



The
Compassionate
Friends

When our sibling
has died by suicide

**A nationwide organisation of bereaved parents
and their families offering support after a child dies.**

When our sibling has died by suicide

It is devastating when a sibling dies, particularly if their death was sudden. Your world has changed instantly and forever.

If they died by confirmed or suspected suicide you will likely be in a state of shock. You may feel a range of natural responses including intense sorrow, confusion, numbness or disbelief. At times you might feel overwhelmed by your thoughts and feelings, whereas at other times it might not feel real. You might question how you are going to cope with everything that is going on around you. We hope this leaflet written by others bereaved in this way will help.

Note: This leaflet is specifically about a sibling of any age who has died by suicide. We recommend you also read the leaflet *A sibling's grief* by the Compassionate Friends (TCF):

tcf.org.uk/siblinggriefleaflet

The worst has happened

Whether we were aware or not of any issues our sibling was dealing with, such as mental health issues, money problems, substance use or others, their death will most likely be a terrible shock.

People often describe the impact of sudden death as like an earthquake, where the ground beneath our feet shifts. There is a widespread shock wave across family and close friends which can put relationships under strain, as well as external stresses from legal processes involving police and social media.

At the centre of this turmoil is our sibling. We miss them. Perhaps we feel abandoned or angry. Perhaps we struggle with how they died and have terrible mental images. We may want to remember better times but struggle to do so.

We may also have additional concerns about how our parents are going to cope.

Our siblings

A sibling relationship is unique. Our sibling has been around us for much or even all of our life, and so the shared bond is strong. We shared in-jokes, secrets, arguments, childhood successes and challenges. As we grow and develop, some sibling relationships maintain a closeness while others drift apart due to differences in life choices and personalities.

In either case, and in any family, the loss of a sibling leaves a very specific hole in the dynamic. We may have lost a role model, or a younger sibling who looked up to us with reassurance. If our sibling had a birthday at a similar time of year or was our twin, we might feel that our future birthdays will no longer be a time of family celebration and joy as they will be overshadowed by the grief. This may be particularly poignant if our sibling was older and we reach the age they were when they died. We may also feel the loss of our own identity with our sibling.

Our life has changed forever.

What happens next

- Following sudden, unexplained death there is always a post-mortem and an investigation. The police will be involved.
- The coroner will usually open an inquest within days, but the actual inquest hearing might not take place until many months later. (In Scotland an inquest is called an investigation.)
- The funeral cannot take place until the coroner has given permission. This usually happens within a few weeks.
- The deceased's next of kin is legally responsible for arranging the funeral, burial or cremation. If your sibling was married or in a civil partnership, this will be their spouse. If not, and your parents are still living, they will be directly responsible. Either way, there is no guarantee that you will be invited to help with the arrangements. If this is something you want to do, you may need to speak up.

Suicide is sometimes seen as newsworthy. Local news outlets may publish articles following suicide. However, there is an Editors' Code of Practice which should protect your family from insensitive media intrusion.

Find out how to complain here: **[ipso.co.uk/complain](https://www.ipso.co.uk/complain)**

- The inquest is open to the public and might be attended by members of the press.

If you would like to know more about inquests and coping with legal proceedings, including managing media attention, visit this link:

[tcf.org.uk/legalhelp](https://www.tcf.org.uk/legalhelp)

Thoughts and feelings

It is normal to be experiencing a range of intense, complex emotions and upsetting thoughts. These can include sadness, anger, fear, anxiety and confusion. We might experience a mixture of these and they might be inconsistent. Many people describe grief as a rollercoaster of emotions.

Read more about the general impact of grief in these leaflets:

[tcf.org.uk/siblinggriefleaflet](https://www.tcf.org.uk/siblinggriefleaflet)

[tcf.org.uk/livingwithgrief](https://www.tcf.org.uk/livingwithgrief)

Grief due to suicide can also cause more specific emotional responses:

Guilt

“I think about my brother and wonder, how could I not see what he was going to do? Why didn’t I pay more attention?”

