The death of a child has been written for The Child Bereavement Trust by a bereaved parent, Sue White, whose son Paul died at 18 years of age.

“There are two things I regret. One is that I was not able to see Harry, even if I'd just been able to see his toes. The other is that I never gave a thought to what he should wear in the coffin.”

Flappy Lane Fox whose son Harry Sidebottom died in an accident when he was 25 years old.
Losing a child at any age brings specific problems; a parent whose child dies at 4 years old will find their grief intensifies as the ages their child will not see pass; first day at school even simple events such as a friend’s child losing teeth can provoke extreme emotion. It is the same for a parent whose child dies as a young adult.

The world of the young adult is fast moving, populated by events such as leaving school, going to university, learning to drive, first holiday alone and girlfriends/boyfriends. The list seems never-ending as our child begins to find a life of independence, the lead up to separation from the parent/child relationship that had protected and guided them all those years.

It is a time when decision making becomes their choice and a parent must stand back and watch the results.

Teenagers or young adults provide a link with a changing world enabling parents to keep a ‘young’ outlook and keep up with technology as it progresses. We know all about the latest ‘cult’ television programmes, the ‘in’ groups or ‘must have’ fashions. We know who won the football league this year and can converse on world issues from the viewpoint of someone who will inherit our mistakes. Take our child away and we can become stale and uninterested in ‘today’.

Teenagers talk incessantly of their future, the plans, the adventures they will have. As parents we watch as they build a new life that will not include us on a daily basis. We cannot help but get caught up in their excitement or comment when plans seem a little too adventurous for our liking. We run ahead of them to a vision of partners and grandchildren and cosy family gatherings. When our child dies their future and ours with them is torn away.

There is nothing left of a future only a smiling face immortalised in a photograph.

It is wonderful to see all those years of hard work building a foundation on which our child can grow come together. Here is the child as an adult. We have made mistakes and they will make mistakes – we are only human – but we have given them life and a chance to create their own future.

As a child becomes a teenager/young adult and takes on more responsibility for their own life the role of the parent changes. They leave behind the control they once held and gradually relinquish it into the hands of their child hoping that the foundations they had laid will be enough to guide their child through life. Their child will now want to venture further from home, meet friends and build a social life at night. Rules will be set and tested time and time again. The parent will now become a taxi driver, money lender and often an embarrassment! Bedrooms will be out of bounds and cleaning them will be difficult as you try to negotiate a time when the young will not be sleeping!

It is unbearable for a parent to have had a taste of the love and friendship a young adult can give only to lose them before they have taken more than a few steps into the adult world.

Some relationships between parent and child will be fraught with the problems that can arise as children try to make their mark on the world. Parents who have not had an easy time during these years will often feel guilt and anger at their loss.

The loss of an older child will often mean that the parent’s other children will also be adults. These parents may be of an age when bearing another child, not as a replacement but as a focus for their love, will be unlikely or impossible. They may also be faced with other children leaving home and so the loss becomes a loss of more than one child.

The time when our children leave home is always difficult, for a mother especially there is the loss of a nurturing role that has been part of her life for many years and she will need to find herself again and fill the void left. If a child dies at this crucial point in life she will be faced with a struggle on many fronts. A father will not fare any better – he will have lost a friend, a future drinking partner, a son who shared his passion for football or a daughter who was his joy.

Between them, mother and father, will have seen their future with that child destroyed. There will be no family parties in which he will take part, no wedding day, no grandchildren.

When an older child dies and his brothers and sisters have left home the parents are left with emptiness. At a time which should be a release from the years of caring for children and a future where mother and father can begin to build a new and full life of their own they are faced with trying to hold their lives together.
There are no other children at home to care for: There is often just two people who have lost themselves. They will struggle with the loss of the child who has died; the loss of those children who have left home to begin their separate lives; and with the loss of the years of fun and fulfilment they once dreamed were ahead of them. Marriages and partnerships may shake or crumble under the heavy weight of grief and loss but in time many will find a path forward, marriages can become stronger and life will mean something again.

