# The Compassionate Friends of Metrowest

# N E W S L E T T E R

*The mission of The Compassionate Friends is to assist families in the positive resolution of grief following the death of a child and to provide information to help others be supportive.*

## *Special Edition*



## YOU ARE INVITED

The Compassionate Friends - Metrowest Chapter meets twice a month. Evenings on the third Tuesday from 7:30 pm to 9:30 pm in the library of St. Mary's Parish Center, Route 16, Washington St., Holliston. The parish center is located between the church and the rectory.

The afternoon sharing meetings will be held on the last Tuesday of the month. We will meet in the parish center of St. Mary of the Assumption Church in Milford. ***Please call Ed or Joan Motuzas at (508) 473-4239 by the last Monday or earlier if you plan to attend.***
***Directions....***On Route 16 (East Main St.) going north through downtown Milford (Main St.) at Store 24 on the left, take a left at the lights onto Winter St. The parish center is the last building before the church.
Going south on Route 16 (East Main St.) after Sacred Heart Church on the left. Bear right on Main St., continue past Dunkin' Donuts on the right, proceed to the next set of lights and take a right onto Winter St. There is parking on both sides of the street. Look for Compassionate Friends signs to meeting room.

## WHO ARE WE?

The Compassionate Friends is a nonprofit, nonsectarian, mutual assistance, self-help organization offering friendship and understanding to bereaved parents and siblings.

Our primary purpose is to assist the bereaved in the positive resolution of the grief experienced upon the death of a child and to support their efforts to achieve physical and emotional health.

The secondary purpose is to provide information and education about bereaved parents and siblings for those who wish to understand. Our objective is to help members of the community, including family, friends, employers, co-workers, and professionals to be supportive.

Meetings are open to all bereaved parents and siblings. No dues or fees are required to belong to the Metrowest Chapter of The Compassionate Friends.

## *A Very Special Newsletter*

This newsletter is special in that it is only sent out to ***parents who have experienced the death of an infant or a stillborn.***
The intent of this newsletter is to get information to parents that will help them cope with these new and profound feelings that are very hard to understand upon the death of a child. Other newsletters will follow and you may want to attend our meetings when you feel ready.

### *The Compassionate Friends Credo*

We need not walk alone. We are The Compassionate Friends. We reach out to each other with love, with understanding, and with hope.

The children we mourn have died at all ages and from many different causes, but our love for them unites us. your pain becomes my pain, just as your hope becomes my hope.

We come together from all walks of life, from many different circumstances. We are a unique family because we represent many races, creeds, and relationships. We are young, and we are old. Some of us are far along in our grief but others still feel a grief so fresh and so intensely painful that they feel helpless and see no hope.

Some of us have found our faith to be a source of strength, while some of us are struggling to find answers. Some of us are angry, filled with guilt or in deep depression, while others radiate an inner peace, but whatever pain we bring to this gathering of The Compassionate Friends, it is pain we will share, just as we share with each other our love for the children who have died.

We are all seeking and struggling to build a future for ourselves, but we are committed to building a future together. We reach out to each other in love to share the pain as well as the joy, share the anger as well as the peace, share the faith as well as the doubts, and help each other to grieve as well as to grow.
We need not walk alone.

**We are The Compassionate Friends. ©2013**

## *Chapter Information*

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The Compassionate Friends has a national office that supports and coordinates chapter activities. The national office can be reached as follows:

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**Chapter Web Page**
**www.tcfmetrowest.com**

### *What Should I Expect?*

When a grieving family member first attends a TCF meeting, they may be so full of emotional pain that they can only sit and listen. To talk might require more emotional composure and energy than they currently possess. Others, fresh in their grief and quite possibly still residing in shock, might choose to talk non-stop; others may choose to hide their tears and actually find ways to joke about life. All of those ways are considered normal and acceptable. But, either way, talking or listening, laughing or crying, dialogue with other families who know and understand what you are going through will eventually be of extraordinary benefit.

Sometimes parents attend a couple of meetings of The Compassionate Friends hoping for a ninety-minute miracle. Then when the pain remains, or actually becomes more intense as it surfaces, they decide not to attend any more meetings, where painful memories might evoke tears. Sometimes the newly bereaved just don't have enough physical energy to attend a meeting. They struggle just to make it through the day. Others assume the mistaken belief that if you just don't dwell on it, it will get better with time. These parents may try to force the grief down deep inside, and some people carry the unexpressed pain inside for years, where it continues to simmer and fester until it manifests in serious physical consequences.

Unresolved grief does not go away. It can be eased or masked for a time with drugs, and often a parent turns to tranquilizers, anti-depressants, or other medicinal chemicals with unknown risk, seeking permanent relief from the emotional devastation. But true healing occurs through a long process involving time, love and understanding of others, and by acknowledging, discussing and ultimately learning to accept all the feelings and experiences which surrounded your loss.

