



The Compassionate Friends

Modesto~Riverbank Chapter

Supporting Family After a Child Dies

A self-help organization offering friendship, understanding and hope to bereaved families that have experienced the death of a child.

www.modestoriverbanktcf.org

December 2019

tcfmodestoriverbank@gmail.com

Someone Special at Christmas

Looking back to Christmas past
and HAPPY times gone by
remembering your LAUGHTER
and as always, asking, "why?"
For there are just so many things
that no one can explain
why one of us is taken
while the rest of us remain
And why a SPECIAL time like this
should be a time to grieve
to wish you were still here
and wonder why you had to leave
Because you're MISSED at Christmas
and on each and every day
for you were SOMEONE SPECIAL
who means more than words can say.

Author Unknown

MONTHLY MEETING

7:00 PM

Bridge Covenant Church
2201 Morrill Road
Riverbank, CA 95367
(Corner of Oakdale Rd and Morrill Rd)

*Please join us at our
next meeting on
Monday, December 9th
*Please arrive by 6:50 PM
so we may begin promptly
at 7:00PM**

Upcoming Meetings

January 13th

February 10th

March 9th

MESSAGE LINE

(209)622-6786

*If you leave a message
a steering committee member
will return your call.*



Visit us on Facebook
The Modesto-Riverbank
Area Chapter of TCF

OR



Find us on
Instagram at
[modestoriverbank_tcf](https://www.instagram.com/modestoriverbank_tcf)

THE 23rd ANNUAL

The Compassionate Friends

Worldwide Candle Lighting

Join us on December 8, 2019

"...that their light may always shine."

Bereaved parents, grandparents, siblings, family & friends
are invited to attend this memorial candle lighting.

Please arrive early to pick up your candle.

A display table will be available to share a photo of your loved one.

You are invited to enjoy refreshments before & after the program.

Please RSVP by December 3rd 2019 to reserve your seat & if you wish
to receive an ornament tcfmodestoriverbank@gmail.com or (209) 622-6786.

JOIN US ON SUNDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2019

7:00 P.M.

COMMUNITY HOSPICE

4368 SPYRES WAY

MODESTO, CA 95356

December

EVENTS

Lunch with the Ladies

Date:

Time:

No lunch date for this month

Location:

To RSVP - call or text Tracey at 209-996-2040 or email tcfmodestoriverbank@gmail.com.

Saturday Morning Breakfast with the Dads

Save the dates Saturday, December 7th and Saturday, January 4th for breakfast with other bereaved dads in our chapter.

8 am at Perko's in Salida - 4642 Kiernan Avenue

Confirm with Chad at 209-338-8496 or chomme@gmail.com, or Norm at 209-345-0601 or nandrews6863@charter.net, & they'll save a seat for you.



Suicide Loss Support Group

7 pm at the Sutter Health Education Center
in the back of McHenry Village, suite B.

The group meets the third Monday of each month.

For more information, contact Norm at 209 345-0601
or at nandrews6863@charter.net.



HOLIDAYS AFTER CHILD LOSS: INCORPORATING YOUR LOVED ONE INTO SPECIAL OCCASIONS

I couldn't do Christmas last year. The sound of a jingle bell literally felt like someone was peeling my skin back with a paring knife. I avoided all festivities. Skipped sending holiday cards. Didn't go into shops if I didn't have to. And asked our family not to send us gifts. The thought of getting a tree, hanging her stocking or not hanging her stocking, getting out all the ornaments she loved... I just couldn't do it without my little girl.

Fortunately, our family was very understanding and we didn't receive any push back or judgment or guilt about these decisions -- because that would have felt completely overwhelming. Instead of a traditional Christmas, we headed to Hawaii for a week, pretended Christmas wasn't happening, and soaked in only what felt tolerable. It wasn't particularly healing, we were obviously fully aware we were avoiding, but it meant I stopped throwing up from the anxiety of Christmas looming.

It wasn't just Christmas (though the full month of activities leading up to it does bring extra intensity). All the holidays and family occasions have felt difficult since my daughter, Gwendolyn, died, are painfully incomplete, and are anxiety inducing. Holidays after any loss are hard, but what is particularly challenging with child loss is our children are still very much part of a grieving parents heart -- they still age, they continue to miss milestones no matter how much time has passed, and so they always feel missing at family occasions. Our children are part of our family -- forever and always.

