and physiological responses that come along with them.

Whether I choose to answer the question or not, and whether the outcome feels validating or horrendous, I am trying to be more gentle with myself as I navigate these convoluted moments. I am doing the best I know how to hold the tension of living with grief in a way that feels honoring to both my brother and my experience while being in a relationship with folks who do not yet know what this feels like.

Most days, I wish the grief journey wasn't impossibly messy and this path unendingly opaque. And here we all are, finding our way in each moment, in each question that gets asked, with the finite energy and emotion we have because this process of learning to live with the grief is wearying beyond words. I am deeply grateful to my body for how much it has and will continue to endure to simply survive the death of my loved one. Perhaps my thoughts on being asked this question will evolve as I and the grief continue to change and grow in our relationship. For now, I acknowledge the enormous perseverance and intentional effort it has taken these past four years to even be able to try and answer "How did he die?" at all.

Chelsea Willis (she/her) savors moments in nature, with animals, and hiking. She is a Licensed Mental Health Counselor and Compassionate Bereavement Care Provider that works with traumatically bereaved children and families near Boston, Massachusetts. Her younger brother, Camden, died in 2019. The folks in TCF and The Dinner Party have been primary supporters for her in her grief journey.



Vilomah

by Janie Garner, Alex's Mother and Katie's Aunt

It's been almost 11 years since the end of the world as I understood it. Since the day that I think of as marking 'before' and 'after'. Since the day a large portion of me died. The day my son, Alex, was killed in an accident.

And now my twin sister has also lost her child. Also killed in an accident. Her beautiful, smart, funny daughter, Katie.

I didn't want to share this with her as I shared a single cell before the divide, a womb, a bed, a room, a prom, secrets, 50 Birthdays, an apartment, a high school graduation, and our favorite clothes. I wanted her to be free of this thing. What I want doesn't matter. The world turns...and sometimes turns on us.

Now I watch my twin go through the same pain, the same guilt, the same loss. She and I approached the early grief in different ways. She insists on planning every detail. I nodded and waited for others to make decisions. This is notably opposite of our personalities. Neither of us could manage to cry.

Alex and Katie were toddler buddies. My twin and I were pregnant at the same time. They plotted against us when we lived together early in their lives. Katie was always the sassy little ringleader. Alex was the staunch ally. There was a notable event involving a can of baby powder and my twin and I watching through the window as they made a giant mess in their bedroom and laughed and laughed. We also laughed. So hard we couldn't even bear to stop them from powdering the entire room.

And they are gone forever. Both ripped away by drivers who carelessly killed our children.

I don't laugh much anymore.

Before Katie died, I still had that adorable link to Alex's babyhood. I would see an expression on Katie's face, and it would remind me of baby powder night. Or the time they dragged a bottle of soda into their room and consumed the entire thing. Or any number of things. God, they were perfect.

Link severed.

Today, for the first time I learned a word to describe us. It was in my grieving moms' group. Apparently, it has been posted before, but this was the first time I saw it. Five days after the death of our beloved Katie. I don't believe in fate, but maybe, somehow, I was supposed to learn this word to teach it to my grieving twin. Only when the time came.

There is a saying that one calls someone who has lost their parents an orphan, and someone who has lost their spouse a widow. There is no word for a grieving parent.

Vilomah.

It is a Sanskrit word meaning 'against the natural order'. It is a way to describe the unnatural act of 'the gray haired burying the black haired'. Of a parent lingering after the child is dead. Of the wrongness.

Having a word for it makes me even more angry. Because no one should ever become a Vilomah. This state of being should be impossible to attain. The universe should somehow prevent it, and yet it does not.

The Vilomah Twins.

Has a horrifically discordant ring to it, doesn't it? Watching my twin go through this is almost like reliving it myself. Not quite, though. That kind of agony is strictly reserved for the new Vilomah.

Janie Garner is in no particular order; Alex's mother and Katie's aunt, Kristine's twin sister, a nurse advocate, a traveling nurse, a daughter, a sister, and a wife. She created the Show Me Your Stethoscope Facebook group which advocates for individual nurses and the profession in general.

VIRTUAL BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT EVENT
November 11, 2023

This special virtual grief event will include:

- A range of workshops on grief, loss, coping, and healing
- Main sessions featuring recordings of our Main/Keynote presentations from this summer's 46th TCF National Conference
- Access to recordings of all sessions for 90 days following the event

Special Opening Rate until Oct. 8th - \$99
Registration after Oct 8th - \$125

compassionatefriends.org

The Wisdom of Darcie Sims

Goodbye to Goodbye

“I didn’t get to say goodbye.” As a therapist, I have listened to thousands of bereaved people lament about the last words they spoke to their loved ones. So many of them wept in grief over not saying goodbye. So much grief has been spent on not saying a farewell; so much additional hurt has been felt because someone did not get to say goodbye.

