

WE NEED NOT WALK ALONE

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

Winter 2023



*The
Compassionate
Friends*
Supporting Family After a Child Dies

A Poem About Grief

Grief is more than just stages...Grief is..
A journey into deep within,
An empty space that can't be filled in.
A stunning realization of what used to be,
A battle with sadness others can't see.
A life story ended with untold emotion,
A powerful time of unwavering devotion.
An unsettled struggle that catches attention,
A missing beyond comprehension,
An awareness of life's fragility,
A life now seen very differently.
A collection of moments of love and care,
A desperate feeling of deep despair.
A mystery dance with fate alone,
A future hung in vast unknown.
A collection of blessings in disguise,
A wake-up call in the middle of the night.
A video of unfinished dreams,
A gratefulness for all you mean.
A hole inside a broken heart,
An inner sadness that we're apart.
A struggle inside the inner soul,
An awareness grief can take its toll.
A stark reminder of what once was,
A painful journey of unconditional love.

- Chaplain Mary George-Whittle



**The
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Gentle Gifts of The Season

The holiday season is usually a cheerful time of sharing with family and loved ones who mean the most to us. It's also a time for anticipating all that is ahead as we begin a new year. For those who have experienced the death of a beloved child, sibling, or grandchild, this time of year can be very painful. Reminders are all around us of the cherished person we deeply miss as well as the onerous task of starting a new year without them.

For a family who is grieving, there are many gentle ways we can be supportive of their needs during this extra challenging season. Consider some of the following things you can offer to help a grieving family who is struggling.

- Assist with shopping and wrapping gifts for other siblings in the family.
- Spend a quiet evening looking through their cherished photos and listening to their stories from previous holidays when they were all together.
- Set a weekly time to walk in nature with them.
- Share a cup of tea and a warm fire while you encourage their sharing of precious memories of their loved one's life.
- Help them with planning the holiday meal they may be providing while they are painfully grieving.
- Encourage them to write a love letter to the person they are grieving expressing the deep love they will always feel and their sorrow for all that they now miss.
- Just listen or simply be present in silence by their side.

These gentle gifts are always helpful for someone who is grieving, but they can mean even more during a holiday season full of festivities and expectations. The gift of listening, the gift of presence, and the gift of companionship can be some of the greatest gifts of all for a bereaved person or family.

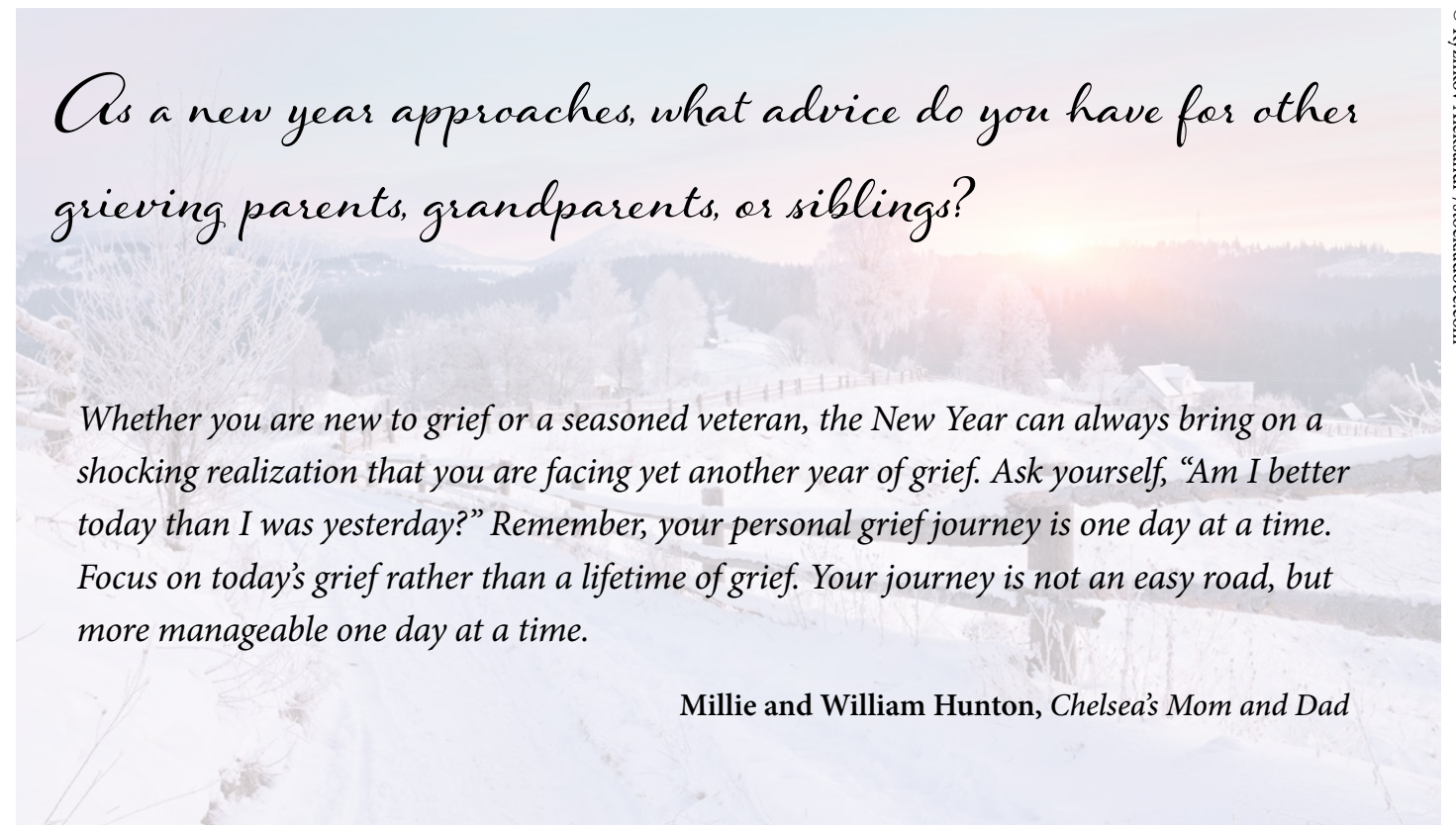
Warmly,
Shari O'Loughlin, MBA, CPC
CEO
The Compassionate Friends



Candles

Candles of our world unite
 Burning long, burning bright
 Reminding us of who we might miss,
 Upon this starlit night
 As we look into the flame
 May we softly say your name
 I hold this candle to the sky
 Ever wanting to know why

- Ian T. Rowan, Sophia's Grandpa



As a new year approaches, what advice do you have for other grieving parents, grandparents, or siblings?

Whether you are new to grief or a seasoned veteran, the New Year can always bring on a shocking realization that you are facing yet another year of grief. Ask yourself, "Am I better today than I was yesterday?" Remember, your personal grief journey is one day at a time. Focus on today's grief rather than a lifetime of grief. Your journey is not an easy road, but more manageable one day at a time.

Millie and William Hunton, Chelsea's Mom and Dad

The Most Complicated Time of the Year

by Hilary Scott, Tyler's Mom



Here we are again, amid the longest and most complex holiday season of all. This time of the year puts a multi-colored spotlight on every one that is missing in your life and all the parts of your life that are not going as you would hope for.

The commercials and advertisements paint a picture of fictional lives. Perfect intact families, beautiful homes, and lots of money for presents and decorations. The presumption is that you should be cheery, positive, and grateful for all the good things in your wonderful life.

What if that is not your reality right now? What if you are missing loved ones and grieving? What if your relationship is breaking up? Perhaps you are out of work, very low on funds, and cannot provide your family with necessities, much less extravagant presents. What if you or a loved one is very ill?

I hear so often how difficult this time of year is. How lonely and sad. The nostalgia for wonderful holidays past with

loved ones, or on the other side, this may serve as a big reminder of awful times with family and memories you would rather not revisit.

How do we cope with the lights and music and all that comes with this long season when we are grieving and feeling sad, hopeless, and stressed?

Take care of yourself. Being aware of what is just too draining and difficult. Knowing that you can give yourself a pass.

You can pass on all of it, the whole thing, or maybe just the parts that you are finding too difficult. You can rest, you can say no.

You can say thank you for inviting me, but I am not up to that this year.

You do not need to explain. You do not need to heed people giving you advice and telling you what you SHOULD do, as they are not you and they have little idea of what you need to heal.

Listen to your own needs, do only the very most important things for yourself and your loved ones, and take care of your limited energy.

We put so much pressure on ourselves to be cheery, to perform, to be out of our comfort zone for the comfort of others. It is exhausting.

