



## When a Grandchild Dies

No one expects to outlive their own children, much less their grandchildren. It is so difficult to raise a family, see your children do the same, and then see the cycle broken in this out-of-order way. No one is prepared for the grief that follows.

As a grandparent, you have a double grief. You grieve for your grandchild who has died, as well as for your own child who is now a bereaved parent. You not only feel your own pain and sadness, but feel helpless and frustrated at not being able to help your bereaved child. It helps to remember that there is no timetable for grief.

Do not expect too much of your child, their spouse or of yourself. At first, no one believes it. When the reality "hits" everyone feels even more devastated. It is important to consider your needs as well as those of your bereaved child. Acknowledging and working on your grief will help you and, indirectly, your grieving child.

As a bereaved grandparent, you may feel great sadness, loss, guilt and anger. Some older grandparents have said, "I've lived my life. It should have been me." The fact that they are still alive while a young child or young adult is dead is difficult for many to bear. You may feel guilty if you live a distance from your child and, due to health or finances, you are not able to be with them at this painful time. Realize that you would be there if you could.

It helps to write supportive letters and to make loving phone calls. You may experience anger at God, life, those in the medical profession, or any person you feel is responsible for your grandchild's death. You might even feel angry toward your own child for "letting it happen." Such guilt or anger is not always rational but may temporarily go with the territory of grief.

Some of you, who now find yourselves grieving for a grandchild, may have experienced the death of your own child years ago. Your grandchild's death may trigger memories and pain that you thought were long since forgotten. If your child died more than ten years ago, you may not have resolved your grief. In earlier years, and in some cases even today, grieving people were not allowed or encouraged to grieve.

There were no support groups or books on grief. You were supposed to go on as if nothing had happened. If this is the case for you, it is important to allow your grief to surface. If you can, talk about it with your grieving child. It may help both of you.

Be careful not to suppress your grief, and encourage your child not to suppress grief either. Suppressed grief can cause physical as well as emotional pain. In addition to being harmful to you, it may seem to your bereaved child that you do not really care and are not hurting, too. In reality, when our child suffers, we suffer. It is important for everyone to face the grief and work through it. Life will never be the same, but with time, effort and much love...grief will ease.

Do not be surprised if at first you cannot reach out to help your grieving child. Remember, YOU are grieving! Be patient with yourself. Eventually you may be able to talk, listen and help. If you find that you cannot help specifically with the grief, you can send cards, tell them that you love them, etc. Explain that you wish that you could be of more help but that you do not know what to do.

### **Suggestions for Helping Yourself and Your Grieving Child.**

- Read about grief (Hope for Bereaved Handbook, The Bereaved Parent, Living When a Loved One Has Died). It is important to understand what you and your child are experiencing.
- It helps to be open and share your feelings. Your openness sets a good example for your child. Share the good memories and good days, as well as the pain of grief and the bad days.
- Talk about your dead grandchild. Mention his or her name.
- Find someone with whom you can talk freely - a friend, support group member, clergy or counselor.
- Be available to LISTEN frequently to your child. Respect your child's way of handling the pain and expressing grief. Do not tell you child how he or she should react.
- At special times (anniversary of death, birthday, holidays) write or call your bereaved child (and their spouse). Mention that you realize what day it is. You are calling to say you love them and you wish that you could take some of their pain away.
- When adults are grieving, remaining siblings often feel neglected...plus they do not understand the grief that they are experiencing. Try to spend extra time with your other bereaved grandchild(ren), offering to listen and reminding them that they are very important and much loved.
- If possible, offer to take surviving grandchild(ren) for an afternoon or a day. Help with practical matters, such as preparing food, doing laundry, shopping, and spend time alone with your child.
- Most of us need hugs even if we do not recognize that we do. It helps to hug and hold your child if you both are comfortable doing so.
- Allow yourself, and encourage your child, to cry when needed. Crying offers relief.
- Let the family know that you care, that you love them.
- Hold onto HOPE that eventually you and they will enjoy life again. Offer HOPE to your grieving child and family.

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