“I feel like, if only I could go back in time and try to sort out the problem, I might have been able to change things.”

Of all the types of bereavement, suicide is the one that leads to the most guilt. We might feel in some way responsible. There’s usually no reason for this, but we could feel guilty nonetheless, looking for any reason that we could be to blame. If we were aware of problems, perhaps around substance abuse, mental health problems, addiction or debt, we might blame ourselves for not being supportive or understanding. We might blame ourselves for not telling anyone else something that our sibling had confided to us.

Guilt is a normal response to grief but it can cause us to cut ourselves off from the kindness and support of others. We might feel unworthy of their compassion.

These are difficult feelings to work through. It can take a long time to see that nobody can control someone else's actions, including those of our dear sibling. It was simply not possible or desirable to be at their side every second of every day, watching over them. We could never 'cure' our sibling's emotional pain, however much we wish it. We loved them but we could not live their life for them.

Anger

“How could she leave me?! I feel she betrayed me.”

“When my dad died a few months later and then mum the following year, I couldn't help but blame that on my brother.”

“I was so angry that he'd let his life get out of control.”

Anger is a natural and common part of grief, but particularly so in the grief that follows suicide. Sometimes we may project it on other people, sometimes on ourselves, and sometimes even on our sibling. We may feel they have let us down or caused unnecessary pain for our parents.

Equally, we may be angry with our parents for decisions they made that we now look back on as being detrimental to our family. Perhaps we feel they failed to give the support our sibling needed.

As with guilt, these are difficult feelings to work through. Talking with someone who is somewhat removed, such as a counsellor, might help us. In some cases, honest conversations with parents are also needed.

Relief

“I knew that she was finally at peace but hated myself for feeling that way. While she was alive, there was always hope she’d get better.”

In the first days and weeks following our sibling’s death we may be shocked to find ourselves feeling moments of relief. Their death may have brought months or even years of upset and worry to an end. At the same time, we might feel incredibly guilty to be having such thoughts and feelings. In reality, we are not relieved that they have died, but we are relieved that they are no longer in pain, and there is nothing wrong with feeling this way.

Anxiety and fear

Our sibling’s suicide can make us anxious that we too could one day decide we’ve had enough. Perhaps we worry that there is some sort of familial or genetic link that would predispose ourselves or someone else in our family to die by suicide. If we have children of our own, this could be a particular worry. The fear of future loss can cause us to hold back from loving and caring for others, including a partner. If this is how we feel, it is worthwhile getting our fears out in the open in a safe space rather than letting them build inside.

Reflection and rumination

Our thoughts might go round and round in circles, as we try to figure out the elusive “why” our sibling died the way they did. But we cannot get inside the mind of another person, and even a note – if they left one – will not tell the whole story. There are probably many reasons and factors that led to this final act.

Although many of us do it, such rumination does not do us any good. When we are able, it can help instead to try to recall happy moments in our lives together. If our sibling's life was troubled, this might take searching through our memories, perhaps going back to early childhood.

It is not easy to stop these ruminating thoughts. Some of us find we need to access some professional support to help us to manage these thoughts differently.

Attitudes to suicide

Attempting suicide was a crime in the UK until 1961. Even today, it remains a crime in some parts of the world. (This is the origin of the phrase “committed suicide”. It is better to say “died by suicide”).

Someone who takes their own life is desperate for their pain to end. According to research, a person will have a kind of tunnel vision, whether or not they were suffering from a mental health condition. This means that they cannot truly comprehend the consequences for those they leave behind. This is often considered to be true, whether it was a planned act or on the spur of the moment.

There is no shame in being the sibling of someone who died by suicide, just as there would be no shame if they had died of cancer or in an accident. Let's try to remember them as a whole person – their unique personality and life story. Even someone who made poor life choices along the way will have had some redeeming qualities. All of this is more important than how they died.