If this is the first Holiday since your loved one died and you want and need to be quiet and not participate like you have done in the past, please give yourself permission to do so.

If you are supporting a loved one who is grieving and experiencing loss and difficulty, please understand that saying “you need to get out of your comfort zone” may not be helpful, as the griever is uncomfortable every single second of the day. This time of the year is much worse.

We put so much pressure on ourselves to be cheery, to perform, to be out of our comfort zone for the comfort of others. It is exhausting.

Could you please ask your loved one what they need this year? What would be most comfortable and helpful for them? Understand if they are not participating so much and do not judge how anyone chooses to handle their loss. Every loss is unique and individual to the person experiencing it.

This season is so difficult and weighty due to the memories of our past and the reality of our present.

I wish you the space and time you need to heal. The ability to take the smallest glimmer of light from the intention of this holiday season. Be good to yourself and kind and know how much energy it takes to grieve and acknowledge loss.

Hilary Scott is the mother to Jacob and Tyler. Tyler died in his sleep five days after his 18th birthday in October of 2013. For the past eight years, Hilary has been helping others cope with their unimaginable losses, which has in turn begun to heal her own broken heart. You can find her at www.healingtheloss.com

As a new year approaches, what advice do you have for other grieving parents, grandparents, or siblings?

Don't compare yourself to other bereaved parents when looking to the new year. Your needs may be very different. Take personal assessment of what you need or what you can do at this time since your loss. If this is the first new year, you probably are looking at survivor modes of extra sleep, good nutrition, and monitored exercise. For us, that first new year was when we chose to join The Compassionate Friends local chapter after the death of our only daughter Jill.

Sharon and Jim Staniforth, Jill's Mom and Dad



This Life

by Jody Gelb, Lueza's Mom

During my daughter's birth something went wrong. I had been in labor for a reasonable amount of time, and everything was progressing properly when suddenly, the doctor announced that the baby was not happy where she was and needed to be gotten out immediately. I do not remember everything. I remember severe labor pain. I remember something about forceps. I remember that she did not move or breathe. I remember they intubated her and took her away to a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. I remember terror.

This was how my daughter's life began in October 1994. This was how my life as a mother began.

We were able to bring Lueza home from the hospital twelve days later. We knew she had seizures at some point and had been prescribed phenobarbital to stop the seizures. She slept most of the time in the NICU because of the drug but was weaning off it as the days went by. She had started nursing. We were hopeful that it was just a scary birth, and everything would be fine. We had scheduled a follow-up appointment with a neurologist a few weeks later. We

left the hospital with our daughter on a beautiful October afternoon and walked to my parents' apartment a few blocks away. We did not leave for nine months.

Everything was not fine.

Lueza had sustained significant brain damage. She developed a new kind of seizure a few months later called Infantile Spasms and went back on anti-epileptic medication. When that medication did not resolve her seizures, she was prescribed a treatment of ACTH, which required twice daily intramuscular injections into her upper legs. My husband immediately stepped forward to learn how to do this as I felt incapable.

Just writing these words is hard. It brings back all the memories of those early days.

The feelings were grief and terror. I had the feeling that life had been ruined. Our baby had been severely injured on the day of her birth and we were all ruined.

But we were not alone.

We were living with my parents. My mother would hold Lueza and sing to her when we were having a bad night. We would watch Seinfeld with my parents on Thursday evenings. They took care of us. My mother cooked us dinners. They loved Lueza. They comforted us.

For the longest time in those early months, it was hope that got me through the days. The hope that she would catch up. The doctors and therapists kept using the word delay. Lueza's motor development is delayed. In my mind that meant that she would eventually be okay. It might take a little longer to walk and talk but it would all work out.

And one day I was watching Lueza looking around as she lay on her back, and I asked my husband if she would always be lying down. He said: she may be lying down but she may be very happy.

I know that memory is a tricky thing, but I remember clearly that his words went straight through me. She may be very happy.

And she was. Very happy.

Little by little I was able to give up all hope of what she would be able to do or not do and realize that she had the miracle of a joyful spirit. Lueza was happy. She loved us. She loved life. She loved her younger sister Dora.

We finally figured out her way of saying yes and no. She couldn't speak but she was able to make a sound like aye as she turned her head to the right for a yes and a slight shake of the head for no as she lay on her back.

Lueza loved the Matterhorn rollercoaster at Disneyland. She loved the rides Jurassic Park and Back to the Future at Universal Studios. She loved watching movies.

Lueza did not care that she traveled by wheelchair or could not speak. She was happy lying down. Of course, there were tears and frustration when she could not explain what was wrong, but we would eventually figure it out with yes and no questions.

Her happiness let me accept the reality of her situation. Yes, she was severely physically disabled but she was HAPPY. We found amazing schools for her with teachers that loved her and were excited for what she could learn.

Of course, at a certain point I realized how vulnerable her lungs would become and we had to face the reality of her medical fragility. I knew what was coming before we would ever be ready.

When Lueza started having frequent hospitalizations for aspiration pneumonia she was about thirteen years old.

It is hard for me to write about. I was thinking about death a lot. It was a coping mechanism for me. Maybe if I worried about it constantly, I could keep her safe.

Being in reality about her situation made every day precious. She was with us.

*We are all together in this at
The Compassionate Friends.
We have all been through this
dreadful day.*

She was happy. We were okay.

Lueza died when she was sixteen.

Yes, she was medically fragile, but it was shocking. Shocking and devastating.

We are all together in this at The Compassionate Friends.

We have all been through this dreadful day.

We grieve as we can and remember joy and lives full of everything.

We find our way.

For me it was writing.

Writing and remembering her extraordinary and precious life.

We are all together in this.

Remembering what we had and what we will always have.

Love.

*Jody Gelb has a 40-year acting career. She has portrayed roles in the Tony Award-winning Broadway shows *The Who's Tommy*, *Titanic*, *Big River*, and *Wicked*. Gelb also played Joan of Arc's mother in the David Byrne rock opera *Joan of Arc: Into the Fire* at The Public Theater in New York City. On television, she has appeared in guest roles in *Gunplay*, *Law & Order*, and *Dr. Death*. Gelb is now following the career of her daughter, Dora Jar, a singer-songwriter.*



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No Coincidences

by Matt Cotter, Allyson's Dad

As I write this, 107 days have passed since I lost my daughter, Allyson, to suicide. One hundred seven long, brutal days. I am still in “early grief” (at least, that’s what they tell me). I don’t know how one measures such a thing, though. How can you? The loss of a loved one distorts your perception of time. Grief is complicated, layered, and certainly non-linear. Some days, I am able to maintain my faculties for the most part, often fooling myself into thinking I’m better than I am. Other days, the waves of emotion are tall and frequent, pummeling me relentlessly until I feel like I’m back at the beginning of it all.

Allyson was thirteen years old when she passed away. She had such a vibrant, developed soul despite having such little time on this earth. Allyson was incredibly sweet, always giving time and attention to those she loved, especially her friends and siblings. She was a prolific artist, drawing from the time she could hold a crayon until the day she died. One of her drawings has already found its way onto my body

in the form of a tattoo since her passing. Perhaps above all else, Allyson had a beautiful sense of humor. She was sassy and quick-witted. I don’t think there was a single day of her life where she didn’t make me laugh.

Over these last 107 days, my entire reality has changed. I’m certain that many people reading this can relate. Everything that I thought I knew about life, death, love, time, money, people, and priorities...all gone, or at least shifted greatly. I would not label all of this shift in perspective as negative, however. I’m sure that many of my bereaved brothers and sisters can attest to this one byproduct of grief and loss: it prompts you to open your eyes in search of ways to stay connected with those you have lost.

This brings me to the main focus of this writing—I no longer believe in coincidences. Now, let me be clear; I am not saying that “everything happens for a reason”. That statement in and of itself is too broad to be applied to situations of tragedy and great loss. I refuse to justify

Allyson’s death because of some unknown, cosmic reason. She did not die to teach me a lesson or make me a better person. This is not karma balancing its scales. It is not part of “God’s plan.” Allyson died of a medical condition. That is the bottom line.

Despite my firm stance against the “everything happens for a reason” platitude, I do believe there are no coincidences. Since Allyson’s death, I have worked diligently to open my eyes, mind, and heart to signs from her. I believe that my work has yielded not one, but many such signs (or “winks” as my therapist refers to them). Some are perhaps small, finding a perfectly-placed feather or penny on the ground while on a walk, or Allyson visiting me in a dream. Though small, these signs still carry great weight.

