INFORMATION SHEET

☎ 0800 02 888 40 www.childbereavementuk.org

# The death of a grandchild

Grieving is never easy and the death of a spouse, friend or anyone important all bring their own pain. However, there is something about the death of a child that is particularly hard to bear. When that child is your grandchild, dealing with your own grief, while having to witness the anguish of a bereft son or daughter, can feel like a double loss. One grandmother commented that this double loss is not more of the same. It is different, a grief unique to grandparents.

If your grandson or granddaughter died before, or shortly after birth, the anticipation surrounding the birth is replaced by a devastating sense of loss for a future denied. Whatever the age of your grandchild, their death can feel very out of the natural order of things, something that is simply not supposed to happen. There is always a tragic sense of unfulfilled potential. We assume that children will grow into full adult life, but sadly some do not.

Whatever the circumstances of the death, or the age of their grandchild, grandparents often say the hardest part is observing the pain and intense grief of their son or daughter while feeling helpless, useless and impotent. Sadly, you will not be able to take away their pain but you can be there to support in the very special way that only someone with the experience of being a parent, and a grandparent, can.

## A Grandparent's grief is unique

They may have many years left of a fulfilled life, but grandparents tend to be more aware of their own mortality than most. The cliché "time heals" for many rings true but some grandparents may have a sense of time running out. They may feel there is not enough time left to learn to live with the loss of their grandchild. This can give an edge to their grief, unique to the role.

The depth of your grief may come as a surprise to others and possibly even to yourself. The intensity of your grief will be influenced more by your emotional connection to your grandchild rather than physical closeness. The death of a grandchild that you have seen on an infrequent basis, or may have lost contact with completely, can still be devastating.

In today's world, many grandparents are geographically distant from their grandchildren. However, modern communication methods such as Skype enable a close relationship to continue despite lack of physical proximity. Equally, many families consist of two working parents necessitating grandparents to take a key role in child care, seeing their grandchildren on a daily basis and being very involved with their nurturing and upbringing. A grandchild's death will be keenly felt.

A grandparent is only one individual within a family network. There are others to consider and perhaps another set of grandparents. It can all feel a bit crowded and there will be times when you are required to take a step back to let others play their part. This is not always easy to do.

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## Your grief might be misunderstood

Friends and neighbours may ask about your son or daughter but forget that you too are grieving. Some may consider that as a grandparent your grief will be less intense. This view is not reflected in the calls that are made to the charity's Support and Information Line. Callers talk about intense sadness, anger, bitterness and guilt, feelings similar to parents.

## How we grieve

Everyone is unique and every death is unique and how we respond and react will vary dependent on the type of death, the circumstances of the death and the relationship that we had with the child or baby that died and the immediate family. For more information on this please see our information sheet *How We Grieve*. As a grieving grandparent you may experience all of the below, or only some, or none. It doesn't matter.

## Guilt

The natural order of things indicates that adults are meant to die before children. You may be asking yourself "Why not me?" and feel a sense of guilt because you are still alive when a much loved grandchild is not. You may be feeling guilty about missed opportunities to have spent more time with your grandchild, or remorse at things left unsaid. With the benefit of hindsight, we can all think of things that we would have done differently, nobody is perfect.

## Anger

When a child dies it is out of the natural order of things and we can struggle to put any logic to it. Searching for a cause or looking for someone to blame is not unusual. Anger is a natural reaction, and you have every right to feel this way after what has happened. There are lots of ways to express anger, try to find one that works for you. Suppressed anger can result in us saying or doing things that we may later regret.

## Isolation

Often it is family with whom we have most difficulty communicating when someone dies, even when the relationship you have is a close one. This can leave you feeling misunderstood, hurt or angry. The immediate focus is understandably probably on the parents, and then on any surviving brothers or sisters. Grandparents can sometimes feel way down the list. It might be some time before you are all able to share thoughts and feelings in a mutually supportive way. Remember, that it is never too late to do this.

If you live some distance away, despite a very understandable feeling that you want to be there for them, it may be hard for the family to have you to stay immediately after the death. Grief can be all consuming and the family may find it just too much to think about having someone else around, even someone they care about. Try not to take this personally. There will be times when the parents need to be alone to do things their way and other times when they may appreciate having you there to share feelings and thoughts.