The passage of time didn't lessen my angst. Getting through the firsts didn't make things easier. Being "strong" and pretending all was okay made me feel worse. I knew I couldn't avoid forever and so I started paying close attention to how other loss parents approached these things, imagining different rituals in our own family, and even quietly trying some out to see if they felt okay. What has become clear is the only way to make any special event tolerable is for Gwendolyn to be involved... in some way.

This year, the holidays haven't felt as excruciating. They will never be the same, but we are finding our way. This is NOT simply because of time. I could feel my body tightening and that familiar dread once again as fall approached -- that is until we created a "plan" for how Gwendolyn will be woven into it all. From watching other loss parents over the years it seemed incorporating my child into the holidays and family traditions would soften the pain, but I didn't know how to do that at first. To be honest I desperately wanted someone to tell me how or to just do it for me because not including her was literally making me ill. But, that "thing" that feels good to one family may be awful for another so, ultimately, we had to determine how we wanted to create new traditions to keep Gwendolyn present in our family holidays. Each family is different so I thought I'd share some ideas to consider and help you navigate your own plan to incorporate your loved one.

Create New Traditions! Part of the emptiness of holidays in loss is the traditions are now incomplete. To do the same exact thing when everything in our world is now utterly different can make the loss feel even bigger because all else is seemingly the "same." And sometimes because things have been done a certain way for a long time families tend to just assume or even expect that all to continue, which can feel insensitive. Give yourself permission to change if the idea of old traditions no longer feel good. This can be as simple as a new location of an event and someone else hosting. It can be starting an activity that honors the loved one. It can also mean totally changing to something new like going on a trip instead of celebrating at home. It is actually quite freeing to realize holidays and traditions don't "have to" stay the same. They can become anything you imagine -- temporarily or permanently.

Ways to Bring a Loved One into Special Occasions:

Table Setting: Meals tend to be the focal point of holidays and family gatherings so one simple way to include or acknowledge the missing person is by incorporating them into the table setting. Light a special candle in their memory, create a flower arrangement in their favorite color, decorate with something that represents them, or include their photo at the table. This can be done at everything from a wedding to a July 4th BBQ. It can be done quietly for just yourself or explained to family and friends so they are part of this new tradition going forward.

What You Wear: I wear something connected to Gwendolyn every day. It helps me feel I am honoring her and holding her close and it gives me strength to have a tangible I can touch or see. On special occasions, this has been one simple way we've been able to include her. Our first family photos without her: we wore butterflies. Our younger daughter's first holiday sing: she wore one of Gwendolyn's special dresses and hair bows. And on many special days our family and friends have worn specific jewelry or clothing in Gwendolyn's honor. This is an easy request to ask of others if it will make you feel good to look around the table and see all the shades of your child's favorite color.

Say Their Name: I desperately wanted someone, anyone, to mention Gwendolyn as we said grace at each holiday meal. It seemed the most organic way to bring her into family functions and have her absence be acknowledged. But family didn't want to cause more hurt, didn't want to say the wrong thing, and we felt too broken... so nothing was said. Everyone is different but for family unsure of what to do I highly recommend asking the child's parents ahead of time if they would like to say something about their child or if they would feel comfortable if you did. Or for loss parents, ASK family or friends to do this for you if you feel you can't. It doesn't have to be a long speech, in fact, brevity

is best -- but a mention that when "the whole family is together" that person is missing, that loss is very felt, and they are still loved means everything!

Decorations or Favorite Foods: For our younger daughter's 2nd birthday last year, our thoughtful and incredibly sensitive baker added purple butterflies around the floating balloons of her Curious George cake. It was a simple decoration that most probably didn't notice, but it meant to world to me to physically see that Gwendolyn was part of our special family event in this way. For other families we know, they have added a loved one's favorite food to traditional holiday meals. For example, chocolate chip pancakes at Thanksgiving dinner. It may seem silly but how wonderful to add levity and create an opportunity to share memories as you are passing the unconventional around the table. Who says meals have to be a certain way?

Other Ideas for New Traditions:

- Going around the table to share a memory. Or writing a memory down on a card.
- Making a craft together that honors the loved one. An ornament, for example, is a nice thing to do at Thanksgiving to lead into Christmas.
- Playing a game the child loved.
- Visiting the cemetery and decorating the gravesite together.
- Going on a remembrance walk as part of the festivities.

Christmas Traditions: Because Christmas is filled with so many family traditions, I wanted to highlight a few ways to make some of those more bearable.