Others have been not-so-small. I’ll share two examples with you.

About six weeks after Allyson passed, I was at home working on my computer when the power flickered. It was only out for a few seconds, but it was enough to shut down my computer. When I booted it back up, I noticed the clock was now incorrect, off by a couple of hours. This had never happened before as I have always set my computer to automatically synchronize its clock. Though strange, I did not give it a second thought. I proceeded to open my computer’s settings to resynchronize it. I clicked the “synchronize” button and waited...it failed. I tried again, same result. I tried a third time. No luck.

I was perplexed.

After several minutes of trying to diagnose the issue, I eventually conceded and decided to update the clock manually. That’s when I saw it—a message in my computer that I will never forget:

LAST SUCCESSFUL SYNCHRONIZATION: June 27, 2023 at 10:47pm.

This moment in time is quite possibly when Allyson passed away, down to the minute (the coroner estimated between 9:00pm and 12:00am that night). Nearly six weeks later, my computer had this issue that I’ve never encountered before and of all days and all times, that’s what the message said. Coincidence?

I’ll share one more with you.

During a therapy session one day, I had asked my therapist (we’ll call her Maria) for advice on talking to Allyson’s younger brother about her death (for context, he is 8 years old). After discussing it with some of her peers, Maria recommended the book *After a Suicide Death*, an Activity Book for Grieving Kids by The Dougy Center. The book is comprised mostly of simple writing and drawing activities designed to help young children open up and understand the death of a loved one by suicide. As I thumbed through this book, I noticed that the author provided quotes from young children who have been exposed to death by suicide on the side margins of each page.

“Mommy got very sad, so she took a bunch of pills and died.” –Billy, age 8. Quotes of this nature.

Then I turned to page 13. As a reminder, Allyson was 13 years old when she passed. I looked at the quote and couldn’t believe what I was reading. It was from a little boy named Matt. My own name. Across from it on page 14...a quote from a little girl named Ally. Allyson was between 13 and 14 years of life, and there was this sign, staring me in the face, on the 13th and 14th pages of this book. It brought me to my knees.

My brothers and sisters...if you gleam any one take-away from my message, please let it be this: there are no coincidences. I believe that those we lost are still present in this universe, watching over and guiding us while we attempt (often in futility) to navigate what’s left of our lives. I believe that if you are able to open your eyes, mind, and heart to them, they will become increasingly apparent. Nothing can fully heal our hearts. Nothing can fully repair the damage done. But if you can find the strength to stave off the bitterness long enough, you, too, may be rewarded with a “wink” or two from your loved ones.

Matt Cotter is an Active-Duty U.S. Air Force veteran of 12 years and bereaved father who lost his daughter, 13, to suicide. A native of Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, he enjoys gardening, hiking, and creating digital content to share his journey with grief and spread mental health and bereavement support awareness.



Hope in a Jar, a Gift of Caring

by Harriet Hodgson, Helen's Mom

What should you say to a grieving friend? What shouldn't you say? Finding the right words may be so hard that you give up and send a sympathy card. "Well, that's done," you mutter to yourself. Later, though, you may wish you had talked to your friend face-to-face. Of course, that isn't always possible.

Instead of sending sympathy cards, give your friend a homemade gift—Hope in a Jar. It's easy to make.

Get a Mason or Ball jar with a lid. Write one-sentence affirmations, save them on your computer, and print out the file. (You may also hand-write affirmations.) Cut the affirmations into strips and put them in the jar. Tie a bow around the top and a tag that says, "Hope in a Jar. Read one a day."

You don't have to be a writer to do this. Only a few things are needed: motivation, a computer keyboard, or paper and pen. I recommend one-sentence affirmations because they are easy to write and remember. Write affirmations that comfort you.

To get you started, here are a dozen affirmations I have written.

- Every so often I call time out and take a break from grief.
- Instead of pain leading me, I lead the pain.
- Happy memories of my loved one are comforting.
- Slowly, surely, I'm creating a new life for myself.
- Getting better! I can talk about my loved one without crying.
- Well-meant advice doesn't always have to be followed.
- In defense, I've prepared answers to the question, "How are you?"
- With every breath I take, I'm thankful for the gift of life.
- Quiet time is part of each day, a time to rediscover myself.

- I keep my loved one close by living their values.
- Sometimes I just want to be alone and that's o.k.
- My life is what I make it.

When you create this gift for a bereaved relative or friend, in a sense, you're creating a gift for yourself. Affirmation writing changes your thinking from negative to positive.

Better yet, affirmation writing makes you aware of your grief journey, and the progress you've made. Although your progress may be measured in baby steps, it is still progress.

Hope in a Jar can have a significant impact on the recipient and you. It's hope that keeps us going!

Additional Affirmations for Your Hope in a Jar

Read one a day.

- Getting up and getting dressed are the first healing steps.
- Be grateful for the time you had with your loved one.
- Having more questions than answers is a normal response to grief.
- Tears express your feelings; cry when you need to for as long as you need to.
- Stash sympathy cards in a box and read them when you feel up to it.
- Hard as it is right now, try to eat a balanced diet.
- Check out the website before you join an online grief support group.
- Laughter is good medicine and it's okay to laugh when you're grieving.
- You have enough to deal with right now, so limit television news viewing.
- Spend time with people who have experienced grief and understand it.
- You are stronger than you know and will survive this.
- Accept the confusion you feel and mistakes you make.
- Watch for "grief brain" and take steps to counter it.
- Say this aloud: Love is stronger than grief.
- Find comfort in happy memories.
- Live the best life you can in memory of your loved one.
- Think about your blessings and share one with a friend today.
- Choose a legacy that would make your loved one—and you—proud.
- Say goodbye to guilt; it does nothing for you.
- Claim happiness for yourself; you deserve it.
- This is a good day to have a good day.
- Help yourself by searching for new meaning in your new life.
- Build on the strength of your loved one's love.

Harriet is acquainted with grief--too well acquainted. She is a bereaved mother, daughter, sister, sister-in-law, mother-in-law, and friend. A week after her daughter died, Hodgson sat down at the computer and described her grief in words. Writing helped her understand grief and her new mission in life, to write books that help people. Hodgson is a long-term member of The Compassionate Friends, and has spoken at national and regional conferences. A prolific writer, Hodgson is the author of 45 grief books, including 11 grief resources. Many of her books have received awards. Today, Hodgson gives doodle art workshops to understand grief and foster healing.



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Nurturing Bonds

The Sibling Program at The Compassionate Friends

by Zander Sprague, Lucy's Brother

Hi, I am Zander Sprague, the sibling representative on the Board of Directors. I am honored to represent the siblings and raise awareness of these often-forgotten mourners. I lost my sister Lucy in 1996 to homicide. There were things that I thought that I might face in my life, but murder was not one of them. As my grief journey began, I felt very lonely, and few people were acknowledging my loss. It was not until 2013 that I heard about TCF and found the family I never knew I needed.

Grieving the loss of a loved one is an indescribable journey, and for those who have lost a brother or sister, the pain can be particularly unique and isolating. In the midst of this challenging terrain, The Compassionate Friends has extended its compassionate reach to include a dedicated Sibling Program. This program, a haven for those who find themselves navigating the turbulent waters of sibling loss, serves as a testament to the organization's commitment to providing solace, understanding, and a community of empathetic companionship.

At the heart of the Sibling Program is the unwavering acknowledgment that grief knows no singular path. Losing a sibling is a profoundly personal experience, and the program recognizes and validates the diversity of emotions that individuals may grapple with. Whether the loss was sudden or anticipated, the pain is no less palpable, and the Sibling Program becomes a sanctuary where these feelings can be explored without judgment.

One of the cornerstones of the program is the creation of a supportive community where individuals can connect with others who share a similar journey. Through group meetings, and online forums, participants find solace in the company of those who understand the unique bond between siblings. The program facilitates an environment where each story is heard, every tear is acknowledged, and the collective strength of shared experiences becomes a source of empowerment.

Grief often carries with it a range of emotions, from profound sadness to anger and guilt. The Sibling Program recognizes the importance of addressing these emotions in a safe and understanding space. Trained facilitators guide participants through discussions and activities designed to explore and express their emotions, fostering an atmosphere of healing and self-discovery. These sessions offer not only an opportunity to share the pain but also to celebrate the cherished memories and the enduring love for the lost sibling.

Beyond the structured sessions, the Sibling Program organizes events and activities that aim to commemorate the lives of the departed siblings. From memorial gatherings to creative expression workshops, these occasions serve as a platform for participants to honor their siblings' legacies. Through art, music, and storytelling, individuals can channel their grief into positive, affirming outlets that celebrate the enduring impact their brothers and sisters had on their lives.