It takes inordinate courage to confront the Demon of Death and the loss of a child. It also requires a certain amount of love and care for your fellow human beings to continue to share with other newly bereaved. But ultimately, when we decide to walk this walk with The Compassionate Friends, the love and support we offer to one another, as together we travel the road to healing, brings comfort, strength, understanding and finally, a newfound sense of purpose in our life. We are not alone, and by truly caring for one another we can help each other go way beyond "just surviving," or "getting over it." We are truly sorry for your loss and we extend ourselves to you with compassion and love.

***Sharon Steffke***
***TCF, Downriver One Heart Chapter, MI***

# THE SIBLING CORNER

**This page is dedicated to siblings together adjusting to grief thru encouragement & sharing**

## *The Sibling Credo*

The Compassionate Friends. We are brought together by the deaths of our brothers and sisters. Open your hearts to us, but have patience with us. Sometimes we will need the support of our friends. At other times we need our families to be there. Sometimes we must walk alone, taking our memories with us, continuing to become the individuals we want to be. We cannot be our dead brother or sister; however, a special part of them lives on with us. When our brothers and sisters died, our lives changed. We are living a life very different from what we envisioned, and we feel the responsibility to be strong even when we feel weak. Yet we can go on because we understand better than many others the value of family and the precious gift of life. Our goal is not to be the forgotten mourners that we sometimes are, but to walk together to face our tomorrows as surviving siblings of The Compassionate Friends.

***BY SIBLINGS***
***From the Young Adult Group,***
***TCF, Albany/Delmar Chapter, NY***

## *How Kids Grieve*

Two years ago my brother-in-law died unexpectedly of a pulmonary embolism. He was just 40, and he left behind two young children and his wife, my husband's sister. Our family was dazed with shock and grief, barely able to function. How could we explain to our three-year-old daughter what had happened, when just days before she had been tumbling around our living room with her cousins and Uncle Emil?

I must have stumbled through some sort of explanation, although I can't recall the words I used. I do remember thinking that I was doing it all wrong. Everything I said seemed false or incomplete or too frightening for a toddler.

I now know I wasn't alone in feeling this way. Death, according to several experts, has replaced sex as the topic parents have the hardest time discussing with their children.

**"How do we tell the kids?"**

"The main thing is to keep it simple and the younger the child, the simpler your explanation should be," says John Schowalter, M.D., professor of pediatrics and psychiatry at the Yale Child Study Center, in New Haven, Connecticut. "It's important to use the correct vocabulary," adds Helen Fitzgerald, coordinator of The Grief Program at the Mount Vernon Center for Community Mental Health, in Alexandria, Virginia. Avoid 'she expired or we lost him. Use the real words: dead, funeral, cancer, heart attack, or AIDS. You might say, for example, Grandma had a very bad heart attack and died.

**Encourage their questions.**

After telling your child the facts, as briefly and honestly as possible, it is best to turn the floor over to her. Ask whether there is anything she wants to know. Don't be concerned if she does not respond right away. "As is true with sex and other emotionally charged areas, the discussion often works best if you give your child time to think and then to ask questions. Make it clear that she's free to come back to you later," says Schowalter.

Although parents tend to think that they should "be strong" when they deliver the bad news, so as not to frighten or upset their child, experts agree that crying in front of your child is both normal and healthy. "We should allow ourselves to be human. This is not easy to do. We can tell our children that we hurt a great deal when someone dies. Even if we can't find the right words, we can say that we aren't thinking as clearly as we would like because of our sadness," suggests Phyllis Silverman, Ph.D., an associate in social welfare in the Department of Psychiatry at Massachusetts General Hospital, in Boston, and principal investigator in an ongoing study of child bereavement.

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"Younger children may not be able to understand the full range of feelings and emotions that adults or older children have. With an older child, it may be possible to share some of the feelings you have and to invite her into a dialogue. Together, then both parent and child can develop a better understanding of what's happening."

John W. James, who founded the Grief Recovery Institute in Los Angeles in 1981 after a son died, wholeheartedly agrees. "The most helpful thing adults can do for children is to be emotionally honest about their own feelings," he says. It's not always easy to be emotionally honest, however, because most of us have been coached since childhood to keep a stiff upper lip and to go to our rooms to cry. "A child who sees this immediately thinks there must be something wrong with crying," James continues. "If, on the other hand, we could just stand in the kitchen and cry, our children could come up and ask, 'What's wrong?' We could then say, 'Grandpa just died and I'm very sad.' Then you have the beginnings of an emotionally honest conversation about grief."