Christmas Tree: This year we got two trees: one for home and one for Gwendolyn's special spot at the cemetery. We quietly observed other families last year and watching them decorate (some quite elaborately) and spend "traditional" family time together at an untraditional place opened our eyes to creating our own new traditions. Realizing that this was okay was huge! This made the grand voyage to get the tree all the more tolerable. In fact, it even felt good to see our little one select her big sister's tree with such enthusiasm and normalcy. It also does something else by allowing us the opportunity to once again buy ornaments and little decorations throughout the festive weeks for Gwendolyn. We also asked our family to write messages to her on little chalkboard ornaments at Thanksgiving, which helped bring her into that holiday as well.

Other families dedicate a tree in their home to their child, making it a certain color or only putting certain ornaments that represent their child on it. It may be a smaller tree in the entryway or one in the kitchen or a place in the home the family spends a lot of time. One family we know had two at home, but their other children actually asked to only have "Ethan's special tree" this year. And what a positive way to allow children to continue to process their grief. Tangible activities like this do so much to create healing -- especially in children. Another idea is to decorate a tree outside in the backyard with birdseed ornaments. (It doesn't have to be a Christmas tree!) And how beautiful if it is a tree planted in the child's memory or within a memory garden or in an area that has become a place of solace.

Ornaments: are another way to have a child represented on a family tree. Many families we know, especially those who have lost infants, have one special ornament they place each year on their tree. It may be a photo or a baby's footprint or the one ornament they received for their "first Christmas." Or it may be a collection of ornaments all over the tree, perhaps one they have purchased each year in their child's memory.

Stockings: Hanging stockings after a child has passed is excruciating... but not hanging one is, too. Here is the thing with child loss -- a deceased child is and will always be part of the family. Loss parents will carry their child for the rest of their life and, sometimes, seeing them represented is extremely important -- even if it makes others uncomfortable. If your child did not live to see a first Christmas, one lovely idea is to use a child's special outfits to make them a stocking.

Next is to decide what one does with the stocking. Perhaps "Santa" leaves a special ornament in the stocking each year that can then be added to the tree the following Christmas. Or the stocking can be filled with items the child loved or that are appropriate for the age the child "should be" to be donated to a child in need. Or maybe the stocking is filled with love notes from the family or flowers. Many families use this as an opportunity to teach their other children about the deceased child. And, as one friend said so beautifully, *"It is the one time of the year I get to see my entire family represented."*

Holiday Cards: Sending out the traditional holiday cards without your child in them can feel so very incomplete. Many families find ways to include their deceased child in the picture. Some ideas are to hold a picture of your child in the new photo, have a child's favorite stuffed animal as part of the photo, wear clothing that represents the child, or have the photo taken at a special place or time of day (like sunset) that has special meaning to your family. And, sometimes, a loved one may represent themselves by presenting a sacred sign in the photo. (Others may not see it, but if you do that is all that matters!)

Gifts and Giving Back in a Child's Memory: The simple act of shopping for your child is one of the long list of things taken from parents in child loss. It may seem insignificant but how many parents pick up little gifts all the time simply because it brings you joy to see your child's joy over a new treasure? The holidays, so focused on gifts, can make this all the more pronounced. Altruism is also highlighted this season and many families use it as an opportunity to give back in their child's honor.

You can adopt a child in need or in foster care or undergoing medical treatment and fulfill their "wish list." This can be a child that is your child's age when they passed away or their "should be" age, allowing you to once again buy things for your own child knowing it is helping another.

We know other families who host toy drives during this time of year in their child's name, collecting a variety of toys to be donated to the hospital where their child received care or asking for a specific item (like a Mickey Mouse doll) that was important to their child to be given to children in need. Some families also add a special sticker or tag to each toy with their child's name or a letter with more detailed information. Doing something like this also gives your loved ones a way to honor your child that they know you are comfortable with. Amazon Wish Lists are a great tool to use to make this easy to send around.

Another idea is to make gifts or treats to give to those who give so much of themselves: the military, the police, the fire department, nurses/doctors, therapists, or organizations who gave your child opportunities. Or perhaps make cards with your other children to be sent to kids in the hospital or facing the same illness as your child.

Acts of Kindness. If doing one thing doesn't feel right, perhaps using the season as a time for intentional acts of kindness will feel good. You can print out little cards to accompany your gestures that talk about your child as a way to include them. You can also ask friends and family to join you in this. One family we know did this and then put each act into their child's stocking which they read on Christmas morning. Even though they knew about the different acts of kindness done in their child's memory already, to read them all together was a beautiful reminder of the impact their child is still having and made him a sacred part of their Christmas morning.

