

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT—GRANDPARENT GRIEF

## Grandparents' Grief—Who Is Listening?

By Mary Lou Reed

If a grandparent/grandchild relationship is shattered by death, grandparents lose more than a cherished grandchild—they suffer a dual loss—simultaneously needing to mourn the death of their grandchild, while also grieving for their adult child's suffering.

A grandchild's death seems perverse, absurd and totally unnatural; it defies the natural order. Grandparents expect to predecease their children, and certainly, their grandchildren.

But, who is listening?

Parental bereavement has received extensive study, publications and publicity from the counseling and bereavement community in the past couple of decades, and rightly so. But, what about the grandparents? They, too, need support and resources that address their specific double loss.

A lack of societal and professional consideration for grandparents' grief may be attributed to the impression that since the death of a grandchild is one generation removed (i.e., it is "not *their* child that died!"), grandparents, therefore, are immune to the intense pain of such a loss.

That is not true, of course.

Another common cultural assumption is that because grandparents are older than the parents of the deceased child, they have had more experience with death. Consequently, they will not need as much consideration and support as they will "know how" to cope with the death of their grandchild.

Many grandparents, unfortunately, have learned differently.

Following the death of my grandson in 1989, I searched through death and bereavement literature in a near futile attempt to find assistance with my debilitating grief. Literature dealing with the death of friends, and pet loss, showed up more frequently than grandparents' grief.

My research located mostly tangential references to the role and needs of grandparents. A short paragraph by Rando (1986) did note the duality of grandparents' grief, "They not only lose their grandchild, but they 'lose' their child as well, as they cannot rescue their child from bereaved-parent status." (pg. 37)

And yet, even today, not much has been written about the special needs of grandparents. Since Margaret Gerner (1990) wrote her excellent book, *For Bereaved Grandparents*, only a few other books (Kolf, 1995; Galinsky, 1999), including my own (Reed, 2000) have been published. This is "slim pickin's" for a large and growing segment of our society.

Although much has been written regarding grief, particularly parental grief (which is useful to grandparents), there remains a deficiency of specific information to assist grandparents survive an event they never believed they would live to experience.

### Grandparents' Personal Grief from the Loss of a Beloved Grandchild

Most grandparents would gladly trade places with their dead grandchild—such a loss feels so devastating. Not often conscious of the enormous investment in their grandchildren as well as the strength of the attachment, grandparents are vulnerable to intense double pain on the death of a grandchild.

The development of a cherished grandparent/grandchild relationship often grows from the fact that, because grandparents are no longer responsible for the day-to-day care of the child, they are spared from the usual conflicts between generations. Also, grandparents often have more leisure time and disposable income than the parents, thus making it easier to develop a closer and sweeter relationship between grandparent and grandchild.

The hopes and dreams of the grandparent (sometimes even a namesake) are invested in a grandchild. Losing that child leaves grandparents struggling through a grieving process for what feels like a loss of part of themselves.

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A grandchild represents the grandparents' immortality—the bearer of the grandparents' legacy to the world, one generation extended—a powerful concept that brings deep grief when a grandchild dies.

A grandchild's death sends shock waves through the entire family. Rando (1986) mentions potential family relationship problems, the important role of grandparents and how difficult their role. Those difficulties extend far beyond the afore mentioned double mourning, as grandparents often are the ones a family looks to for strength, inspiration, understanding, and care.

### Bearing Witness to Their Adult Child's Grief

Bearing witness to an adult child's grief is a process filled with *potholes*—a situation fraught with possible misunderstandings.

A major stumbling block can be the many cultural and family-learned grief customs on both sides of the family. Details such as how grief should be expressed, how death rituals should be handled, the right and wrong way to grieve, how long one should grieve, and idiosyncratic reactions to the loss can be a minefield for grandparents to maneuver while watching helplessly the anguish of their child's grief.