**"Mommy, what's 'dead'?"**

After stumbling through telling my daughter that Uncle Emil had died, I learned that children's simplest questions can be the hardest to answer. Rebecca's was "Mommy, what's 'dead'?" I hesitantly said something about not breathing and hearts not beating, feeling hopelessly inadequate for this terrible task. "I think that's all you need to say," Silverman affirms. Dead is when all functions stop, you don't breathe, you can't see. Grief counselor Helen Fitzgerald describes a simple yet powerful game she used with one group of five-to twelve-year-olds. I started by saying, I'm alive, I can stomp my feet, she says. The kids got into this immediately, saying things like, I'm alive, I can cross my eyes, and even some gross and silly things like, I'm alive. I can pick my nose. Then, after we'd gone around the room, I said, When all of that is gone, that is what dead is, at least as we know it here on this earth. It got really quiet for a few minutes. They weren't upset; they were just letting it sink in.

**"Is she in heaven?"**

Whether or not religious beliefs enter into the discussion with your child is entirely up to you.

" Parents should simply tell their children what they believe," says Elizabeth Weller, M.D., director of child and adolescent psychiatry at Ohio State University, in Columbus, Ohio. "You shouldn't tell children about life after death if you don't believe in it yourself. It's also fine to simply say, 'some people believe this and some people believe that, but I don t really know what happens.

That's the approach Phyllis Silverman took with her own child. When my son was five, he asked what happens after people die," she recalls. "I told him that I didn't really know, that some people believe nothing happens, the body returns to nature and nourishes the soil and we live on in people's memories. Some people believe we go to heaven and they see heaven in a very concrete way. And others simply believe that in some way the spirit lives on. My son thought for a while, and then said, 'I think I believe that somehow your soul lives on.' And that was the end of it. That was all he needed to hear."

Fitzgerald, who has a new book out called The Grieving Child (Fireside) adds one caveat: "I think we have to be careful about such comments as, God loved her so much he took her, as if God goes around zapping people and they're gone." Schowalter agrees it can be confusing. If you've been told that Grandpa has gone to heaven and that heaven is a wonderful place, then why are all of these people crying? Of course, Grandpa is still missed in this life, and it may help to explain that to your child.

**When can children really understand death?**

Children ask questions; parents try to answer. But just how old does a child have to be for the reality of death to truly sink in?

John Schowalter says, "People argue about this, but it's probably somewhere around age ten that death is understood to be irreversible. Of course, there are no hard-and-fast rules. There are some five-year-olds who will not have a hard time grasping death in its true sense, that death is a one-way trip, that you go and never come back," says Weller. Adds Silverman, I do think kids understand much earlier than we realize, especially if they've had an experience with an actual death. This doesn't mean that ten minutes later they won't ask, 'When's Papa coming back?' but I think that's a kind of reality testing."

**How much it hurts.**

How deeply a child will be affected by a death depends on several factors other than age.

Losing a grandmother who lives down the street, a close school friend, or a cousin who plays with the child every weekend is likely to be felt deeply.

On the other hand, if the child has not had a significant relationship with the person who died, she may not feel the loss intensely, notes John James.

Older children, however, may have a strong reaction to the death of a relative they weren't close to. They may feel sadness that the chance to know that person, and to have that person know them, is gone.

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**Children's secret fears.**

A few months after the death of her great grandmother, and about a year after her Uncle Emil died, my daughter, Rebecca, dropped a bombshell. "Is it almost time for Daddy to die?" she asked quite matter-of-factly as I drove her to nursery school one sunny spring day.

"What? Good grief, of course not!" I sputtered.

Had I said the right thing? How could I promise my child that our family would be spared, when tragedy had struck so close to home?

"You might have said, 'Daddy is very healthy, and he and I will do everything we can to stay that way. We are probably going to live a long time, until you are all grown up," says Helen Fitzgerald. "You could say it's rare that someone as young as Uncle Emil dies."

Weller suggests pointing out that "not all daddies die" and mentioning some friends whose families are intact. She adds that it's very common for children to worry that someone close to them, of the same sex and age as the deceased, will also die.

There are several other fears that these experts say are common after a death has occurred:

• A child may worry that somehow she made the person die. "You have to give a lot of reassurance that thoughts and words don't kill," says Fitzgerald. If a child has thought about getting rid of a pesky cousin, or told her grandfather in a fit of anger that she wished he were dead, and that person dies soon afterward, the child may hold herself responsible.

• Death, darkness, and sleep also seem to be universally linked. "Darkness is a time when children fear someone's going to come and get them, and anthropomorphically speaking, death does come and get you," says Schowalter.

• "Since death might be thought of as the ultimate punishment, the idea of death as retribution for bad actions or thoughts is very common," adds Schowalter. A child may, then, ask what the dead person did wrong or whether he was bad. The child may worry that he's going to die too, since all kids know they've done some pretty bad things in their time.

• Older children worry about their own deaths, Weller comments. She recommends saying something like, "It is true that someday everybody will die. But usually death is due to the aging process or a serious illness, and you are still very young and healthy."

**Helping children handle complicated feelings.**

How can we know if a child is harboring one or another of these fears?