Parents may change so much after the death of their child that to each other they become unrecognisable as the people who met and began a family life years before.

They will need to discover who they are all over again and both partners will need space and time as they grieve for their child in their own way and on different timescales. At this crucial time of change they will also need to leave the path of communication between them open to enable a new life and understanding to be constructed, slowly and with input from both.

For any siblings the loss of their brother or sister will mean the loss of the chance to discover a closer friendship as adults. This kind of relationship is often denied them during the turbulent years of youth when hormones and a need to find out who they are inhibit the need to be friends not antagonists.

The pain never goes away. It is there with you every second that you breathe, every step that you take. Gradually it softens and becomes a part of your life, a part of who you are, a part of the relationship between you and your child. In time this new life seems so normal and it is normal. Normal to cry, normal to feel sad, normal to be thinking of your child all the time; normal for him not to be in your life. You may hate how it makes you feel but you cannot change anything and so you get on with life and carry your pain through each day.

Sometimes it is unbearable, eating away at the foundations of the new life you have fought so hard to build. It tears apart the strength you have wrapped around your broken dreams and exposes the damage you have suffered since your child died.

As bereaved parents we are expected to leave our child in the past, to ‘move on’ or ‘let go’. It is why we feel so isolated from society, from family and friends. We are expected to take this child, whose attachment to us was not severed with the umbilical cord and pack him away like old, out-dated clothes. A child we had nurtured and loved every second our lives touched, whose connection with us was on every level of our existence, a child who filled our world with the miracle of his smile.

We do not have to ‘leave’ our child. We can move forward into a new life and take our child with us. Every time we think of our child they are a part of that moment. I know that we cannot see our child by our side, we cannot hold them, but the love we felt for each other is imbedded in our soul, runs through our veins and inhabits every breath we take.

As the bereaved parent struggles to adapt to a life without their child it will be at a time when their energy levels will be severely depleted and it will be vital that they also try to take care of themselves.

a mother’s story

The moment in time that took my son also destroyed the life I had. It erased my memories leaving in their place a blank sheet on which to start again. Step by tiny step we can survive. We may live a life of pain, anger, tears and sadness but slowly we look at our blank sheet and take our first steps.

We have lost so much, all those moments a parent takes for granted. We yearn to hear the loud music, to pick up the dirty socks hiding for a week under the bed. We ache to see the smile that melted our anger or to feel the kiss goodbye that would leave an echo of his touch on our cheek to help us through the day.

In the second it took for Paul to die I stepped from a normal life of laughter, impatience, kisses and fun into a world where the very act of breathing was painful.

One moment I was sitting reading, curled up on the chair facing the window, waiting for Paul to arrive home from work. The next minute I looked up and saw not Paul, but a police car parking outside.

My world was already slowing down. Separating me from the life I knew as I stood and watched the policemen walk towards my house. I can remember feeling a rising sense of panic as they moved down my path yet by the time I had opened the door and the policeman had spoken I was already in another world. I had entered an unfamiliar place where reality was suspended and I did not yet have to face the full impact of my nightmare.

As a family we are still struggling from the repercussions of his accident. Grief is very personal and we will all grieve in different ways. That concept often causes added problems as we all think our way is right. It is but only for us.

Paul and I had always been close and the teenage years did no damage to our relationship. I consider myself so lucky to have had Paul in my life. Our house was the normal mix of fun, loud music and arguments. There was rivalry between Paul and his older brother Gary but only what would be expected between young adults and time would no doubt have seen their relationship change as they moved away into separate lives.

Paul’s death tore us apart. Never again will our life be as it was, that carefree, innocent life when the only stress we felt was mainly of our own making and time would eventually bring an outcome that could be lived with.

The consequences, fallout and path for most parents whose child dies will share similarities, but will also have a uniqueness about them just as each of our children do.

