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# The Compassionate Friends: A Support Group for Bereaved Parents

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Each year more than 100,000 children die from illnesses, accidents, or acts of violence, and the parents and families of these children suffer one of the most painful emotional traumas a human being can sustain. For the bereaved parents, society does not provide much more than temporary emotional support through help from relatives, friends, employers, or church groups. Because most people have little understanding of the grief process, the support given is often perceived as superficial, perfunctory, and generally lacking in understanding and acceptance. Many parents feel isolated in their emotional devastation and, although they seek answers through psychotherapy or organized religion, still lack sufficient emotional support to carry themselves through the difficult stages of grief. Recently, support groups formed specifically for bereaved parents have successfully filled the need in this area.

The purpose of this article is to acquaint professionals in the community with a new support network called The Compassionate Friends.

The Compassionate Friends is a self-help organization offering "friendship and understanding" to bereaved parents. The organization's philosophy and ethics are summarized in a charter clearly stating its purposes—to promote and aid parents in the

positive resolution of the grief experienced upon the death of their child, and to foster the physical and emotional health of bereaved parents and siblings.<sup>1</sup> The basic premise is that the expression of thoughts and feelings is part of the healing process.

The organization was founded in 1969 by Reverend Simon Stephens in Coventry, England. In 1972, the first United States chapter was organized in Miami, Florida. The group is nonprofit and nonsectarian and is governed by a board of directors with headquarters in Oak Brook, Illinois. The Compassionate Friends holds regional conferences and an annual meeting featuring speakers and authorities on aspects of the grief process. It also offers workshops for mothers, fathers, step-parents, siblings, and grandparents in which active participation is encouraged. The board of directors consists of bereaved parents who donate their time for administrative and financial management of the organization. The national office also publishes a quarterly newsletter and offers help in starting new chapters and consultation to existing ones.

Currently about 300 chapters have been established in the United States. Chapters are usually started by bereaved parents who want to help others. The primary purpose of the chapter is to establish a forum for open, nonjudgmental exchange and sharing of feelings, ideas, and information about one's own grief and the loss of loved ones. Meetings are usually held once a month at a member's house or at a community site offered by churches, family service agencies, or private organizations. A chapter newsletter is sent monthly to all members with information about the

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meeting time and date. New members are initially invited by word of mouth through friends, clergymen, or health care professionals in the community. Referral to professionals for counseling or psychotherapy is neither encouraged nor discouraged.

Chapter meetings offer the bereaved parents an opportunity to assemble in an open, honest atmosphere. It is generally thought that the founders of a successful new chapter should have lost a child at least one year before and that they should consist of a father or mother or both. The meetings are open to all parents who have lost a child regardless of age or how long ago the child died. Most members appear to be parents whose loss occurred within the previous two years, although for some parents losses date back five or six years. There is no time limit on how long members can attend; whereas some parents attend only a few meetings, others come for several years. This pattern confirms the theory that grief is a highly individualized process requiring different amounts of time to work through. Attendance at meetings can vary from 5 to 25 members, but an optimum group size is 10 to 12 members. Whenever a chapter draws too many members to a meeting, a second chapter is encouraged.

The group meets at a scheduled time for one to two hours during which a group leader guides the members by encouraging them to talk—to share feelings or thoughts about their lost ones. All

communications are considered confidential, and disclosures about each other are regarded as privileged information. Everyone has an opportunity to be heard; no one is compelled to speak, and all have a responsibility to listen. It is up to the group leader to foster an open atmosphere of acceptance. It is important to include members at different stages of grieving so that parents can see other parents proceeding in their grief process.

This group has demonstrated that most people can obtain comfort from knowing that other people are experiencing similar problems or pains and that psychiatric help may not be the only alternative. Although a few grievors are capable of working through the crisis by themselves, most bereaved parents need emotional support for several months or years. The Compassionate Friends, as a new self-help group, provides the support system that can effectively help individuals and families through this traumatic experience. It is a valuable community resource for all family physicians.\*

#### References

1. Principles. *Compassionate Friends Newsletter* 1982; 5(2):2-5

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\*To find out whether your community has a local chapter, write to *The Compassionate Friends*, PO Box 3696, Oak Brook, IL 60522-3696.