The Sibling Program extends its reach beyond physical gatherings with an online platform that serves as a virtual haven for those unable to attend in person. This digital space becomes a 24/7 support network, connecting

individuals across geographic boundaries. Through forums, chat rooms, and online resources, participants can access a wealth of information, share their stories, and seek comfort at any time, knowing that they are never truly alone in their grief.

As the Sibling Program continues to evolve, it remains deeply committed to breaking down the stigma surrounding sibling loss. Society often underestimates the impact of losing a brother or sister, and the program seeks to raise awareness about the profound and enduring effects of such a loss. Through outreach initiatives, educational campaigns, and partnerships with other organizations, the program aims to foster a greater understanding of sibling grief and promote empathy and support within communities.

Zander is an award-winning public speaker, best-selling author, and Licensed Professional Clinical Counselor (LPCC). He serves on the Board of Directors as The Compassionate Friends' Sibling Representative. Zander is the author of three books: the internationally acclaimed Making Lemonade: Choosing A Positive Pathway After Losing Your Sibling; his second book Why Don't They Cry?: Understanding Your Living Child's Grief, a book to help parents understand sibling survivors; and the best-selling EPIC Begins With 1 Step Forward: How to Plan, Achieve, and Enjoy the Journey.

As a new year approaches, what advice do you have for other grieving parents, grandparents, or siblings?

I attended my first TCF meeting 14 years ago, a month after my brother died. I am not sure I would have made it all these years without the love and support of TCF. I'm able to keep Jon's memory alive by sharing his story with other bereaved siblings. Be gentle on yourselves and reach out to your TCF family, you are not alone in your grief.

Andrea Keller, Jon's Sister

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Ring in the New Me

by Jordon Ferber, Russell's Brother



This coming New Years Eve will be our 22nd without my brother Russell, who died in July 2002. It's a bittersweet holiday because it is also his birthday.

The holiday season can be a stressful time for everyone, but it can be especially hard for families whose lives have been shattered by loss. Celebrating the holidays suddenly felt like an empty ritual or a thing of the past. It was hard to embrace new traditions in order to find hope and joy again. It took time to give myself permission to do it the way that I do it.

I remember how hard the first few years were, how alone I felt in the world. I didn't know how to do the holidays without my brother. All I could do was go through the motions. Spending time with family was often when I felt the most alone. It was hard to see the rest of the family intact, acting as if everything was ok, and no one talked about Russell but me.

New Years Eve was especially tough, as there seemed nowhere to go and nothing to do where Russell was not there. His absence was ever present for me. My grief followed me to every party, a cloud hung over me at every celebratory event. Alone in my thoughts, surrounded by strangers who didn't know or care about what I was going through.

The repetition helped. My process of grief has been Trial and Error – MOSTLY Error! As hard as these events that come up every year can be, they are also opportunities to try something new. Every year I get to find ways for the holiday season to suck less.

Every year I get a little bit better at navigating the hard days. I have made it my job to bring up Russell at family events. It was a little awkward and weird those first few years; it was clear that it made some people in my family uncomfortable because it forced them to confront his death, but I am always going to make sure I remind everyone of his LIFE.

It's up to me to keep talking about Russell, to remind people that he lived, to normalize the fact that we're going to continue talking about him as a family. It's comforting to me to know that I get to keep working at it until I find what feels good.

About 5 years after Russell's death, my parents and I started hosting a party on New Years Eve that we always describe as a hybrid NYE/Russell's birthday party. It's a mixture of my friends, my parents' friends, and always a nice showing from our TCF family. Everyone there knows the deal, and I'm allowed to be emotional if I want, or jubilant, or whatever I need to be, and no one will judge.

It's also just the perfect low-key way to ring in the new year, similar to a party my parents threw years ago that Russell and I basically crashed (along with a half dozen friends). We have a huge spread of food and desserts (SO many desserts – Russell was a pastry chef, after all). At midnight we sing happy birthday to Russell. It's become a real source of healing and connection to be able to celebrate not just

Russell, but all the people we still have in our lives. It truly feels like Russell is there with us every year. For many years, I was convinced that all my New Years would be ruined for the rest of my life, but the truth is, I would never be able to celebrate it with as many people as I do if his birthday were any other day of the year.

One year when Russell was very young, he was awoken by the fireworks at midnight, only to run out into the living room asking, "Is it time for more presents?!"

I have tried to think of NYE the same way that Russell did – that the whole world was celebrating his birthday whether they knew it or not, and I allow myself to celebrate him every year, along with the rest of the world.

Jordon Ferber is a comedian, podcaster and much needed voice in the bereavement community. Jordon's brother Russell was killed in a car accident on July 6th, 2002, at the age of 21. Jordon has facilitated the TCF Manhattan Siblings group for the past decade. Producer of the podcast "Where's the Grief?", he and his family run The Russell Ferber Foundation, continuing to carry on the spirit of his brother through love and laughter.

As a new year approaches, what advice do you have for other grieving parents, grandparents, or siblings?

Plan special events for remembering your child with others who nurture you. Put these events on a calendar for the new year. The calendar helps you see that they are still a part of your life this new year. These could include a birthday party for your child, sending cards to your child's friends for special events (birthdays, weddings, get well, births, and others). We have a Holiday craft and cookie party as our daughter loved both. Light a candle and/or set a picture of your child on your table for family gatherings in memory of your child.

Lori and Bill Englund, April's Mom and Dad



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Honor, Labyrinths, and Slices of Normal

by Margaret Markham, Carl's Mom

My oldest son Carl died in a car wreck so recently that I'm still counting my grief in weeks. He was 31, and he left behind a wife and a two-year-old son. My daughter-in-law and grandson, my husband and younger son, and I all converged on the hospital that day. One of the first things my younger son Jay said was, "I don't know how to do this." He meant grief. He is 26, and despite living through the death of several grandparents, he (like all of us) did not know how to grieve a loss of this nature.

I told Jay, "There is no wrong way to grieve." And I meant that. Short of the self-destructive behaviors that people can sometimes fall into in the throes of grief, I do not believe that there is a "wrong way" to do this thing. It is ok to cry, scream and rage; and it is ok to grieve in silence. It is ok to throw yourself back into work as my husband has, and it is ok to quit your job entirely as I did. It is ok to turn inward to family only, and it is ok to turn to friends and groups.

We are a family of differences. Different sides of the isle, different spiritual traditions, different personality types.

Our strength is in the ways we work to not merely tolerate these differences, but actively honor, and make room for them. So, we knew that we would all grieve Carl's death in our own ways. And we knew that we would honor these differences also.

Who wants a funeral, and who wants a smaller gathering? Who wants cremation, embalming, a viewing? The decisions were discussed, and the wishes of those with the strongest needs in each area were those we honored. I expected a particular picture to be shown at the memorial, and my daughter-in-law did not select it. Her decision not to highlight that photo was more important than my desire to show it. We make room for each other's feelings. Along the same lines, I only want to look at pictures when I am mentally prepared for them. My husband has Carl's picture as his screen saver. I would never ask him to change that, because the brief jolt it causes me is less significant than the great comfort it gives him. I wanted to try a group for bereaved parents. My husband had no interest at all. I went,

and he did not. And we both honored the rights of the other to make that decision. At times we come together in our grief. At times we each need to feel our loss alone, in our own ways. The important thing for our family is to honor each other's needs.

Shortly after Carl's death I went to walk a labyrinth again. I needed the physical form of it. A labyrinth is a great metaphor for a lot of struggles in life. You start at the edge and at the center is your "goal." But just when it seems you are close to that center goal, the path leads you out to the edges again, where you feel as though you may drop completely off the map.

It keeps on happening, until you finally reach the middle. But even then, you have not made it, because you still must find your way back out again; you cannot stay there. The goal at the center of my grief labyrinth changes day to day. Sometimes it is to find wholeness again. Sometimes it is to find a new normal. Some days it is to support my family members. And there are days when brushing my teeth is beyond me. In these weeks of our new life, I have been yanked to the outer edges of the labyrinth many, many times. But there have been a few times as well where that center place of wholeness feels like it might be in reach. And this is how we approach it.