Communication with the adult child and his/her family (including in-laws) after such a devastating loss will depend in part on "the long history of your relationship with your child" (Galinsky, 1999, p. 51). There are no guarantees, however, that even in the best of relationships that there will not be confusion or misunderstandings. An example is Gerner's (1990) observation that, "one of the most talked-about subjects in groups of young bereaved parents is the lack of understanding from their parents."

Grandparents cannot protect their child from, nor take away, the child's pain. Extreme effort is required to be available and helpful to their adult child and his/her family all the while watching their suffering. This puts an extraordinary demand on grandparents' love, understanding, knowledge, and abilities—not to mention stamina.

The extraordinary emotional and psychological effort grandparents experience trying to cope with a grandchild's death often seems to be a challenge far beyond what most grandparents believe they can endure. No one ever expects to have to fill this particular role in life and there aren't any training manuals!

The burden is a long-lasting one. Even grandparents who have found some feelings of "peace" about the death of their grandchild frequently mention that the pain they see in their own child over the years is a never-ending source of sorrow.

### Helping Surviving Siblings (Other Grandchildren of the Same Family)

If there are other siblings in the same family where a grandchild has died, grandparents may be invaluable to those children and their parents at such a difficult time. Most grandparents will recognize the importance of being available to those children. Unfortunately, this is another area where grandparents may find it difficult to "help without hindering." It is another burden for grandparents, especially those ill-prepared to recognize and deal with the special needs of surviving siblings.

### Being Available to Other Family Members

Being the "strength" for the entire family is a difficult expectation for grandparents to handle—to "carry on" with grace and dignity—with little support from either society or bereavement professionals.

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In one way or another, the entire family will be affected by the death of a child, generating emotions that "rattle around, and bounce back," unbalancing the family dynamics. Janice Nadeau (1998) uses a mobile to represent an extended family, demonstrating the "unbalancing" and instability that occurs in a family when a child dies. When the figure of a child is removed, the mobile swings wildly. I cannot think of a better image for a family grieving the death of a child.

Aunts, uncles, and cousins of the dead child have their own mourning to do also and often look to grandparents for assistance. A sibling of the parent who has lost a child, and who has children of his/her own, may go through tremendous fears for their own children. Their reactions to these fears may lead to confusion and distancing. "Why haven't (sister or brother's family) called, been to see us?" the grieving parents ask the grandparents. The grandparents are then put into the situation of being mediators for a family in grief—to be the peacemakers. What incredible demands the family may place on the already stretched physical, mental, emotional, and psychological strengths of the grandparents!

### From Where Will Come Support and Validation?

I believe grandparents need and deserve an extensive examination of the depth and complexity of their grief—studies similar to those of parental loss.

Validating grandparents' grief through scholarly studies and development of educational materials could be a fertile field for bereavement educators and grief counselors. This subject will require more attention in coming years as the aging of our country's population means more grandparents are living longer—long enough to suffer the death of a grandchild.

While many grief groups and organizations encourage bereaved grandparents to attend their meetings, generally grandparents of today are reticent to speak of their pain in a group of non-peers. Providing grandparents with time to be heard in "a place of their own" will help answer the oft-heard need expressed by grieving grandparents—they want someone to talk to who has experienced the same type of grief. They want someone who will listen.

Grandparents' grief may present multiple challenges, but the simple act of listening, as we all know, is a powerful healer. ■

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### About the Author

Mary Lou Reed RN, MA, has worked in both medical and mental health fields, most recently facilitating grief and caregiver groups at a local Senior Center in Mesa, Arizona where she helped develop and initiate a Peer Training/Peer Counseling Program for seniors. An ADEC member, she is the author of *Grandparents Cry Twice: Help for Bereaved Grandparents and currently working on a book about grief and autism*. Email: [mlreed@metabien.com](mailto:mlreed@metabien.com)



# Grandparent Grief: “Nipped In the Bud”

By Tom Easthope, CDE

As a Death Educator/Funeral Director working in a large funeral home setting for over thirty-five years, grandparent grief has become a familiar challenge. I use the word challenge because no two scenarios are exactly the same and yet there are some common threads that bind the weave within the mosaic of this unique group when it comes to loss.