“What helped me get through”

Taking time and making space to remember

Many of us find some comfort in remembrance activities, such as creating a photobook or visiting a place we both loved.

Interacting on social media

Social media can be a great place for remembering a sibling and for getting encouragement from our friends. It is not problem-free but generally, most people find social media is very useful.

Getting outside

Exercise is often helpful. Getting out into green spaces or by the sea can help us find moments of inner calm.

Doing something useful

Getting involved with a cause or raising money for a charity is a good way of honouring our sibling's memory. Being active in some way is a key for coping for many of us.

Taking a break

Our life wasn't always about our sibling while they lived, and nor should it be now. We don't have to think about them all of the time. Taking a break and doing other things is essential.

“I collected all of the photos since our baby days to the present and made a big collage.”

“Someone I know on social media told me that she had lost her dad to suicide. She became a good friend as she could understand what I was going through.”

“I started volunteering and I was glad to have an opportunity to help other people. It helped me too, as it gave my life a new meaning and I could see that I was making a positive difference.”

Spending time with friends

Friends can be invaluable in helping us cope with grief, particularly those who will listen without trying to 'fix' us and will be with us during our difficult moments. Some friends might offer us opportunities to take a break from grieving. It's okay to laugh and enjoy our time together. We need to keep living.

Avoiding triggers

Some things or people may make us feel worse. For instance, some films and programmes with storylines about suicide could be upsetting. Figuring out our own triggers and then avoiding them where possible is a good plan. The triggers may be more common in early grief but over time, we often learn to recognise and manage them better.

Making wise choices

It's not surprising if the painful shock of grief can lead to seeking solace in illegal substances, drugs or alcohol. However, in the long-term these do more harm than good. The same is true of impulsive, rash, risk-taking behaviour. We might feel like nothing matters anymore, but it does. There are people who care about us. We can still have a meaningful life despite our tragic loss. We deserve to be as happy as possible.

"I was pleased to get back to work after returning home for the funeral. Being busy helped."

"I did hit the bottle for a while but finally saw how futile it was."

"After her death, it took a long time to feel like my life had any value."

Finding someone appropriate who will listen

It's really important for our mental health to talk about what we are experiencing. Friends can be great, but they might not know how to respond, particularly if they haven't been through this type of bereavement themselves.

Talking with other people in similar circumstances can be very helpful. The Compassionate Friends (TCF) has a team of volunteers led by people who have lost siblings. We organise talks and retreats online and in person, and run a private Facebook group. We also have a helpline you can call. See the back page for details and visit: **[tcf.org.uk/siblings](https://www.tcf.org.uk/siblings)**

There are quite a few other charities that also offer listening support, by phone, chat or text. Some organise support groups.

- **SAMARITANS**

Call free on **116 123** or visit their website **[samaritans.org](https://www.samaritans.org)**

- **SURVIVORS OF BEREAVEMENT BY SUICIDE (SOBS)**

Visit their website **[uksobs.org](https://www.uksobs.org)**

- **SHOUT**

Free, 24/7 mental health text support in the UK – **text 85258** or visit their website **[giveusashout.org](https://www.giveusashout.org)**

- **CRUSECHAT**

Chat with a trained Bereavement Counsellor visit their website **[cruse.org.uk/get-support/crusechat](https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-support/crusechat)**

- **MIND**

The mental health charity. Visit their website **[mind.org.uk](https://www.mind.org.uk)**

- **PAPYRUS**

Helpline for those under 35 - **call 0800 0684141** or visit their website **[papyrus-uk.org](https://www.papyrus-uk.org)**

Some schools, colleges and workplaces have a counsellor or support system. They may also have areas where you can retreat to when you are having a hard day.

If it is getting too much...

If you are unable to eat or sleep, or are in any way overwhelmed in your grief, particularly if you are thinking of harming yourself, please don't try to manage this alone. Make an appointment with your GP or call any of the helplines listed on the previous page.