We decided to grant ourselves compassion by allowing little "slices of normal" back into our lives. We let ourselves play the board game we have always played at dinner time. We do yard work together. My daughter-in-law and I both decided we were allowed to paint our toenails. Hers black, mine dark grey. Then bright colors again after the memorial. Little slices of normal. We visit our grandson and rejoice as

he plays and laughs. We let ourselves watch TV without feeling guilty. I am learning to quilt. We built a sidewalk. Little slices of normal. Re-read a book read many times before. Repair a broken pipe. Visit family. Go to a show.

Play on the swing set. Wear earrings again. Little slices of normal.

Our journey with grief has just begun, and I know I do not have all the answers. But we have made a start. We are honoring each other's needs, even when they are different from our own. We are traveling the labyrinth together, knowing we are all in different places on it at any given time. And we are granting each other and ourselves the compassion that comes with each tiny slice of normal.

Margaret Markham is a homemaker, mom, and grandma. She and her husband Cliff raised their two sons in central Texas, and they prioritize time with their family.

We decided to grant ourselves compassion by allowing little "slices of normal" back into our lives.

As a new year approaches, what advice do you have for other grieving parents, grandparents, or siblings?

Writing in journals to your missing loved one may be helpful. We have used prompts from booklets, songs, poetry, and written based on a line or paragraph from there, or written stories and memories about our daughter so others can remember or learn about her later. Even if you only see these journals, the act of writing is a therapy.

Lisa Mitchell Parker, Katherine's Mom

Oh No! Here We Go Again!

The Joyous “Not so Joyous” Holiday Season

by Jill Medina, Tristan's Mom



Well, here we are again.....getting ready to enter the Holiday Season as a bereaved parent/grandparent/sibling. Nothing I say can possibly help you through the holiday season. Nothing I do can help me or you disappear into the background through this season. There are no magic words or magic tricks that will ease my pain or that of yours. And of course, there are no answers to help ease the pain and sensations that the season brings.

My first Thanksgiving and Christmas without my son Tristan, I was adamant that I was not going to celebrate. I was just a little less than two months bereaved for Thanksgiving and three months for Christmas. I had to acknowledge (not “celebrate”) his 20th birthday just three weeks after his death. How was I supposed to deal with the Holidays where everyone and everything around me was radiating joy and happiness? What should I do for these holidays when I felt no joy? No sense of family? No sense of caring? I

knew I didn't want to be stuck in the hustle and bustle of the seasons- fighting the crowds in the grocery stores and those in the stores. The anxiety of being out in public and everyone staring at me was just too much. All I can say is THANK GOODNESS for online shopping!

That first Thanksgiving I bought the turkey and all the trimmings online and drove through the drive thru where someone loaded them- I didn't have to speak or see anyone. I cooked at home, and we ate on paper plates watching football, which was Tristan's favorite pastime on Thanksgiving. I did not have to worry about how I would appear to the outside world or my own family members. No one called to check up on us; not one word to say, 'How are you doing?' or 'Is there anything you need?'

Then comes the first Christmas without Tristan; my other two sons and I made a pact that we would not celebrate this year. There would be no tree or any other traditions we

normally did. That first Christmas we stayed home and did absolutely nothing. I took off the week between Christmas and New Years so I could avoid all the crowds and questions of others as to what I was doing. I made sure to make myself scarce so that no one could force their joy upon me.

The second Christmas season my youngest son Nick and I flew to my sister-in-law's home in Honduras and spent Christmas there. It was good to get away from all the hoopla around us and a wonderful change in traditions. After Christmas we spent five days in Costa Rica and mingled with the sloths. Sloths were Tristan's favorite animal. The week he died Geico's commercial was introduced with the Sloth (that was my sign that Tristan was with me). Sloths appeared everywhere so it was only fitting to go visit the sloth sanctuary. AND ONCE AGAIN- I did not have to endure the “joyous” around me through the Holidays.

The third Thanksgiving and Christmas season became a little easier. There was the lockdown from COVID-19, so I used that as an excuse not to wander out into public or get caught up in Holiday parties. It was easier to use this excuse than to hear “He wouldn't want you to not celebrate,” “You need to move on,” and/or “I can't believe you are still stuck in this place.” I did put up a tree this year, but it was the day before - I couldn't bring myself to look at it any longer than I had to. I also brought back a few of the traditions - stockings, baking cookies, and some gifts - nothing extravagant, but I was slowly making my way back.

The fourth and fifth Holiday seasons got even a little easier. We began new traditions and I managed to get the tree up a week before! I still had anxiety over going to any parties or gatherings, so I made myself as scarce and distant as possible, so I didn't have to come up with more excuses - or - just the same old ones.

And now here we are approaching the Holiday season again! This is my sixth season - YES - sixth! I don't dread the season nearly as much as I have before. I'm not entirely looking forward to it, but I am not in panic mode either. I am taking forward steps, gradually, but steps, nonetheless. I have realized that other people's expectations don't need to be met. I have become more honest and open to my feelings and what I expect people to say or do. Is it cruel or disrespectful to tell others what I need? Maybe, but holidays and special days are painful to us, but we survive them. And as the years move forward, maybe they will get easier each year. Maybe before too long we can enjoy the memories of Holidays past without too much pain. My hope to you is that the Holidays are spent or celebrated the way YOU need them to be, and not the way you perceive others need them to be. Remember to rest, take time for yourself, and remember.

May your holiday season be one of comfort and peace. Traditions can be changed. Memories remain!

Jill Medina lost her son Tristan Tanner Medina at age of 19 in September 2017 due to a fall out of his fifth story dormitory window at George Mason University.

As a new year approaches, what advice do you have for other grieving parents, grandparents, or siblings?

I am grateful to TCF for giving voice to the bereaved who have walked this path before us. I learned a truth that has sustained me in the darkest hours: Love does not die. You will carry the absence and presence of your child every day throughout your own remaining lives. Wrestling this golden nugget from the scorched earth of pain is the heart of grief work.

Elizabeth Brady, Mack's Mom



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Beauty in Brokenness

by Mark Mason, Makenna's Dad

In the English language, we have words to describe a person who has experienced loss at the death of another. Someone whose spouse has died is called a widow or widower. A child who has been left parentless is an orphan. But nowhere in our common tongue is there a word for a person who has lost their child.

In Sanskrit, there is a word 'Vilomah,' which means "out-of-order." It is the closest thing I've found to describing the condition of a bereaved parent such as I.

During the early morning hours of June 21, 2019 I received a phone call from my daughter's half-brother. His voice was calm, but somber. "Mark, there's no easy way to say this." Instantly, I knew. My 25-yr-old daughter Makenna had died. In the time it took him to speak those eight words, I became a vilomah, a person whose life would, from that moment on, be permanently out-of-order.

My daughter's life struggle was at an end, but my journey of grief was just beginning.

Only a few weeks after her death, I joined a closed Facebook group dedicated to bereaved parents. In the months that followed, it proved to be a godsend. I have learned much from reading the stories of others who've lost their children and taken to heart the insights they have gained along the way. It has been a safe place for me to share my own experience and in so doing provide a measure of comfort to those who, in becoming new members as I once was, are thankful for a group that nobody ever wanted to be a part of.

One morning, I visited the group page to find a new post which read, "What have you done to get your life back in order?" Immediately, my mind went to that word, 'vilomah' and I responded by saying that my life would forever be out-of-order. In a moment, grief became a permanent fixture in the landscape of my life and I had accepted that. Many others shared the same sentiment.

It is important to understand that a life which has been shattered to pieces can never be put back in order. The real challenge, as I see it, is to embrace this new reality and to

try and find some beauty in the brokenness. But this level of awareness did not come to me early or easily.

As it has turned out, it was a simple piece of jewelry that helped show me the way.

Among my daughter's personal possessions was a heart-shaped pendant made of porcelain, dark brown in color and highly polished. But what made it unique among all others was a clearly visible and slightly jagged vein of bright gold running through its center. It was an example of kintsugi, a Japanese art form in which a broken piece of ceramic is repaired with lacquer and where the cracks are highlighted with the application of gold dust, rendering the piece even more beautiful than before. Kintsugi is often viewed as a metaphor for restoration and transformation.

My daughter struggled with alcoholism. The last few years of her life were a continuous cycle of sobriety, relapse, hospitalization, rehab and recovery. I gave her the pendant when she had completed her first 30-day rehab at the age of 22. She cherished it and wore it often, sharing with others at AA meetings its message of hope and healing.

A few weeks following the Life Celebration we held at her mother's house, I asked family members if anyone had found the pendant among her belongings. I was crestfallen to learn nobody had seen it and that in all likelihood it was gone forever. But a few days later, I received a call that Makenna's half-sister had found it and I could pick it up at any time. I was tearful with joy!