Sometimes it's obvious. "Often if a child does not master the process of understanding this complicated issue, he will bring the subject up over and over again," says Weller. "The parents might think, 'Oh my god, is this child obsessed? But he is just trying to make sense of what happened."

Other children will suddenly start playing funeral, hospital, or car crash. "This doesn't mean they are cruel or that they are having fun with a subject that causes the rest of us pain," says Weller. "Play is the work of childhood. Through it all, they try to understand and master what we teach them."

Talking is often a good way for children to sort through issues they don't understand, although some children just aren't comfortable talking about feelings. "The easiest way to help your child to talk is for you to go first," suggests John James. You might start by saying, "l really feel bad that I never told Grandpa how much fun I had when we went to that basketball game together," and then ask, "Is there anything you wish you had said—or hadn't said—to him?" Having your child write a letter to his grandfather and then read it either at the grave or to a photograph of him can help lay this type of nagging regret to rest.

Helen Fitzgerald suggests getting younger children to draw "something they wish they'd done differently. If something's making a child feel bad and she can't get it out, it becomes a deep, dark secret."

Books can help too. One that Fitzgerald uses in her kids' bereavement groups is The Tenth Good Thing About Barney (Aladdin Books), about a child who counts the reasons he loved his dead cat. "I read that a lot," she says, "and then I ask the children to think of ten things about the person who died, but I do tell them that the things don't all have to be good. Not all memories are happy. It's a relief for children to know that it's okay to remember the not so great stuff too."

**What about the funeral?**

Funerals are an important way of paying respect and saying good-bye to someone when he dies, what experts term a "conclusionary ritual." But how can a parent know whether this ceremony will be good for a child or too frightening and upsetting?

"There's a wide diversity of opinion about this," says John Schowalter. "In studies I've done, I've found that children under nine or ten tended to be quite disturbed about funerals, but only if they were forced to go.

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It is my feeling that the decision should be left to them. If your child doesn't want to go, she should not be made to feel that she is abandoning anyone or doing something wrong." If your child does want to go, she needs to know what she's getting into. You need to tell her, briefly what's going to happen, whether there will be a casket present, for example, and whether it will be open or closed. Be sure to tell her that people will be crying, even Mom and Dad, because they're sad. Then answer any questions, keeping it simple, advises Fitzgerald. Also let your child know that she can leave the service at any time if she needs to.

Taking your child to the burial is even more problematic, according to Schowalter. "For the child who is not really sure that dead people are going to stay dead, and again, this tends to mean younger than age ten or so, seeing someone put in the ground in a box and covered with dirt is a lot to handle."

Cremation can seem awfully frightening, although Fitzgerald comments that the children she has counseled have no particular trouble with the concept, as long as it's presented sensitively and simply, with additional details provided only as asked for. If a young child is attending only a memorial service, you may not need to broach the topic at all. Older children and those who are exposed to the planning of a cremation, tend to be interested in how it's done ("in a large kiln, lined with fireproof bricks so that intense heat causes the body to become ashes); what the ashes look like afterward ("light gray flour, about the size of a five pound bag"); and what will be done with them.

If a child decides against going to the funeral, then later regrets her decision, reassure her that at the time, she made the best decision. "You might then arrange a special ceremony," suggests Fitzgerald. This could be something as simple as a poem read at church, or flowers and a letter taken to the grave.

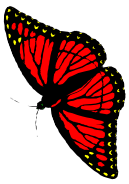
Sometimes a simple ceremony of the child's own devising can be particularly fitting. Fitzgerald mentions one that the children in her group came up with:

"Yesterday each of them wrote a message on a silver helium balloon to the person who had died. We picked a spot in the parking lot, under a tree, and planned a very simple ceremony. We all held the string, counted to three, and, as we let the balloon go, said together, 'We sure hope this gets to you!' We watched the balloon until we could no longer see it." Of course, she says, "we had talked about how the balloon couldn't really get to the people we wrote to, but also how doing stuff like this makes us feel better anyway. And it did."

*Jennifer Cadoff is a free-lance writer specializing in health and family issues and is the mother of two preschoolers.*

***Jennifer Cadoff***
***From Parents Magazine, April 1993***

## *Men Do Cry*



I heard quite often "men don't cry"
Though no one ever told me why
So when I fell and skinned a knee
No one came to comfort me.

And when some bully boy at school
Would pull a prank so mean or cruel
I'd quickly learn to turn and quip
"It doesn't hurt" and bite my lip.

So as I grew to reasoned years
I learned to stifle any tears.
Though "Be a big boy" it began
Quite soon I learned to "Be a man."

And I could play that stoic role
While storm and tempest wracked my soul.
No pain nor setback could there be
Could wrest one single tear from me.

Then one long night I stood nearby
And helplessly watched my son die
And quickly found to my surprise
That all that tearless talk was lies.

