



The Compassionate Friends Victoria, Australia

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Understanding Grief When a Grandchild Dies

The grandparent-grandchild relationship is a very special one. When a grandchild dies, grandparents grieve, too. They grieve not only for their grandchild, but also share in the grief of the bereaved parents. For some grandparents, the hardest part is a sense of helplessness they feel for the pain that the child's parents suffer. But their own grief may also be very intense. When a child dies both the parents and grandparents lose part of their future.

Grief Is Individual

As with parents, a bereaved grandmother often grieves differently than does the grandfather and this difference may create a strain between them. This does not mean that one is right and the other wrong. There is not one right way to grieve. Knowing what usually happens in grief may help bereaved grandparents as they grieve, as they try to understand their child's grief, and as healing slowly occurs for all

Denial

Grief is said to have several stages. However, most bereaved grandparents do not grieve step by step, for grief is disorderly and irrational. At the time of the death of a loved one, there is a protective numbness. Even though they know that the loved one has died, their minds want to deny it. They may find themselves talking to and of the grandchild as if the child were still alive. They may "see" the dead child, only to realize that it is another child. But they now know, all too well, that death does not only visit someone else; it is now with them, for they, too, are vulnerable! The ache in the chest can become their nearly constant companion.

Anger

As denial lessens, grandparents feel much hurt and frustration. This could lead to anger directed toward others and inward. It may be focused on the spouse and even the dead child. Their own grief-stricken children, whose pain they share, may become the object of their anger. They may be very angry at God; they are often angry with themselves!

Guilt

Guilt, real or imagined, is always there, with the recurring "What if...?" "Why didn't I...?" As they try to resolve their guilt feelings, anger often returns in full force. Grandparents may experience all of this twice, once for the grandchild who died and then for the parents who have their own guilt, anger and pain, and who appear inconsolable. Because grandparents love their children, they often are torn between this love and the fear of loving too much, lest they then lose another grandchild or child. Grief of a previous death may return. Often, as in the multiple losses that may occur from an accident, the grandparents are grieving not only the loss of a grandchild but also the death of a child in the same tragedy. Guilt may occur because they live on, while the young ones died.

Depression

Some depression is a very real part of grief. It may be overwhelming to bereaved grandparents who may fear that they are going crazy. Bereaved grandparents also worry about the sanity of their grieving child. Friends may burden them further by voicing their concern in this respect. If thoughts of suicide occur, professional counselling may be indicated.

Time Is a Slow Healer

During grief, which lasts much longer than our society is yet able to admit, talking with those who have had the same experience is useful. Grandparents may assist other grandparents in this respect. Some find help in reading about grief and the experiences of others, particularly of grandparents. They may be aided in dealing with their children's grief by reading about parental grief itself. Some draw comfort and strength from their religious faith, although that faith may be severely tested. Self-help groups, such as The Compassionate Friends, can provide needed support.

Grief Work

Those acquainted with grief speak of "grief work" and this is fitting, for grieving takes energy. Those who grieve are tired much of the time. Men may have grown up with the tradition that men don't cry, although they know that this is not true in their private moments. They may feel that they must maintain composure so that they may properly support their wives and children in their grief work. The family may feel that grandfathers are not grieving, although they are feeling the same doubt, guilt, anger and despair as are others. Tears have healing properties and should not be suppressed by grandparents since they are a part of grief.

Resolution and Reorganization

Perhaps one of the most troubling aspects of grief is the question that grandparents continually face "Why?" Friends try to comfort with answers but, for the bereaved, no satisfactory answer exists. Thus, grandparents must finally accept the unacceptable. This does not mean that they understand why, not that they are forgetting the dead grandchild. Bereaved grandparents and parents will be told that they "must get back to normal." But what is now normal for them will never be the same as it was before the child's death.

Life without that child must go on and, as healing occurs, it will. Holidays, birthdays and anniversaries, including that of the child's death, may be stressful time. Allow time and space for your own emotional needs. There will be a deeper appreciation for those children and grandchildren who survive. There will be a greater understanding of others who experience similar loss. Many grandparents become more compassionate because of the tragic event that has touched their lives. Healing will help the bereaved accept the new understanding which has been forced upon them.

Love Remains-Healing Does Occur

Grief is the price we pay for loving. Grandparents love both the dead grandchild and the grieving parents. As they grieve and try to understand the parents, healing will occur. For, as love remains and that love will never leave, time will bring healing. Though they retain scars, grandparents will recall the happy times they once shared with their children and their grandchild and not just the tragedy and sense of loss that they have come to know.