I have always had a respect for the wisdom imparted by certain Japanese arts and traditions. What is different about Kintsugi in contrast to other types of 'broken pot'

metaphors is the deep philosophical and aesthetic practice that underlies the art form. Especially, the concept of creating beauty out of brokenness.

The process does not attempt to disguise the damage, but rather renders the cracks as beautiful and strong. The precious veins of gold are there to emphasize that fault lines have a merit all of their own. I now view these fault lines as my faith lines and I have learned to see my heart as broken open rather than broken apart. As a result, I am stronger, wiser, kinder, and able to love deeper.

For me, the gold dust added to the adhesive mix has come to represent acts of gratitude and love - gratitude for the things that remain in my life, and also the love I continue to feel for my daughter.

Makenna's pendant now hangs above my drawing table in the studio at my house. I see it every time I pull up my chair and am reminded of something Ernest Hemmingway once wrote, "*The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places.*" The places where I have known brokenness and experienced healing are the places where I have empathy and compassion for others who are broken. They are the places where I have a story to tell and where I have credibility to minister to the needs of others. They are the places where I can speak hope and shine light into the darkness . . . and find beauty in the brokenness.

Mark Mason is a retired book illustrator living in Whittier, CA. Since the death of his daughter, he has become an advocate for bereaved parents whose children struggled with substance. His favorite quote from Mother Teresa, "Few of us can do great things, but we can all do small things with great love."

The places where I have known brokenness and experienced healing are the places where I have empathy and compassion for others who are broken.

Holidays? Now What? My Only Child is Gone

by Paula Neidorf, Forever Kevin's Mom



I dread the holidays. All of them. Hanukah, potato latkes and brisket, that Kevin loved. Thanksgiving, and the carrot ginger soup recipe, I had just perfected. The Christmas dinners with green and red potstickers, I shared with friends. Holidays were always about food and bringing together family and friends.

Do holiday foods bring me any pleasure anymore, or are they a sad reminder of what is gone? How do I proceed moving forward, without resentment, or willingness to hear others talk about their families and lives full of hope and a future, at the dinner table?

I know I am not alone in these thoughts. I know I have choices. I think about honoring Kevin during these challenging times while caring for myself. That might equate to isolating, and not putting myself in harm's way. Self-care is what I have been told to focus on.

I first authored this article 3 years ago. At almost 5 years bereaved, I still do not have it in me to make my delicious

carrot ginger soup. I will always miss my son smiling in approval, with each slurp of the spoon. But I have learned I can eat the holiday foods and enjoy them.

If during these melancholy times I had a choice of where to put myself during a holiday, it would be in the arms of parents who have lost an only child. We would talk about our wonderful children, our pain, shed tears, share favorite recipes, eat, laugh a little, and know that we were understood. We could go in and out of this maze of emotions, without having to offer an explanation, without having to exit the table. Outside of that option, I have learned it is ok to stay at home.

In this revised/edited writing, at 5 years, I can now enjoy cooking and inventing recipes. Choosing ingredients, creating a new recipe, is no different than deciding where I go during holidays. I know I have options, and whatever I select, will be the correct one, for that moment in time.

Kevin's Carrot Soup

INGREDIENTS: Serves 8

- 1/4 cup butter
- 2 medium onions, chopped
- 2 Tbs. grated peeled fresh ginger root
- 1 1/2 lbs. carrots, peeled and thinly sliced
- 6 cups chicken stock or 6 cups of vegetable stock
- 1/2 tsp. salt, 1/2 tsp. black pepper

DIRECTIONS

- In a 4-quart saucepan, melt butter over medium heat.
- Add onions and sauté until translucent, about 5 minutes.
- Add ginger root and cook for 2 minutes longer.
- Add carrots and stock to onions; heat to boiling over high heat.
- Reduce heat to low, cover and cook carrots until tender, 15 to 20 minutes. *(Or you can cook the carrots first, then add to stock)*
- Use hand blender to blend carrot mixture, in batches, until smooth.
- Salt and pepper to taste.
- Heat soup over low heat until hot.
- Sprinkle with chopped scallions before serving

Paula Neidorf, is the mother to only child, Kevin, 28, who died in a drowning accident in 2019. She is a writer, facilitator, and admin for several support groups for child loss. She has taken several courses for grief certification, including David Kessler, and the Miss Foundation.

If during these melancholy times I had a choice of where to put myself during a holiday, it would be in the arms of parents who have lost an only child.



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The Stubbornness of Lady Grief

by Heather Rubio, Sydney's Mom

Grief has become an unwelcome and unwanted guest in my home. She barged in one hot and sunny July afternoon, screaming at me, and commandeered my favorite seat at our family dinner table.

I tried to scare her away... I yelled, screamed, begged, and bargained for her to leave, and she screamed even louder at me while tears of fire streamed from her eyes.

Afraid that she would tear my home asunder and set the ruins ablaze, I turned to my china cabinet and grabbed the prettiest of my pieces. A cup of tea I then made and a slice of cake I cut. I laid out my offerings to this screeching grief banshee, sat beside her, and slowly took her hand. I, even more slowly, embraced her... her screams settled. Her eyes met mine as she slowly sipped her tea and nibbled her cake. It was at that moment I realized that she, though unwelcome, angry, and intense,

was in my home to stay forever.

In beginning to accept this and her chaos, I've learned that she will be my constant partner, and that setting her a place at my table to share my tea and cake is much better than trying to fight her off. She is not leaving, no matter what I do, and the harder I try to make her leave, the hotter she burns... and the more she destroys.

So I have befriended her, my Lady Grief, however difficult and however loving she may sometimes seem. She is mine and I am hers and we are the only ones who can walk this lonesome path together.

I have made her an honored guest and gifted her the seat where Love still sits (they can fight over it later). Because of this pact we have the combined strength to search for her lost sister, Peace, and we go out looking for her every day after tea.

I, and her cousins Hope and Dream, are on the trail of Peace and we will all surely catch up with her soon...

Perhaps we will live simply ever after and not as much "happily."

Regardless, it will be me and she, my Lady Grief.

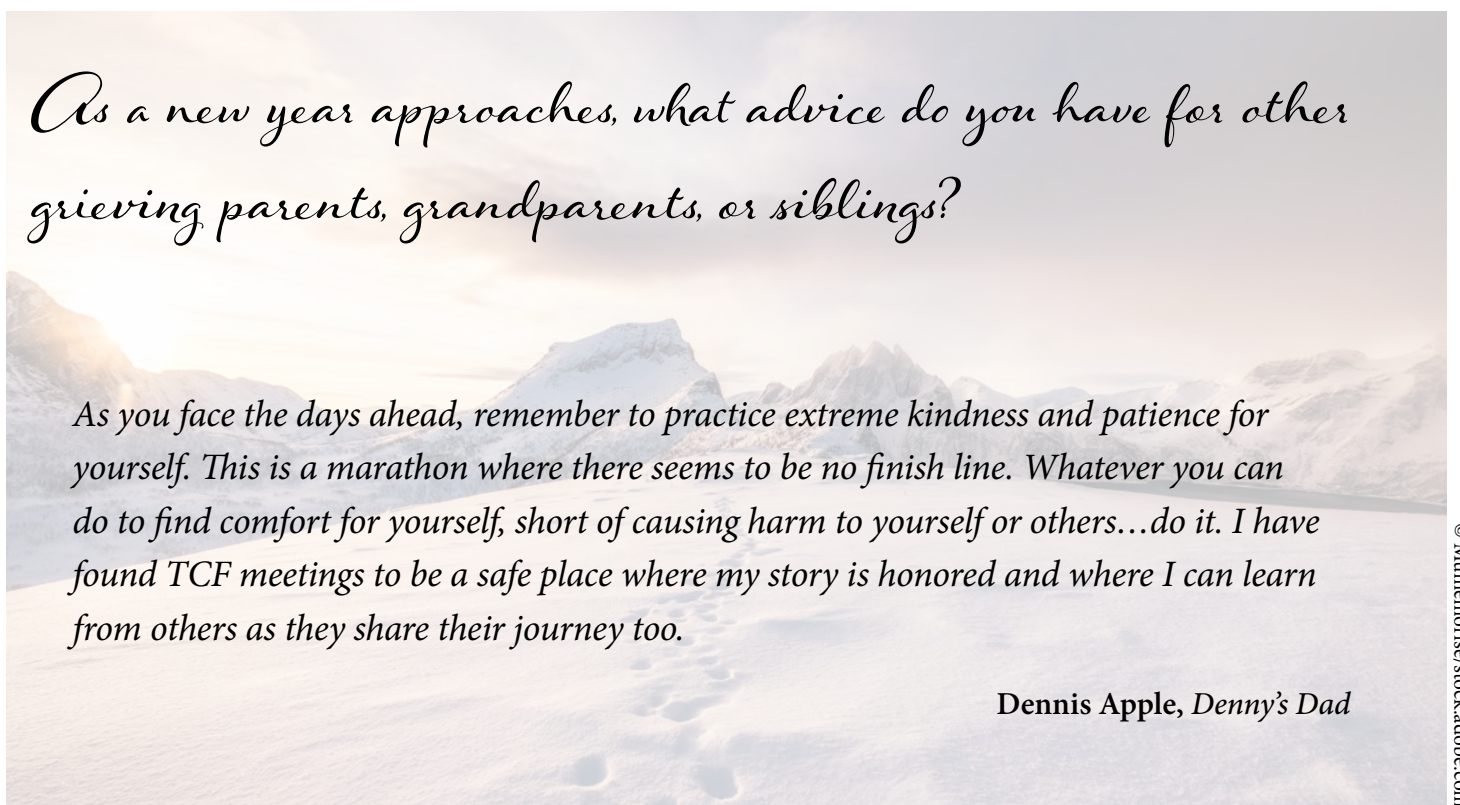
Heather is a bereaved mother who lost her beautiful 12-year-old daughter, Sydney, to complications of Hypoplastic Left Heart Syndrome in July of 2023. She and her husband, Daniel, have one surviving child, Daniel II. Together, they are learning to navigate the rugged terrain of child and sibling loss. Heather is studying to become a registered nurse and is learning to face her grief through writing, and bringing awareness to pediatric congenital heart defects.