## How you can help the family

Try to allow your son or daughter to grieve as they feel they need to, rather than how others think they should. Their response will be different from yours because although you are grieving for the same child, the relationship you each had with that child was unique. You may both share feelings of devastation, despair and loss but will probably have different ways of dealing with them, dependent on personality, the circumstances surrounding the death, and how others around you respond.

What you can share are precious memories of the child or baby, or hopes that you both had for the life not yet begun. With a stillbirth or miscarriage, you may wonder how to grieve for a baby when cruelly denied the chance to get to know him or her, and perhaps never having had the chance to hold them. If the family are comfortable with it, try to find ways to include the baby in conversation. Mention the baby


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or child's name and try to show that he or she is still very important to you. It can be immensely comforting for a parent to be able to share intimate family thoughts, or memories that make you smile, with someone who had a different, but still close relationship with the child or baby who has died.

For parents, the grief after the death of a baby or child can be very intense and it is not unusual for them to feel that in some way they must be responsible. You may be able to help with reassurance that nothing they said or did caused the death, but while acknowledging that to feel like this is understandable and not unusual.

Grieving is exhausting both physically and mentally so, dependent on the type of relationship that you have with the family, anything that you can do to help with the practicalities of family life may be welcome. This was described by one grandparent as "non-intrusive, practical usefulness."

## How to help surviving grandchildren

Children tend to be very protective of their grieving parents. This is when you can take a key role by providing a listening ear for surviving grandchildren. You may need to repeat information many times and answer lots of questions, but this is how young children try to make sense of what has happened.

Young children cannot cope with overwhelming feelings for long periods of time and so taking them out for a break will give the children some respite from powerful emotions at home and provides an opportunity for you to spend some time with them.

It is well recognized that how a child grieves is influenced by the response of the adults around them. When parents are deep in their own grief, they may well have neither the physical or emotional energy to be there for their surviving children. If you are able to express your feelings and shed tears with your surviving grandchildren, they will know that it is OK to do the same thing, should they want to.

Just keeping in touch can be comforting for a child. Sending a card or letter, or email if you are into technology, helps to strengthen the bond. Don't expect a reply, but the chances are that your grandchild will appreciate the care behind the action. You don't have to say much, the important bit is letting them know that they are in your thoughts. This works particularly well with older children.

## Helping Yourself

It is important to try to get some support for yourself so that you are better able to listen or empathise with your son or daughter, and your grandchildren. You may have other family or friends that you can talk to about how you are. You can phone the Child Bereavement UK Information and Support line for a confidential listening ear. If your son or daughter feels that they have to look after you as well as themselves, this may make it hard for them to have you around. One grandmother described her role as having one foot inside the grief while keeping the other outside, placed on firm ground.

Replying to condolence letters can be cathartic. Remember, they are written as an expression of care for you and not as a rod for your back. Only reply if that is what you want to do.

In families that have histories of poor communication, you may just have to accept that you will not be able to play the part that you would like and acknowledge that hopefully, on the whole, the intentions are good, even if the expression of them is poor. Try to find other people outside the family to give you the support you need.

## Resources

**The Compassionate Friends**
08451 232304
www.tcf.org.uk

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Compassionate Friends offer support for bereaved parents and specialised support groups for grandparents. Call the number above for local contact details. Their website contains many useful leaflets including “Helping Our Grandchildren When Our Child Has Died”.

**For Bereaved Grandparents** by Margaret Gerner
Addresses the grief that grandparents feel when their children have a child die. Shows how grandparents can help their children while grieving themselves. The author’s three-year-old granddaughter, Emily, died of an unknown liver ailment. Available from Amazon.
**Relative Grief** by Clare Jenkins and Judy Merry
Parents and children, sisters and brother, husbands, wives and partners, grandparents and grandchildren talk about their experience of death and grieving. Available from Jessica Kingsley Publishing.

**Help for Grandparents** produced by ARC (Antenatal Results and Choices)
Explains about the diagnosis of fetal abnormalities during pregnancy, and choices that are available to parents. It talks about emotions grandparents have felt, and gives advice on ways to cope - how you can help your children, and yourself. Available from www.arc-uk.org or 020 76310285

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