Relationships

Immediate family

Relationships of all types are often shaken by grief. It can be hard to watch a parent or sibling grieve alongside you as their reactions may be similar or very different.

If we have a partner, most of us will find that they are very caring and kind as they see what we're going through. However, it can be exhausting being around grief 24/7, and we may need to accept that they will sometimes need a break.

Siblings may have different responses to us as we all have different personalities. Also, their relationship with the sibling we have lost will inevitably be different.

Our parents may react in ways that are unexpected. For example, they might be unable to care in the same way for their other children, or they might become over-protective.

If we are now the only surviving sibling, we may notice our parents becoming dependent on us. This is even more likely if our parents are ageing or have care needs. We may have concerns about how the future will look.

It is worth mentioning that as a sibling, and therefore, a different generation to our parents, we may have a different outlook on how

to cope with grief. We may want to share our experience of having a sibling who has died by suicide, but not all parents will want this to be known outside of our immediate family circle. We might find ourselves torn between their wishes and the way we need to process our grief. An open conversation about this can be helpful if it is possible, but it might not solve the underlying issues.

If our family is blended, step-parents and step-siblings may have been less close to our sibling and so less able to understand what we are going through.

Friendships

Friendships can be difficult to maintain while we are grieving so acutely. In the beginning friends are often supportive and caring. Still, they can be unsure of how to respond if they have not experienced something similar. They may have expectations for us to 'get over it' quite soon.

Not all friendships survive the type of profound grief we are coping with. On the other hand, there may be other friends who were previously in the background that become more supportive in this time.

Other people

The subject of siblings might come up in general conversation. It is entirely up to us whether we mention what has happened or not.

Many people are uncomfortable around the subject of bereavement in general and suicide in particular, and do not know how to react. On the other hand, people can also be quite insensitive and even intrusive. Nobody should feel pressured to tell the details of how a loved one died. How much detail we share about our sibling's death is our own choice.

The journey ahead

Our sibling's death was like an earthquake. Our life has changed forever. Managing the intense rollercoaster of emotions and thoughts that follow our sibling's death is not easy, but it is possible. We will not always feel our grief so acutely; it will not always feel so raw. It might seem surprising to us in the early months, but eventually most of us find that we do adjust to this new reality.

We find strategies and activities that keep us occupied and are beneficial to our state of mind. We might do relaxation exercises or get out into green spaces; maybe we will take up new hobbies or volunteer for a charity. Taking up a non-demanding, repetitive activity can help calm our minds, or we might find solace in music or in spiritual activities.

We are never the same after our sibling's death, nor would we want to be. We have lost someone we shared a vital part of our life with. We have the rest of our lives to spend without our sibling. If we choose, we can in some ways shape our lives to honour them, while at the same time, living our own lives. They will forever be our sibling and have a place in our heart.

Further reading

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) has published a range of leaflets on different aspects of grief following the death of a child. Although written for parents, the following titles could also be relevant for siblings:

- *Living with grief*
- *Prolonged and intense grief*
- *Coping with judgemental attitudes*
- *Coping with other people's reactions*
- *Remembering our child (leaflet and handbook)*

TCF leaflets can be read and downloaded at this link:

[tcf.org.uk/leaflets](https://www.tcf.org.uk/leaflets)

Printed copies are available from the office, free of charge for bereaved parents (see contact details on the back page).



The
**Compassionate
Friends**

Call our National Helpline

0345 123 2304

*The helpline is open from 10am - 4pm and 7pm - 11pm every day.
Calls are always answered by a parent whose child has died.*

Email our National Helpline

helpline@tcf.org.uk

For more information and support visit

tcf.org.uk

Find us on social media

 **@tcf.org.uk**

 **@TCFcharityUK**

 **@thecompassionatefriendsuk**

General enquiries


0345 120 3785

info@tcf.org.uk

TCF library

0345 120 3785

library@tcf.org.uk



*Remembering Max -
Friend, son, brother
Climber, guitarist, Iron Maiden lover...*