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When the time comes for lighting festive candles, let them remind you not only of what you lost but also of what you had.

- Sascha Wagner



© Mummemorise/stock.adobe.com

As a new year approaches, what advice do you have for other grieving parents, grandparents, or siblings?

As you face the days ahead, remember to practice extreme kindness and patience for yourself. This is a marathon where there seems to be no finish line. Whatever you can do to find comfort for yourself, short of causing harm to yourself or others...do it. I have found TCF meetings to be a safe place where my story is honored and where I can learn from others as they share their journey too.

Dennis Apple, Denny's Dad

The Wisdom of Darcie Sims

Surviving the Mid-Winter Gloom

Why does January seem so empty? Just as the world is stiff and frozen outside my window, I feel dead and cold and scattered inside myself. I managed to make it through the holiday season, though the “how” of that feat is truly beyond my recollection. I can’t even remember eating the holiday meals. (I do, however, remember doing the dishes—again and again and again. Next year we are eating out or using paper plates!)

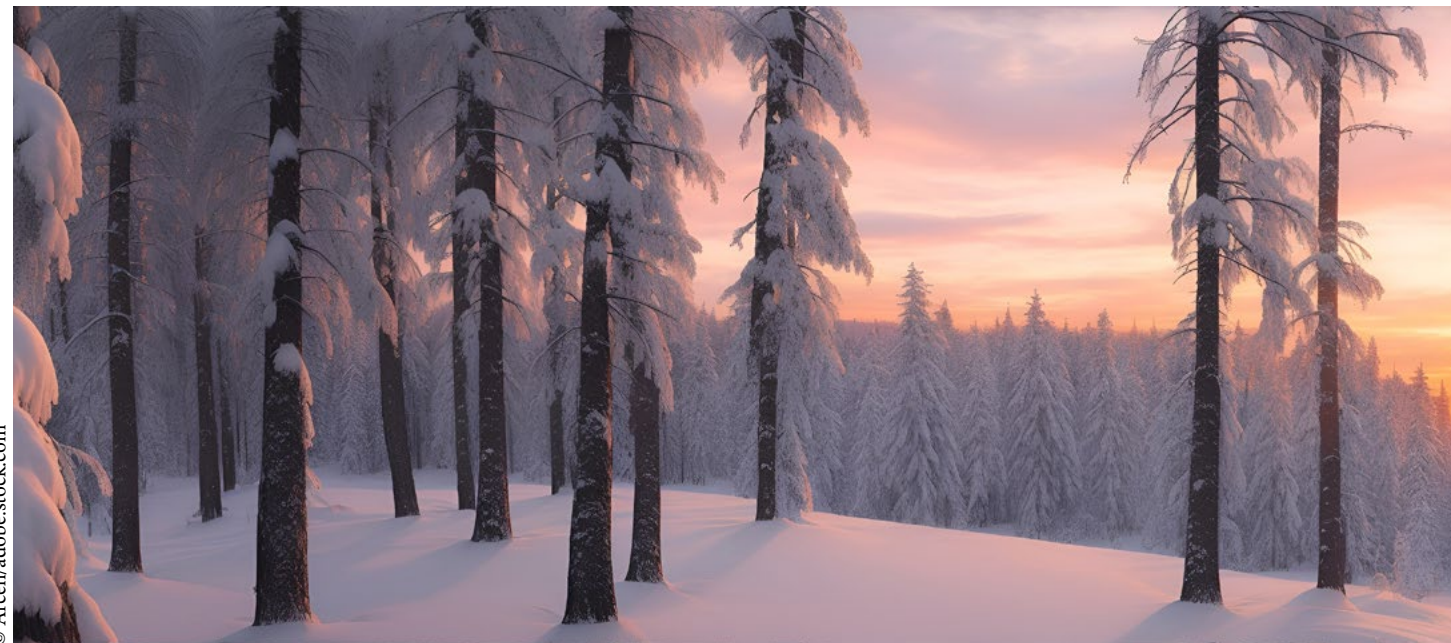
In those glittering days, I managed to smile and even to find a few moments of peace and joy. But here in the gloom of winter, all I seem to see are the scattered pieces of my life, cast before me on the card table, waiting for me to pick them up and make the picture.

But what picture do all these pieces form? I used to think I knew. I used to know who I was and where I was going and how I was going to get there. But now, now in the chill of winter, I can’t even remember where I fit into the puzzle.

I think I’m still grieving, and that surprises me! It’s been (too long, regardless of the time frame you insert), and I should be getting better. Why do I still ache from the sunburn I got years ago when we were together on the beach? Why is there still sand in my shoes and why does your name still stick in my throat? Who am I now that the memories grow cold in winter’s chill?

Am I still a mother if there is no child to tuck in at night? Am I still a dad if there is no one to loan the car keys to? Am I still a wife if there is no one to snuggle up to in my bed? Am I still a husband if there is no one waiting at home for me at the end of the day? Am I still a sister or a brother if there is no one to tease? Am I still a child if my parent has died? Am I still a human being, capable of loving and being loved, if the one person I loved more than anything has become frozen in time? Who am I now that my loved one has died? The gloom has permeated even my toes, and my whole body seems icy.

Why can’t January be warm and gentle—especially after the struggle of the holidays? I need some sunshine, some warmth, some help in turning over the puzzle pieces and putting them back together. I need some springtime. But springtime is a way off and I must somehow get through



these days. If you’re feeling like I am, perhaps these few suggestions will help you find the pieces to your new puzzle.

1. **Identify specific feelings.** Do not generalize. Try to figure out exactly what is bothering you. Look for the tiny grains of sand that are still hiding in the bottom of your shoes. Acknowledge them. Be honest with those feelings, whatever they are. If you’re angry, be angry. If you’re sad, be sad. Be specific in your sadness.
2. **Pick your worries.** Focus on only one worry at a time. Give up being worried about being worried. Prioritize your worries. This helps fight feelings of being overwhelmed, and you can decide which worries to keep and which to send to your: mother, children, family, neighbor, enemy.
3. **Keep a picture or two of the sandcastles where you can enjoy it every day.** You may decide not to make a shrine out of your memories, but don’t lose the joy that you had in making that marvelous moat! That’s what memories are for—a place to stash the important stuff that we need.
4. **Become as informed and as knowledgeable as possible about this new world in which you live.** We fear what we don’t know, what we can’t see, what we can’t touch. Read, listen, and learn all you can about grief. It’s not where you planned on being this winter, but it is where you are. Look around.
5. **Listen to everyone.** You will receive enough advice about how to grieve to sink a fleet of battleships. Be grateful . . . at least someone is talking to you! But follow your own music.
6. **Be kind to yourself.** You survived the holiday season, and now it is the beginning of another season, another way of living. Learn to forgive yourself for living.
7. **Set small goals first.** Accomplish them. Then, set bigger goals. Try starting with getting the garbage out on the right day. Then, open the closet . . . the drawers . . . the heart. Try going out. The next time you might be able to get farther than the driveway. Take your time. It’s a long way to the beach. You’ll get there again . . . someday.
8. **Remember that life requires effort on your part.** Make friends with the vacuum, the checkbook, and the car. Determine to remember to remove the box before microwaving the dinner.