When Paul died we had never had to face a major traumatic bereavement in our family. We had lost grandparents, older parents and well tried and tested paths to assist. However, this was something new and fresh and we had to make our own way to learn to cope.

In the second it took for Paul to die I stepped from a normal life of laughter, impatience, kisses and fun into a world where the very act of breathing was painful.
Each of us reacted in different ways to hearing of Paul's death. I immediately became so deeply shocked that reality no longer existed. Although shivering excessively I remained in total control, talking to the police and going on later that evening to telephoning relatives and friends. Over the next week, before the funeral, I was the one who welcomed people to the house, gave them tea and hugs, answered telephone calls or spoke to neighbours who called.

I chose to tell both John and Gary as each arrived home from work that Paul had died. John was emotional and found it difficult to talk to anyone in those early days and Gary's first reaction was of anger at the garage who sold Paul his car. Five minutes before the police had arrived John had telephoned to say that he had booked Paul's car into the garage to find out what the problem was. Understandably Gary had thought maybe the car was at fault, but that is something that could never be discovered because all the electrics were destroyed in a fire after the crash.

Death suspends your life. Life for everyone involved in the death goes on around you, all the trivialities and worries that once were part of your life still exist for them. I can remember standing in a supermarket queue hearing people say how awful it was that they couldn't go to lunch at the time they wanted to and I wanted to shout at them that my son had died and I didn't know if I could live without him. I was confused, could remember nothing before Paul's death and it slowly in drip by drip over the next year allowed my strength to slowly renew itself.

I craved sleep. Waking was my problem. Seeing Paul's empty room around the day after he died – it took me two months before I could actually view it. Gary watched it first, then one day I discovered I had a real need to see it. My reaction was of tears and smiles whilst touching the screen wanting to feel his flesh.

The shock had erased all my memories – I couldn't remember anything before Paul died, not my childhood, my wedding or even the boys growing up. I had nothing. After 4 years I have at last regained some of those moments in time. In the summer of 2002 I began having panic attacks and over time worked out that I was so frightened of forgetting Paul that I was holding onto his death but my mind had it's own agenda. Eventually I gave up fighting a battle I could not win and Paul came back to me. I can be anywhere now when a little glimpse of Paul's childhood will appear to me and I am no longer afraid of forgetting him.

I never had problems sleeping in fact for me it was the other way around. I would go to bed very early sometimes before 8 pm, fall asleep immediately and not wake until 6 am next morning. I craved sleep. Waking was my problem. Seeing Paul's empty room as I walked out of the bedroom, the smooth bed, the eerie silence. Where was his tousled head just visible under mounds of covers? The silence in the house when John and Gary had gone to work, no noise, no music, no laughter, no brotherly squabbles. No kiss on the cheek that Paul always gave me before he left the house. No telephone calls asking what was for dinner, or could we pick him up from the pub or the cinema.

Young people need feeding all the time – Paul's stomach had ruled him up from the pub or the cinema. He had no noise, no music, no laughter, no brotherly squabbles. No kiss on the cheek that Paul always gave me before he left the house. No telephone calls asking what was for dinner, or could we pick him up from the pub or the cinema.

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Young people need feeding all the time – Paul's stomach had ruled his life. Now I could not even find the enthusiasm to cook at all and John took over in the kitchen and fed us.
Paul used to be home from work by 4.10 pm. Two hours just for us before John and Gary came home. I would have coffee waiting as he arrived home, he’d tell me about his day: the moans, the jokes and the food he had eaten for lunch! He would play loud music or we would watch an American chat show on TV for a laugh or a discussion. Those two hours became the most unbearable in an unbearable life. Strangely Paul also died at 4.10 pm. I spent that time curled up, crying until eventually as winter came I decided to try to become more positive and to fill that lonely time as best I could. I tried television, reading, music, a bath; anything to make the time pass. I lit the room with candles, wrote in a journal of my loss and discovered, in time, that I could cope with those two hours just as I was coping with all the other hours in a day.