Sermons have been preached, books and poetry written about saying goodbye. Pictures have been painted, tears caught in bronze and sculpted arms left empty in the lament of goodbye. Almost no one believes there might be a reason to say goodbye, now—today! Most days are simple, ordinary ones and there seems to be no special reason to say goodbye. Hardly anyone knows if it will be the last day or the last time.

Why do we spend so much time and grief over not saying goodbye? Why do we wash away the words we did get to say over a lifetime of loving someone with the single lament, “I didn’t get to say goodbye”? Why are those words so important that the lack of them creates a lifetime of additional hurt and pain?

Ceremonies are created and designed for the bereaved to say goodbye. We stand in line for hours to express our sympathies to the bereaved and say “goodbye” to the deceased. Even if we have not seen the deceased in years, it seems especially important to come at the time of death to say goodbye. Funeral directors, mental health professionals and most of the world seem to believe that it is necessary to say goodbye in order to begin the healing process.

Goodbye? Why would I want to say goodbye? I was not through saying hello! Thirty-four years ago, I did get to say goodbye. I knew the end of our son’s life was approaching, and I got the chance to give one last hug and say one last goodbye. I got the chance to say goodbye and I did not take it. In the last moments of my son’s life, and years later, of my parents’ lives, I did not say goodbye.

With the very last breath of my son’s life, I simply said, “I love you.” I was able to be with my mom in her final

hours, and I did not say goodbye. I said, “I love you.” And although I was not with my dad when he died, the last words I shared with him as I left his home on what was to be his last night, I kissed him and said, “I love you.” If you did not get to say goodbye, let go of the hurt you are experiencing. You would not have said it, even if you had had the chance! You would have said, “I love you.”



Goodbye is simply too final, too harsh, too forever. Surely your loved one knew you loved him. Surely your loved one knew you cared. And even if you do not believe they knew, you can do something about that right now. Go outside, find your special star, and with all you might, whisper, speak or yell aloud, “I LOVE YOU!” Trust me, the universe is listening, and your words of love will travel far to reach the heart of those no longer within hug’s reach. I guess you could yell goodbye, too, if you really want to . . . but why? Why let the grief of not saying goodbye rob you of the memories of what you did get to say and how you lived your lives together? Why let not saying goodbye steal away the joy of knowing your loved one was in your life and still is a thread in your fabric to be woven forever around your heart?

Goodbye? I’d rather live my life so that my last words were “I love you.” We never know when an ordinary day will turn into a day that gets marked down in family history as a not-so-ordinary day. But all of us can live our lives so we can leave with few regrets. Do not let the events of the past few years rob you of your hope, your passion, your joy in living. Let it become a lesson for all of us to live our lives as if there were only moments left, because that is all there really is anyway. Moments, just moments, one after another, each special and sacred in its own way, each

waiting to be etched forever on our memories or lost in the sea of millions of other ordinary moments.

Long ago, I learned that any moment can be the last one, so I no longer waste too many of my moments. Oh yes, there are days when I simply plod through the moments, not even aware of their passing. It often takes a cataclysmic event to shake me out of my reverie and reawaken me to the specialness of each moment.

We each need to take advantage of the moments we have and spend them wisely. Spend them saying “I love you,” instead of wishing you had said goodbye. Make a commitment to never let another moment pass without being aware of its passing.

Goodbye has always been a part of my life because I grew up in the military, married in the military and gave birth to military. My address changes more often than the weather. But I gave up saying goodbye long ago when I realized that “I love you” lasts far longer and feels so much better. Goodbye? I am not through saying, “Hello,” and “I love you!”

The late Darcie Sims wrote hundreds of articles over the years on grief and loss which have been extremely popular and shared in hundreds of TCF publications. We Need

Not Walk Alone is proud to honor her by featuring selections of her work in a column titled “The Wisdom of Darcie Sims.”

Why let not saying goodbye steal away the joy of knowing your loved one was in your life and still is a thread in your fabric to be woven forever around your heart?

TCF Sibling Zoom Meetings

Grief Writing - Meets Mondays at 7:30 pm ET

Book Club - Meets last Monday of the month at 7:30 pm ET

Meeting with Jordon - Meets Tuesdays at 7:00 pm ET

Growing Up with Grief (*death of a sibling when you were a child/teen, regardless of your age now*) - Meets Tuesdays at 6:00 pm ET

Creative Expression - Meets Wednesdays at 7:30 pm ET

Meeting with Jason - Meets Thursdays at 6:30 pm ET

LGBTQ+ Sibs Meeting - Meets 1st and 3rd Thursdays at 9:30 pm ET

Twiiins Only - Meets Fridays at 9:00 pm ET

Sunday Connection - Meets Sundays at 4:00 pm ET

To sign up for TCF SIBS newsletter, visit siblingisland.com or scan the QR code.