And still I cry and have no shame
I cannot play that "big boy" game.
And openly without remorse
I let my sorrow take its course.

So those of you who can't abide
A man you've seen who's often cried
Reach out to him with all your heart
As one whose life's been torn apart.

For men do cry when they can see
Their loss of immortality.
And tears will come in endless streams
When mindless fate destroys their dreams.

***Ken Falk***
***TCF, NW Connecticut Chapter***

*The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen, nor touched, but are felt in the heart ~*

***Helen Keller***

## *The Grief of a Parent Who Has Lost an Infant*

To experience the loss of an infant is to grieve for what never was. After all the months of anticipation and preparation, the actual birth of a child brings the feeling of hope and fulfillment. Should that child be stillborn, or die hours, days or even months later, the unrealized dreams become a source of pain for the parents. No parent expects to outlive his child; the death of an infant is often the loss of a child unknown even to the parents. The expected stages of grief (guilt, disbelief, anger, etc.) can have new directions for the parents who have lost an infant.

**1. Shame and guilt.** Especially if the infant was stillborn or had a birth defect, the mother may feel she has failed as a woman. "Other women have live, normal babies, why can't I?" Should an infant die months after birth, parents find it hard to resolve feelings that it was their fault.

**2. No memories.** Parents may only have "souvenirs of an occasion" (birth certificate, ID bracelet) by which to remember their child. If the infant is older, they may have pictures and a few belongings, but they still feel they hadn't really gotten to know their child.

**3. Loneliness in grief.** It is hard for friends and relatives to share your grief for a child they never knew. If the child is a newborn they may give the impression that you are grieving unnecessarily over a non-person. They hope that you can "forget this baby" and "have another one."

**4. Neglected father.** Too often the sympathies of professionals and friends are directed mainly to the mother. It is important to remember that the father had made plans for this baby too.

**5. Mothers vs. fathers.** Since the mother has bonded with her child all during pregnancy, her grief may be much deeper than the father who only came to know this child after birth. It may be difficult for a father to understand why his wife's grief is so profound and so prolonged.

***Claire McGauhey and Sue Shelley***
***TCF, St. Louis, MO***

*The only feelings that do not heal are the ones you hide.*

***Henri Nouveau***

## *Miscarriage—The Unrecognized Tragedy*

Though it's been almost three years since I experienced a miscarriage, it still evokes painful memories. My husband and I had two healthy daughters at the time and were eagerly anticipating the arrival of our third child. The little one was to complete our family.

But at 18 weeks gestation, things went awry, and we lost our wee son. I remember experiencing an overwhelming feeling of emptiness as I left the hospital without our baby. Denial, then shock, sadness and anger caused anguish over the "whys?" and "what ifs?" It wasn't long before I found out how miscarriage may be trivialized as an insignificant occurrence.

My physician, who had not been present when I delivered the baby, confronted me a few hours later. "It was a boy," I sobbed. "Oh," she remarked in an offhanded way, "I didn't see it." I vividly remember my anger toward her nonchalant manner and the way she referred to him as an "it." *Don't you know that was our baby, our little son?,* I thought. *Please don't minimize our loss.*

"You have other children at home, don't you?" she continued. *Yes,* I was screaming inside, *but don't you realize that each child is unique and special in his or her own right? Having two at home doesn't in any way lessen the sorrow I feel for this baby.* "Go home and enjoy your summer," she added later. "You can start trying again in another three months." Enjoy my summer?! This miscarriage had literally knocked me off my feet. There I was, an adult mother of two, reduced to tears whenever I saw a pregnant woman or new baby. (They seemed to be everywhere I went!) There was no denying the intense emotions I felt. My husband and daughters, as well, were trying to deal with the loss in their individual ways. Even though I tried, it was not an enjoyable summer. Life didn't automatically revert back to normal.

Yet my heartache was misunderstood not only by my physician, but by others as well. I was given the impression that it was inappropriate and even abnormal to be mourning. There was a conflict between the way I actually felt and the way society expected me to feel. I began to think I must be losing it.

Fortunately, I had a deep need to find out all I could about miscarriage. I read avidly, attended support group meetings and talked to other women who had been through a similar experience.

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I was relieved to find out that my reactions were healthy and normal. Until then, I didn't know that I was going through the grieving process. The tears, along with the questioning, the heart-to-heart talks with my family and friends, and the memorial service to say goodbye to our baby all helped me to heal.

A loss is a loss. Just because it's named "miscarriage" doesn't mean that it's insignificant. Nothing has ever affected me so deeply.... Though the deep sorrow I felt has since subsided, I realize that I'll never completely "get over" him. There are still times that I long to hold our son, to watch him grow, to love him.... I know I'll never forget.

***Sara Winslow, Bereavement Magazine, Colorado Springs, CO***
grief@bereavementmag.com

### *How Many Children Do You Have?*

How many children do you have? A simple, innocent question, but one a bereaved parent struggles with.