Ways for Family and Friends To Offer Support:

Offer to Take the Other Children to Festivities: Parent guilt is powerful and in grief it can be even more intense. Sometimes canceling the holidays is exactly what mom and dad need, but if there are older children that can feel unfair. Christmas is a good example. Literally, the entire month is filled with little festivities geared toward children that friends and family could help with. This is also a chance for siblings to just be kids for a while as they also grieve. Offer to bake cookies or make a gingerbread house with the other children or take them to see the lights or go caroling. If there are events at school or through church or the community that you are already going to, let the parents know it is no trouble to take their children for them. If they decline, don't take it personally (and please don't add guilt), simply offer again on another occasion. Once the parents have thought about it a bit more or get used to the idea of accepting help, it may feel okay. The little events are a better test than the actual holiday itself because separating the family on a holiday after loss may only make all of them feel even emptier.

Invite a Loss Family to Join You: Grief is so lonely and overwhelming. An invitation to join your family for a holiday gathering reminds us we are not alone and takes off the pressure of having to host something when we can barely get dressed some days. Don't take it personally if the family says no... social anxiety is also a common side effect of grief. But do keep asking, keep offering support, keep including loss families and reminding us you are not afraid of our messy lives.

Give Meaningful Gifts: Receiving a gift that has special meaning offers gentleness to broken hearts and is the best gift a parent can receive. These types of gifts have helped us feel a sense of healing because they provide acknowledgment of the forever bond between a parent and child -- and a loving reminder that our child is not forgotten. We know many families give NEVER GIVE UP. for this purpose (which means the world to us to know there is positivity in each purchase) and has made us mindful of other ways to offer opportunities for families to give gifts of healing and is why we created this art print. But, these healing gifts can be anything -- something made (like a blanket), jewelry with the child's name or birthstone or hand print, art made from the child's artwork or poem, signs or art prints with special phrases or sayings that are significant, photos or photo books of memories with the child, clothing with a powerful mantra, books with the child's name in them or dolls that share the child's name, something that represents the child or something their loved one collected. Another wonderful gift to give is to donate in the child's memory. I highly recommend sending a card about the donation and explaining why you chose this just in case the organization does not have a way to do this or does it later in the year.

Be Gentle With Yourself, Do Something New, Take a Break:

With all of this in mind, still remember: ***Be Gentle With Yourself.*** Try some of these out... in baby steps but only when you are ready. And don't be afraid to take a break. That doesn't mean avoiding forever. But it's okay to just pass on family functions, holidays, special occasions as you get your feet more under you. It is okay to listen to what you need... In fact, it is healthy to do just that! Your child died and while "life goes on" sometimes for our own sanity it helps to hit the pause button. This may hurt feelings as others may not fully understand just how engulfing grief can be. But, if the idea of attending a wedding or participating in a baby shower or celebrating Christmas feels horrendous, listen to that and give yourself permission to sit this one out. And for family and friends -- *support their decisions!*

<https://www.huffpost.com>



REMINDEERS

You can still get photo button made of your child, grandchild or sibling with our new button machine! Buttons can be made at 6:30 pm on our meeting nights. Bring an extra copy of a photo or a photocopy of it, that can be cut into a circle 3" in diameter. Close-up photos usually work the best. You may bring a graphic design instead of a photo, if you wish. This will be a wonderful way to get acquainted with each other's children!

Magnets are also available!!

Please remember to send in your child's photo so that it can be added to the new TCF Modesto-Riverbank website.

Send photos to: scasity@comcast.net



SHIPWRECKS



Alright, here goes. I'm old. What that means is that I've survived (so far) and a lot of people I've known and loved did not. I've lost friends, best friends, acquaintances, co-workers, grandparents, mom, relatives, teachers, mentors, students, neighbors and a host of other folks. I have no children, and I can't imagine the pain it must be to lose a child. But here's my two cents.

I wish I could say you get used to people dying. I never did. I don't want to. It tears a hole through me whenever somebody I love dies, no matter the

circumstances. But I don't want it to "not matter." I don't want it to be something that just passes. My scars are a testament to the love and the relationship that I had for and with that person. And if the scar is deep, so was the love. So be it. Scars are a testament to life. Scars are a testament that I can love deeply and live deeply and be cut, or even gouged, and that I can heal and continue to live and continue to love. And the scar tissue is stronger than the original flesh ever was. Scars are a testament to life. Scars are only ugly to people who can't see.