I talked non-stop to friends and to some family members, in fact to anyone who would listen to me. It must have been distressing to many to hear what I had to say but in those early days I never stopped to think of them. Grief is in a way selfish.

The bedroom of an older child will have their personality stamped indelibly on it. Often they will have decorated it themselves, certainly you will not have had much input as to what is on their walls! You probably have no idea what is hidden away in their drawers or under their bed. I can remember a time when Paul was writing a film script and each time I knocked and entered his room it would be hidden from my view. We’d laugh together and I knew that it was his private thoughts and not for my eyes. Imagine the pain when eventually I came across the script knowing that he had not wanted me to see it. I never read it but gave it to his friend Emily with whom he had discussed his ideas – I felt it was more hers than mine.

There is a feeling of intruding into a part of their lives that was private and had not included you. I had no right to be in Paul’s bedroom looking through his cupboards. It took me 2 years 7 months to feel the time was right to sort through his possessions but the time you choose to undertake this task is never going to be easy. By the end of the 8 hours it took me to sort through his bedroom I was a mess. I was no longer his mother but an intruder; reading private thoughts, sobbing over pencil cases proclaiming his love for a girl when he had been at school, hugging his boxer shorts as the ultimate betrayal of a mother was finished.

Paul’s bedroom is now the study. The bed and cupboards remain in place, the decorating is untouched but now his walls are covered with posters of New York (his favourite place), with his own artwork and with photographs of his friends as they fulfil dreams. There are postcards from all over America sent by friends and a growing family of stuffed toys that is my mark on his room. His photograph watches me as I work and it is a room of comfort, solace and love.

It is not the young child that I miss as much as the adult son. It is the son who would discuss life with me, talk about films and music. It is the son who tried to get me to laugh at his comedy programmes knowing how much I disliked them. It is the son who cheered me up when I was tired and miserable or defused my anger with a smile. I miss the son whose outlook on life mirrored mine more often than not. The son who became taller than me, who didn’t always do things that I wanted done but who still found the time to plant a kiss on my cheek as he left the house. It is the son who poked his head around the bedroom door when he got home from a night out to say goodnight.

There are no dirty trainers lying in the hall, no racing to reach the telephone because of course it will always be for them. There is no creeping into his room at night hoping to borrow an extra large t-shirt to sleep in. There is no listening to the laughter from his room, there is no fun when both parents are suffering and there is no young voice to relieve the silence.

Living without Paul is still the greatest loss in my life. It still occupies my thoughts most of the time. Death changes everyone and we have all had our own problems resulting from Paul’s death. Gary has become an only child. John and I, best friends for 32 years, have struggled for the first time in our relationship, our pain mirrored in each others eyes and difficult to ‘escape’ from. My relationship with my parents has been very painful as they have denied Paul’s death from the beginning and I am now uncomfortable in their presence.

Yet I can still say how lucky I am. I have had a lot of love in my life. I have discovered some wonderful friends since Paul died. I now live for the moment which means that I do not worry because I see no point to it, worry did not stop Paul dying and it will not stop anything else happening in my life. I have become comfortable with myself and done things that I would never have done before Paul died.

It is strange how I can say that life is wonderful and yet carry within the greatest pain.

Paul was a lovely, warm, caring son who made friends easily and kept them. He is remembered for his smile and love of life. I was lucky to have had all those growing years with him and I regret nothing except his death too early. Amongst the sadness in my life is an overwhelming love for Paul that keeps me warm and I will not give up on life because while I am here so is Paul.

The following was sent to The Child Bereavement Trust by parents
Sandra and Robert Empson who found it truly helpful after their
daughter Lucy was killed in Bali.

The Comforters

In the days and weeks following Jo’s death, Hil, Katie (sister) and I experienced a vast variety of help and comforting. How we reacted to all that depends in a large measure on the sort of people we are. What follows is not a learned work on bereavement counselling, it is merely the description of what it felt like for particular people to be comforted.