If we don't include our children who died when we answer the question, we feel as if we are denying their existence. One mother told me that she cried for hours because she told someone she had no children (her two children had been killed earlier that year).

If we do include our deceased children when we answer, somehow we fear the response or discomfort that is felt by the person hearing the news.

For the bereaved parent, there is really no "right" answer to this question. We must respond the way our heart and the situation dictates. We should not fear how the person we are talking to feels about the truth. We should only be concerned with how we feel at the moment we are telling it. We need to be considerate of our own feelings and, if the situation is such that we do not include our children who have died in the answer, that's okay, too . . . because we may be at a point in our grief that doing so may be painful.

We are the only ones who need to be pleased with our response!!

***Pat Loder***
***TCF, Lakes Area Chapter, MI***

### *A Word About Closure*

I don't use the word "closure" anymore. For years I thought it was a good way to express what happens to us at various times during our grief journey. I would often tell about the importance of viewing the loved one by saying viewing gives reality and closure.

I live in Oklahoma City. The general feeling here was that the survivors of the bombing would find closure when the trial was over. The ending of the trial was supposed to be some kind of magical day that would bring relief to the pain. The survivors walked out of the courtroom saying, "Don't mention the word closure to us. This does not close anything."

Closure conjures up the idea of healing or moving past. It sounds like some magic moment that happens and the grieving is over. A moment that closes the door to a bad time in our lives and we do not have to think about it anymore. I no longer think there are any magic moments in grief. Grief is a process—a long slow process. There are events that are memorable, but they don't take the pain away. There are times of healing, but the process must still go on.

Closure also sounds like getting well. We do not "get well." A chunk has been bitten out of our hearts and it is not going to grow back. We do not get well. We move toward turning the corner in the way we cope. We live again, but we live again because we learn to cope with the chunk of our hearts that is gone.

We don't have closure. We have times of growing reality. Reality does not come all at once. We must gradually come to grips with our loss. We go through a time of "real but not real." We know it has happened, but we still think it is a dream and we will soon awaken. Reality develops gradually through many experiences.

It grows in those times when we face a little bit more of our loss, and reality becomes more vivid. Viewing a loved one, the funeral, the first visit to the cemetery, cleaning out the closets, cleaning out the room, all of these are steps toward reality and toward coping.

They are not some final step. They are not the closing of a door nor opening of a new door. They are just tiny steps toward deciding to live again and learning to cope.

***Doug Manning***
***Author of "Please Don't Take my Grief Away"***

"It has been said that time heals all wounds.
I do not agree.
The wounds remain.
In time the mind, protecting its sanity, covers them with scar tissue and the pain lessens,
but it's never gone." ~

***Rose Kennedy***

### *The Choice to Heal: The Five Insights*

Several years ago it became apparent to me that I was stuck in "recovering" from my son's death. Nicholas contracted leukemia in 1986 and battled the disease for nearly three years before his death in 1989.

Seven years later, in 1996 it seemed there was no place for me to go with the continued feelings of grief, feelings which included sadness, frustration, and guilt. This was not my daily experience, but it came on periodically and occasionally crippled my ability to engage in life and work. While this was taking place I was also studying about family emotional systems process with Rabbi Ed Friedman and so I presented him with this problem. His immediate response was to suggest that I enter more deeply into my family, and somewhere in my family I would find the direction to move so I would no longer be stuck in my grief.

Armed with this conviction, my wife and I headed to Florida in March of 1996 for several days of golf and fun with my parents. In the seven years since Nicholas had died, no one in our circle of family and friends took his death as hard as my parents. They continuously called Zachary, our second son, "Nicholas" and struggled to move forward, themselves, with this tragic loss.

My decision was made; I'd talk to my Dad. So on the golf course one day, enjoying the beautiful sunshine and warm temperatures, I shared my struggle with him and asked how he dealt with Nick's death. His answer surprised me, but also became the cornerstone on which I continue to deal with Nick's death today. "Son," he said, "I get up each morning, sit down at my desk, and open the drawer where I have a picture of Nick. I say, 'you bugger.' I think of how much I miss him, how grateful I am for him, and then I give him into God's hands…every day." His comment afforded me one of those moments in grief recovery where insight leads to deeper healing.

The first insight was this: I was stuck because I held to the belief that grieving has a finish line while we are alive. In reality, the only end to the pain we feel over the death of our children is our own death. The intensity subsides over time, as do other characteristics of grieving, but there is no day on which we can say we are done grieving the death of our children. While we hold to the joyful memories of our children who died, we also hold to the pain of the loss that comes from the fact that they died. Efforts to live outside that pain prove futile and frustrating.

Even when you and I have worked our way through the pain to the "other side," the path we traveled leaves a clear road mark and an indelible imprint on our psychological, intellectual, emotional and spiritual memory.

