

The death of a grandchild

Grieving is never easy and the death of a partner, 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 your grieving 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 them 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 fulfilling years left of life, but grandparents tend to be more aware of their own mortality than younger people. The cliché "time heals" may ring true for many people, 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 additional edge of pain to their grief.

The depth of your grief may come as a surprise to others and even to you. The intensity of your grief will be influenced more by your emotional connection to your grandchild rather than by how often you saw them. The death of a grandchild can still be devastating even if you haven't seen them as much as you would like, or if you had lost contact with them completely.

**For large print version
call: 0800 02 888 40**



Author: Child Bereavement UK
© Child Bereavement UK
Version: 02 Reviewed: August 2018
Registered in England & Wales: 1040419
and Scotland: SC042910

Many grandparents are geographically distant from their grandchildren, however they are still able to keep in contact with them by phone or online. Equally, many families consist of two working parents, so grandparents 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 in both cases.

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.

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 our helpline. Both grandparents and parents who are bereaved of a child talk about similar feelings, such as intense sadness, anger, bitterness and guilt.

How we grieve

Everyone is unique, and every death is unique. How we respond and react will vary depending 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.

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. On reflection, we can all think of things that we would have done differently, and 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 - It can be difficult communicating within a family when someone has died, even when you have a close relationship. This can leave you feeling misunderstood, hurt or angry. The immediate focus might understandably be on the parents, and then on any surviving brothers or sisters. Grandparents can sometimes feel they are 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 an 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 having someone else around too much to think about, even someone they care about. Try not to take this personally. There will be times when the parents need to be alone 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, depending 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 or child's name and try to show that he or she is still very important to you. It can be comforting for a parent to be able to share intimate family thoughts, or memories that make you smile, with someone who had a 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 depending 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 can include making some dinners,

offering to look after any surviving children for a short period of time or just being there to listen to them. 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 about their sibling's death, 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 recognised 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, 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, can be reassuring for them. 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. You can also phone Child Bereavement UK's helpline 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.'

If you have been sent condolence cards or messages, it can be helpful as a process for you to reply to them. Remember that they are written as an expression of care for you and not as something to put more pressure on you. Only reply if that is what you want to do.

In families where communication can be difficult, you may not be able to help in all the ways that you would like to. Or it might be that others in the family are not able to offer you the support you need. Sometimes the intentions of others are good, even if the expression is poor. The organisations listed below may be able to offer the support you need.

Resources and further reading

Other Child Bereavement UK information sheets you may find helpful:

How we grieve; Remembering; What friends and family can do www.childbereavementuk.org

Other organisations

The Compassionate Friends

Offer support for bereaved parents and groups of grandparents.

www.tcf.org.uk

0345 123 2304

Northern Ireland: 0288 77 88 016

The Child Death Helpline - support for those affected by the death of a child, whether family, friends, or professionals. Staffed by bereaved parents and supervised by trained counsellors.

www.childdeathhelpline.org.uk

0800 282 986 or 0808 800 6019

Books - Available from bookshops or online booksellers, unless otherwise stated

For Bereaved Grandparents

Margaret Gerner

Addresses the grief that grandparents may feel. Shows grandparents how they can help their children while grieving themselves.

Help for Grandparents

ARC (Antenatal Results & Choices) www.arc-uk.org

Booklet explaining diagnosis of foetal abnormalities during pregnancy and choices available to parents. Covers emotions felt by grandparents and advice on how you can help your children, and yourself.

Relative Grief

Clare Jenkins & Judy Merry

Real experiences from parents and children, sisters and brother, husbands, wives and partners, grandparents and grandchildren.

Further resources and/or references are available from Child Bereavement UK, upon request.