In my trade I have read many books on bereavement; I understand the technical stages of grieving; I know what is to be expected as people move through the remorseless sequence of coming to terms with the death of a loved one. That information has occasionally helped me as a priest to spot when the mourning process is going wrong. But in the vast majority of situations there are only two rules that matter:

The first is total honesty about the loss. The fact is that inside me there is an unfillable Jo-shaped hole. That hole is now part of the fabric of my being, and it will always be there. I have to learn to live with that hole, to explore its shape, by crying over it, by remembering the one who once filled it, by talking about him,
looking at pictures of him, listening to others as they share their recollections, making the hole more painful but more real. Any attempt to escape this hole, to paper over it, to preoccupy my thoughts so that I can avoid looking at it, will not help me to recover. They will merely distort the business of coming to terms with his death. It has to be faced, lived with, internalised. So Jo’s picture stays on the sitting room wall. His bedroom still displays all his drapes and treasures—not a shrine, but a guest room, still his, but used.

The second is total honesty about how you feel. In the face of death no emotion is wrong. It is right to cry; it is right not to feel able to cry. It is right to feel sad; it is right to escape for a while from sadness and laugh at a joke. It is right to talk about the dead man, and right to talk about something else. It is right to be totally off your food, and right to be ravenously hungry. It is right to want companionship, and right to be alone. It is right to feel guilty that you are alive, and right to feel guilty that you only care for yourself. Soon after Jo died I wrote the following:

‘I have never thought that eternity has anything to do with length of time, with infinite duration. It is rather the context of God in his fullness, beyond the created limitations of space and time. I believe, on a good day, that I shall be with Jo in eternity and enjoy again communion with my son. But it is fearfully hard to accept that never in all of time, will I see him again. He is dead and gone forever. I can at last understand the temptation to end one’s life, to escape from the endlessness of time into a realm where there is no pain.’

It reflects the nearest I have ever come to despair. By admitting it I coped with it. Faced with death I fear for those who try to feel what they think they are supposed to feel and bury the truth. This stops them from growing through the grief, and by producing a false image of themselves denies others a relationship with them that might be healing and creative ……You can’t let others in if all you offer them is a mask.

I believe we were as honest as we could be about his death and about our feelings; it seemed the most natural thing to do. Into this context we received a host of comforters. They all helped. Every single gesture, every visit, every letter, every card, every phone call helped. However gauche, however inarticulate, however inept, every single act of reaching out towards us helped. Never again in the face of bereavement will I hold back, never claim that I do not know what to say or that I didn’t know the deceased well enough. Always do something to touch those who grieve.

Visitors came endlessly. Some were close friends who came daily to check on our well-being: others returned at longer intervals, somehow symbolising that life went on; and others came just the once, to make contact, to identify, to assure us of their love. Every visit was important because it broke the ice. The death of Jo lay like a great barrier between us and everybody else. Relationships had to be re-defined, re-affirmed in the new post-Jo world. Everyone who came to visit moved over to our side of the great divide. The further we get from the death, the harder it is to face friends whom we have not seen since before he died. Visiting restored the web of relationships.

The following is a chapter from a book called ‘Jo’s Book’. ‘Jo’s Book’ is a father’s response to the death of his son, Jonathan, who was killed in a car accident five days before his return to England. Jo had been on a gap year trip to Zimbabwe and was due to take up a place at Cambridge to read English following his trip. His father, Andrew Daynes, is a chaplain of Bryanston School in Dorset and his mother, Hil, is a housemistress at the same school. Andrew and Hil met at Cambridge University.

The Child Bereavement Trust values the help it gets through learning from bereaved families. If you have found something helpful please let us know so we can help others.

We thank you and your children.

The Child Bereavement Trust
working to help bereaved families

Aston House High Street West Wycombe Buckinghamshire HP14 3AG
Tel: 01494 446648 Fax: 01494 440057 Email: enquiries@childbereavement.org.uk Website: www.childbereavement.org.uk
Charity No 1040419

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