There is no going back, but there is no finish line either. The experience, with all its emotional components, remains with us all our lives. So, instead of looking for a finish line, I adopted my dad's strategy and looked at recovery from Nick's death as a 24-hour experience. There was no knowing what I'd be like three days, three months or three years from then. In fact, the future looked overwhelming. Instead, I started putting Nick in God's keeping for another day, and only one day. As I gave Nick to God, so I gave my grief to God, thereby inviting healing. Whether God is or is not in the equation for you, the key for me was realizing recovery was a 24-hour experience and when broken into daily bites became manageable.

The second insight was this: I was stuck because of holding to the belief that acceptance meant that the experience of Nicholas would make rational sinse. It didn't then and it doesn't now. Nearly 11 years later, the death of a child still does not make sense to me. But the reality of children dying isn't for me to understand: it is for me to accept. Acceptance does not mean there is a rational explanation for why a child dies nor that I must like the reality. It simply means that the death of a child is a part of life and a part of my life. Acceptance means that the events of this fine boy's life actually did take place and I was a participant and witness to them. Acceptance means that life has moved on and will continue to move on with or without me. Acceptance means that no, time does not stop when our world comes shattering down from the death of a child. O that it would, but it does not. Acceptance is looking back and embracing what happened in order to look forward and move on.

The third insight was this: the fact the picture was in a place that my dad visited every day inspired me to keep pictures of Nicholas in a place where I would remember him every day…and enjoy remembering him. We can keep our departed children close through the wonder of photography and other items that remind us of them. My dad struck a unique balance between those who set aside large spaces for remembrance and those who set aside no space for remembrance at all. If needed, he knew where to go in his house to be close to Nick and, therefore, to a package of complete memories.

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Nick had and still has a place in his emotional and spiritual home. This is highlighted daily by being able to look at his picture. Not only does Nick have a physical space, but also a space in memory. We become unstuck when we structure the means to keep the memory of our departed children close. This varies from person to person, but keeping physical reminders nearby encourages us to keep emotional, spiritual and mental image memories nearby and accessible as well.

The fourth insight was this: gratitude for the life of Nicholas helped muster movement against the forces of being stuck in grief. John Claypool tells a story in his book Mending the Heart about the time in his life six weeks after the death of his daughter from leukemia. He could not sleep, got up and went to read the story in Genesis 22 about Abraham and Isaac. As he read the commentary he was amazed to learn that this story of Abraham and Isaac was a story of God reminding Abraham of the gift he had received and from whom the gift came. Claypool says that from that night forward he came to see his daughter's life, though shorter than he wished, as a gift which he did not deserve and for which he desired to give gratitude. Gratitude is difficult in the midst of feeling cheated and deprived by death. However, gratitude overcomes tremendous pain and can move even the most stuck bereaved parent to new places of recovery and joy.

The final insight was this: healing and recovery call for us to make a decision, to answer the question, "Do I want to get better or not?" One can argue that grief recovery is more complicated than answering this question. But grief recovery concerns the direction we point ourselves day in and day out. If we wish to get better we need to encourage ourselves and point ourselves that way every day; we need to surround ourselves with bereaved parents who have healed and found meaning in life again; we need to realize that no one can point us towards the healing we desire except ourselves. Ironically, the times in our lives when we least feel like making decisions are the times when we need to make them: Seek healing? Stay stuck? Recover? Die ourselves? Sometimes it does come to such simple decisions as these. When I studied churches that had experienced trauma, those that recovered had one principle characteristic in common: someone stood up and, from a position of leadership said,

"We are going to heal and grow from this experience and embrace a new future." Most often the leader said this before knowing what direction recovery would go nor who would help. They sought, as best they could, to point the ship in a direction that gave them the best chance of re-engaging life; choosing to get better.

Of all the insights given to me by my dad that day, this last one continues to be the most effective. Grief stays with us for a lifetime…as long as we have our minds we cannot escape from the experience of what took place. However, each day we can point ourselves towards the vision we hold of recovery and have the faith that one day we will get there.

*Fr. Alvin Johnson has served as an Episcopal Priest for over 20 years. In 1989 he and his wife Vickie became bereaved parents when their first child, Nicholas, died after a long battle with leukemia. Nicholas is survived by a sister Hannah and a brother Zachary. Fr. Johnson currently serves as Rector of St. Michael's Episcopal Church in Barrington, Illinois. He recently received his Doctor of Ministry degree in Congregational Studies focusing on the comparisons between how congregations and families recover from trauma. Fr. Johnson has spoken often at Compassionate Friends meetings and was a keynote speaker at the 23rd national TCF conference held in Chicago.*

***Alvin C. Johnson, Jr.***
***In Memory of my son Nicholas***

### *9 Months*

9 MONTHS!....9 whole months since that Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day!!

Several people have compared it to the 9 months of pregnancy, those happy months of anticipation before Jason was born. Yesterday things kept coming to mind, so here is my list of comparisons.