As for grief, you'll find it comes in waves. When the ship is first wrecked, you're drowning, with wreckage all around you. Everything floating around you reminds you of the beauty and the magnificence of the ship that was, and is no more. And all you can do is float. You find some piece of the wreckage and you hang on for a while. Maybe it's some physical thing. Maybe it's a happy memory or a photograph. Maybe it's a person who is also floating. For a while, all you can do is float. Stay alive.

In the beginning, the waves are 100 feet tall and crash over you without mercy. They come 10 seconds apart and don't even give you time to catch your breath. All you can do is hang on and float. After a while, maybe weeks, maybe months, you'll find the waves are still 100 feet tall, but they come further apart. When they come, they still crash all over you and wipe you out. But in between, you can breathe, you can function. You never know what's going to trigger the grief. It might be a song, a picture, a street intersection, the smell of a cup of coffee. It can be just about anything and the wave comes crashing. But in between waves, there is life.

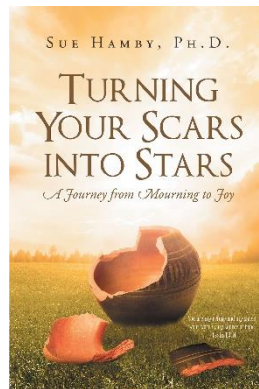
Somewhere down the line, and it's different for everybody, you find that the waves are only 80 feet tall. Or 50 feet tall. And while they still come, they come further apart. You can see them coming. An anniversary, a birthday, or Christmas or landing at O'Hare. You can see it coming, for the most part, and prepare yourself. And when it washes over you, you know that somehow you will, again, come out the other side. Soaking wet, sputtering, still hanging on to some tiny piece of the wreckage, but you'll come out.

Take it from an old guy. The waves never stop coming, and somehow you don't really want them to. But you learn that you'll survive them. And other waves will come. And you'll survive them too. If you're lucky, you'll have lots of scars from lots of loves. And lots of shipwrecks.

Author: Unknown

Book of the Month

This month's spotlight book is:



Please take full advantage of our chapter library. We have a nice selection of books to choose from. The library is available before and after the monthly meeting.

LOVE GIFTS

Love gifts can be made in memory of your child, sibling or grandchild in any amount. Donations received are used for our annual Candle Lighting Program each December, for sending our monthly newsletter via US mail and for community outreach. We are here to reach out to other bereaved families who may not be aware we are here to lend our support after the death of a child. Please send your tax-deductible donation to the PO Box below.

Janet Neal, In Loving Memory of her beloved son, Josh

If you wish to make a Love Gift donation, please fill out the information below and send with a check to:

The Compassionate Friends
Modesto/Riverbank Area Chapter
PO Box 578713
Modesto, CA 95357

☐ Child, ☐ Sibling or ☐ Grandchild _____

Date of Birth _____ / _____ Date of Passing _____ / _____

Donation amount _____

Your Name _____

Telephone _____ Your email address _____

Your address _____ City _____ Zip _____

Would you like your gift listed in our monthly newsletter in memory of your child, grandchild or sibling?

The amount will remain anonymous Yes ___ No ___

The Compassionate Friends is a 501 (c) (3) non-profit organization. Donations are tax deductib



Thank you 7- Eleven stores at
2500 Geer Rd., Turlock, CA and
3225 McHenry Ave., Modesto, CA
for sponsoring our monthly
newsletter!!

**Check out our closed Facebook page, Modesto-
Riverbank Area Chapter of TCF. Make a request to join
the page & an Administrator will approve your request.**



Our Mission

The mission of The Compassionate Friends:

When a child dies, at any age, the family suffers intense pain and may feel hopeless and isolated. The Compassionate Friends provides highly personal comfort, hope, and support to every family experiencing the death of a son or a daughter, a brother or a sister, or a grandchild, and helps others better assist the grieving family.



2019 Steering Committee

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Janet Neal - Outreach Coordinator
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Our Steering Committee wants to provide the best possible support to each of our TCF Chapter members and friends. Please contact a member of the Steering Committee with any concerns you have or any ideas about how our Chapter can be of support to you and others. We're also available if you'd like to talk about your child or some aspect of the challenges of your bereavement journey. You can reach us by email at: tcfmodestoriverbank@gmail.com or by phone at 209-622-6786 or on Facebook.



Visit our website for information
and to stay up to date on
chapter events.

www.modestoriverbanktcf.org

The deeper that sorrow carves into
your being, the more joy you can
contain.

Kahlil Gibran

**Join us on our Instagram
account page. You can find us at -
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