The Compassionate Friends Private Facebook Groups

The Compassionate Friends offers a variety of private Facebook Groups. These pages were established to encourage connection and sharing among parents, grandparents, and siblings grieving the death of a child, grandchild or sibling.

TCF – Loss of a Child

facebook.com/groups/tcflossofachild

TCF – Loss of a Stepchild

facebook.com/groups/tcflossofstepchild

TCF – Loss of a Grandchild

facebook.com/groups/tcflossofgrandchild

TCF – SIBS (for bereaved siblings)

facebook.com/groups/tcfsibs

TCF – Bereaved LGBTQ Parents With Loss of a Child

facebook.com/groups/tcflgbtqlossofachild

TCF – Multiple Losses

facebook.com/groups/tcfmultiplelosses

TCF – Men in Grief

facebook.com/groups/tcfmeningrief

TCF – Daughterless Mothers

facebook.com/groups/tcfdaughterlessmothers

TCF – Grandparents Raising Their Grandchildren

facebook.com/groups/tcfgrandparentsraisinggc

TCF – Sudden Death

facebook.com/groups/tcfsuddendeadth

TCF - Loss To Substance Related Causes

facebook.com/groups/tcflossosrc

TCF - Sibling Loss To Substance Related Causes

facebook.com/groups/tcfsiblinglossosrc

TCF - Loss to Suicide

facebook.com/groups/tcflossosuicide

TCF - Loss to Homicide

facebook.com/groups/tcflossohomicide

TCF - Loss to Domestic Violence

facebook.com/groups/lossdomesticviolence

TCF – Loss of a Child With Special Needs

facebook.com/groups/tcflossofchildwithspecialneeds

TCF – Loss to Long-Term Illness

facebook.com/groups/tcflosstolongtermillness

TCF – Loss to Mental Illness

facebook.com/groups/tcflosstomentalillness

TCF – Loss to a Drunk/Impaired Driver

facebook.com/groups/tcfdrunkimpaireddriver

TCF – Loss of a Medically Complex Child

facebook.com/groups/lossofamedicallycomplexchild

TCF - Loss to COVID-19 or Other Infectious Diseases

facebook.com/groups/tcflossocovid19

TCF – Loss to Cancer

facebook.com/groups/tcflossocancer

TCF – Loss to Miscarriage or Stillbirth

facebook.com/groups/tcflossomiscarriagstillbirth

TCF – Miscarriage, Stillbirth, Loss of an Infant Grandchild

facebook.com/groups/miscarriagstillbirthinfantgrandchild

TCF - Infant and Toddler Loss

facebook.com/groups/tcfinfantandtoddlerloss

TCF - Loss of a Child 4 - 12 Years Old

facebook.com/groups/tcflossofchild4to12

TCF – Loss of a Child 13-19 Years Old

facebook.com/groups/tcflossofchild13to19

TCF – Loss of an Adult Child

facebook.com/groups/tcflossofanadultchild

TCF – Loss of Your Only Child/All Your Children

facebook.com/groups/tcflossofonlychildallchildren

TCF - Loss of an LGBTQ+ Child

facebook.com/groups/tcflossofanlgbtqchild

TCF – Grieving the Loss of a Child as a Single Parent

facebook.com/groups/lossofachildasasingleparent

TCF – Bereaved Parents With Grandchild Visitation Issues

facebook.com/groups/tcfgrandchildvisitation

TCF – Inclusion and Diversity

facebook.com/groups/tcfinclusionanddiversity

TCF – Grieving with Faith and Hope

facebook.com/groups/grievingwithfaithandhope

TCF – Secular Support

facebook.com/groups/tcfsecularsupport

TCF – Finding Hope for Parents Through TCF SIBS

facebook.com/groups/tcffindinghopeforparents

TCF – Reading Your Way Through Grief

facebook.com/groups/tcfreadingthroughgrief

TCF – Crafty Corner

facebook.com/groups/tcfcraftycorner

The Compassionate Friends Chapter Leadership (for anyone currently serving on a Chapter steering committee)

www.facebook.com/groups/tcfchapterleadership/

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WE NEED NOT WALK ALONE

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The Compassionate Friends

Worldwide Candle Lighting

Join us on December 10, 2023

"... that their light may always shine."

The Compassionate Friends annual Worldwide Candle Lighting unites family and friends around the globe in lighting candles for one hour to honor the memories of the sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, and grandchildren who left too soon. As candles are lit at 7:00 p.m. local time, hundreds of thousands of persons commemorate and honor the memory of all children gone too soon. The Worldwide Candle Lighting creates a virtual 24-hour wave of light as it moves from time zone to time zone.



We are excited to announce the dates for
Our 47th National Conference

July 12-14, 2024

in New Orleans, LA