When I found out I was pregnant with Jason the excitement ran high. I had not told Stan I was hoping because we had been disappointed many times before. After the test at the clinic, I found Stan to share the news. We were elated! We held each other and laughed. *When I got the phone call about Jason's accident, I found Stan (via cell phone) to share the news. We were devastated! We held each other and cried.*

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Nausea! Not feeling well through most of the pregnancy. *Nausea! Physical pains throughout my whole body the past 9 months.*

Sorting clothes to get ready for a new little one. How fun! *Sorting clothes to give away or get ready for a garage sale. How heart wrenching!*

Reading books that people have given me to try to understand my pregnancy. *Reading books that people had given me to try to understand my grief.*

Choosing equipment that will be needed for this baby. *Choosing a tombstone that will help us and others remember him forever.*

Phone calls of "how are you doing?" *Phone calls of "how are you doing?"*

Not sleeping because my back hurt. *Not sleeping because my heart hurts.*

Feeling overwhelmed with so much to do and so little energy to do it. *Feeling overwhelmed with so much to do and so little energy to do it.*

At the end of the 9 months we made phone calls to tell others about the birth of this beautiful little boy… this gift from God. *At the beginning of these 9 months we made phone calls to tell others about the death of this wonderful young man.*

Helping older brother, David, adjust to having a baby brother. *David helping us now as we all adjust to Jason being gone.*

The pregnancy ended after 9 months. Life was good! *This void will last forever…..*

***Joann Marner***
***Brighton, Iowa***
***In Memory of my son, Jason***

## *The First Meeting*

I first heard of The Compassionate Friends at the Grief and Grieving Seminar at Sacramento City College in 1989. I sat in the auditorium in the very last row, in the very last seat, sobbing, hoping to muffle the sounds by holding a bandana to my mouth.

My only child, Joe, 21, was killed on December 6, 1988 in a truck/auto accident at 11:49 a.m. (from the police report). He was coming back to work from lunch. A rock truck made a sudden left turn and my son, my best friend, was dead. Two minutes, that's all it took to find myself crying in the dark at Sac City. I wasn't ready to reach out yet, but I took the brochures home.

A year and a half later, I thought I was ready. I arrived at the church on H Street. I sat in my car, asking myself what I was doing here. Talking about Joe's death was so painful, even with friends who loved me.

How could I talk about death to strangers? And why should l? I stood by my car for two minutes and took a deep breath. I walked to an open door and announced to a dance class I was here for The Compassionate Friends meeting. Four couples turned around, the music stopped and so did I.

I finally found the right door and walked in and introduced myself to the woman by the guest book. She said the meeting was beginning for the "new" members and showed me to the room. Darlene Johnson was there, talking about the cards we were to fill out, with our names, the name of our child and/or children who had died and when they died. I looked at the blank card and lines erased themselves with my tears. My hand shook and I felt the familiar anxiety attack symptoms and I glanced across the table and my eyes were met with another pair of tear filled eyes. In that second-long time span, pain recognized pain and I felt kinship with him and my attack drifted away, not to claim me that night again.

I relaxed a little and listened to women and men communicating the loss and agony, and the fearful topsy-turvy roller coaster ride of emotions that battered us day and night. We shared our losses, if we chose to do so. When it was my turn, though, I said, "Pass." And it was fine, no questions, no pushing. And then we talked, cried, admitted to anger, confusion, outrage, sadness, depression and sobbing in public. I talked and I listened. I hugged and I let people give me a hug. The agony was real within us, but together we told it to step back a little that night. The meeting ending with our standing in a circle, holding each other's hands, a circle of courage, relief and strength.

I walked to my car and thought what a difference those four hours made. I found solace and relief. The Compassionate Friends meeting won't make the pain go away, but it is a place where you can honestly and truly believe when someone says, "I know how you feel." They mean it and their eyes prove it.

***Janice Lopez***
***TCF, Sacramento Valley Chapter, CA***

The only cure for grief is to grieve.
Emotions in grief are as different as snowflakes or fingerprints.
Each person mourns in a different way.
There is no timetable for recovery.
***Rabbi Earl Grollman***

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This special newsletter is printed in loving memory of ***Scott Francis Motuzas***
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## *TO OUR NEW MEMBERS*

***Coming to your first meeting is the hardest thing to do. But you have nothing to lose and everything to gain. Try not to judge your first meeting as to whether or not TCF will work for you. The second, third, or fourth meeting might be the time you will find the right person - or just the right words said that will help you in your grief work.***

## *TO OUR OLD MEMBERS*

***We need your encouragement and support. You are the string that ties our group together and the glue that makes it stick. Each meeting we have new parents. THINK BACK...what would it have been like for you if there had not been any "oldies" to welcome you, share your grief, and encourage you? It was from them you heard, "your pain will not always be this bad; it really does get softer."***