9. **Don’t wait for happiness to find you again.** Make it happen. Build another sandcastle, maybe on a different beach this time. Don’t lose the memories just because they hurt. Look at the pictures, listen to the song, remember the love . . . you haven’t lost that. How could you possibly lose the love you shared?

10. **Keep turning the puzzle pieces over, but don’t keep trying to put them back into the same picture.** That picture is gone. There is a new picture to be made of those scattered pieces. Search for that scene. Search for the new you. Search for the new person you are becoming.

11. **Don’t forget how to dream, how to laugh, how to dance.** The music is different but so is the season. The room may be empty, but the heart is not. The spirit may be filled with sand, but the shoes remember the steps. One day at a time is okay if you can manage it but know that on some days all you can manage is one minute at a time. But minutes add up to years, eventually, and each grain of sand adds to the strength of the castle. Build the sandcastle again, if only in your memory. Just because it’s January, doesn’t mean the beach is closed forever. Build your new castle in the middle of winter. Find the new occupant—the new you.

Be gentle this winter season. Turn the pieces over slowly, experiencing each piece as a newly found treasure. We can fill our days with bitterness and anger that the picture will never be the same. Or we can hope for the picture of spring that will surely come if we let it.

I know there are good things on the horizon. Winter can’t last forever. If those things turn out to be less than we hoped, we will simply have to make whatever we get into something livable. Perhaps that is the secret to melting winter into spring. The challenge is to always carve out something beautiful from the icicle. There is joy in living, if we allow time in the winter to reassemble the thousand-piece puzzle.

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.”



Coping with the Holidays

by Dr. Bob Baugher

Holidays used to be a wonderful time of year. The death of your child may have changed much of the way you move through the last weeks of the year. In this article we will look at how bereaved parents coped during the months of November and December during the first few years following the death of their child.

As I've done in previous articles I called on parents and said, "I'm writing an article for TCF magazine about coping with the upcoming holidays. Looking back, what did you do that helped you through those rough two months?" Here's what they said.

On December 23rd four of us couples met at the cemetery where our children are buried and we had a short ceremony at each child's grave. We each brought a coffee can with a candle inserted in it and something to read such as a poem or letter to our child. We lit the candle, did our reading. In this way it signified that our child is with us. We leave

the candles and coffee cans and pick them up the next day. Years later it continues to feel good to look forward to taking this day out for our child—to honor our child. As we finish at the last grave we do a closing ceremony (such as holding hands or singing a song). Afterward we go out to dinner.

Perhaps you're not ready to do anything. Here is what a mother said:

What helped me during the holidays was absolutely refusing to smile and refusing to carry on the usual traditions. I did what was comfortable for me. My relatives didn't seem to like it; but I was a mess and just couldn't bring myself to do any sort of so-called "celebrating." The first year I actually stayed by myself. The second year I scheduled myself to work. This year I may either do volunteer work or head to Canada. Thanksgiving is great in Canada—no Thanksgiving!

Here is what a couple has done since their son died six years ago:

The first year I went to the mall to buy people things. I walked into the stores, looked at items, picked them up, and put them back. I walked out of store after store, frustrated. So, I didn't get anybody anything the first year. The next year I went to a craft store and bought a large candle, a little artificial tree, miniature lights, and decorations. We put the candle and tree in our kitchen, where we spend the majority of our time. The candle stays lit all day. Over the years we buy ornaments that remind us of our son. At holiday dinner, just before we eat, we each go around and say the name of a person who died. But we have learned to do it quick before the food gets cold. Then, as we're eating we say, "Remember when. . . ?" Sometimes our food gets a little salty, but it's worth it. It's like our son is there with us. The first time we did it a couple people were uncomfortable, but once they got into it, it was OK.

A mother whose daughter died eight years ago suggested the following:

A stocking is hung for each person in the family, including my daughter. Into her stocking family members write a note stating what she taught them. The notes are read after dinner. It is a wonderful way to talk about her life and acknowledge what she meant to us.

A couple whose son died four years ago shares their experience of the first three years:

During the first Christmas my daughter thought she would help by keeping me busy shopping for her three children. There I was pushing a cart with a gift list of toys and tears streaming down my cheeks. All I wanted to do was crawl in a hole and pull everything with me. I'm not sure how we made it though the holidays, but we eventually realized that things would never be as they were before. The other family members thought they were helping, but we had to decide for ourselves what was best. The second Christmas was the hardest. On Christmas Eve we went to church and to the cemetery and on Christmas day we delivered our gifts and spent the day alone. We were feeling sorry for ourselves, but that's all we felt we could do at the time. The next years we decided to do something for others. I called the nursing home and asked the director if they needed any help serving the holiday meal. She was very excited to have us. A few days before, we had our grandchildren over and instead of making cookies, we made table favors, including

cards, candy, and ribbons. On Christmas day we dressed in our Santa hats and headed to the nursing home. When we arrived, we were greeted with smiling, appreciative faces. We served their breakfast and many of the residents took us back to their rooms to see their gifts and family pictures. While honoring the memory of our son we forgot our grief that Christmas day.

In closing, let me leave you with some holiday stress-relievers:

1. There is not enough time for everything. Ask yourself, "What am I willing to give up?" and then, let them go.
2. Practice on saying "no" to the things you do not want to do. Here are versions of the same message: "No thanks." "I just can't." "I won't be doing it this year." "Sorry." Remember, when you say, "no" you don't have to give reasons.
3. Plan ahead. Make yourself sit down and write out your "Things to do" list. Then go through it and, as mentioned in #1, ask yourself, "What can I omit?" Also, arrange your list in priority fashion to put the most important things at the top of the list.
4. If you must purchase gifts, ask yourself, "How can I do this with the least amount of stress? For example, consider using the Internet, having someone else pick up the gifts, consider giving money or gift cards as gifts, or have a family lottery where each person picks a name from a hat and buys only that person a gift. Try one of these ideas this year as an experiment just to see how it works.
5. Start early. Pick a date to get done many of your obligations now. Don't put it off. Remember how crazy last minute stuff can be. You don't need any more craziness in your life.
6. Do not rely on your memory to keep track of things to do in your life. Presume you will forget things and write everything down.
7. Ask yourself, "How can I work smarter, not harder?"
8. And finally ask yourself, "In what ways do I wish to keep things the same and how do I want to change things?"

Continued on page 32

As you finish this article and begin to put it down, you might be saying to yourself, "Yes, there were a couple good ideas. I should do them some time." Quick! Capture the moment now! Tape this article up on your wall so that you will see it everyday as a reminder of helpful ways to get through the holidays. I'm willing to bet that your child would agree with me. So, get started, OK?

Regards,
Bob

P.S. Thanks to TCF parents Ann & Neal, Roger & Sue, Joyce, Susan, Denise & Mushroom

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.

Those we hold dear never truly leave us. They live on in the kindness they showed, and the love they brought into our lives. - Isabel Norton

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

Twins 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.



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. There are general bereavement sessions as well as more specific sessions:

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
Bereaved 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.

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/tcflossolongtermillness

TCF – Loss to Mental Illness

facebook.com/groups/tcflossmentallillness

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/tcflossomiscariagestillbirth

TCF – Miscarriage, Stillbirth, Loss of an Infant Grandchild

facebook.com/groups/miscariagestillbirthinfantgrandchild

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/tcfindinghopeforparents

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/

TCF STAFF

Shari O'Loughlin
Chief Executive Officer

Pamela Gabbay
Director of Operations and Training

Sara Zeigler
Communications Coordinator

Cathy Seehuetter
Director of Online Services

Joan Ireland
Administrative Assistant

Kathie Kelly
Receptionist

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Sibling Representative
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Ghislaine Thomsen
Houston, TX

Laura Trinkle
Manhattan, KS

Ann Walsh
St. Mary's, GA

Correspondence for The Compassionate Friends should be sent to:
The Compassionate Friends
48660 Pontiac Trail #930808
Wixom, MI 48393
877.969.0010

WE NEED NOT WALK ALONE

To have material considered for publication, send to: cathy@compassionatefriends.org

Editor
Cathy Seehuetter

Designer
Sara Zeigler

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We are excited to announce the dates for
Our 47th National Conference
July 12-14, 2024
in New Orleans, LA