The grandparent—grandchild relationship is capable of being like no other. Its chemistry is pure and unconditional. The arrival of a new grandchild can be like reliving spring in the autumn of your life.

When most of us pass the mid-life point, we usually incur more losses on a day to day basis. In the midst of degenerating health, downsizing homes, decreasing income, and the deaths of loved ones and dear friends, the presence of grandchildren with all their energy and vitality can provide a sense of new growth when everything else feels like it is dying.

Unfortunately, when a young life is extinguished in its infancy or prime, the grief that follows can be debilitating not only for the parents but also for the grandparents.

When a grandchild dies, grandparents must witness the agony of their own children. As grandparents they may have to parent their child again. In spite of feeling powerless, there can be an overwhelming need to remain strong.

When it comes to grandparent grief, I believe the funeral process, as in any other death, is comparable to a ‘double edged sword.’ The ‘funeral,’ for whatever it may be, has the potential of being a highly therapeutic vehicle. Used incorrectly however, it can compound our grief and exacerbate our pain.

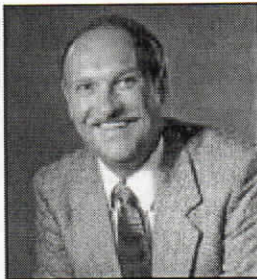
I have seen well-meaning grandparents and parents create further heartache for one another under the guise of genuine caring.

As parents, most of us feel a need to protect our children. This can even apply to adult children when a grandchild dies. It’s like a knee-jerk reaction. We want to ease the burden or remove it completely, not realizing the consequences. I have seen many well-intentioned grandparents disenfranchise their children’s grief by taking over right from the get go. Making the funeral arrangements, paying for the funeral, ordering the family flowers and offering burial space in their own cemetery plots may sound wonderful, but is it?

On occasion, sets of grandparents consciously and unconsciously become competitive with one another aspiring to be the family ‘rescuers’ or ‘saviors’ to the detriment of all concerned. I often wonder if that action is sometimes fueled by ‘survivor guilt’ or recurring family dynamics?

On the other hand, adult children sometimes feel a need to protect their parents when a grandchild dies. Sometimes the thinking is that their parent’s are too old to face the loss. As a result, the grandparents feel isolated and invalidated. It is important to remember that over protection can be as bad as neglect.

At other times, because the heart-wrenching pain is so overwhelming when a grandchild dies, it is understandably hard for



family members to see beyond their own immediate needs. It is like me saying to you, “Stop having that heart attack you’re having and help the person over here with the stroke.”

There is also the gender gap. We know that grandmothers and grandfathers grieve differently. Women are more likely to express sadness and mourn openly. Yet many women have been trained to suppress explosive emotions. They are more apt to nurture other family members, while men are more action oriented.

Men are more inclined to publicize their anger, only to suppress more intimate feelings of attachment. It’s like grieving at sixes and sevens.

Used correctly, the funeral can honor our sorrow and fulfill the needs of the family as a whole. I believe that part of the therapy in the funeral process involves embracing the burden of decision-making as a family: parents, grandparents and siblings.

It is for that reason I do not like to see one family member making the decisions for everyone else who is in pain. Because family dynamics differ based on personalities, closeness, coping-mechanisms, beliefs and expectations, barriers can easily be created through the employment of emotional shorthand. As a funeral director, I think it is imperative to support griever in clarifying their thoughts, feelings and needs, in an effort for the immediate family to work together as a whole.

I also believe the funeral director has a responsibility during the funeral consultation or arrangement to make the family aware of the many choices and alternatives available to them in the way of a funeral, as well as the ‘aftercare’ programs to follow. This way it becomes a ‘family affair.’ Everyone is involved in a positive way, can make informed decisions and, at the same time, be aware of everyone else’s needs. I refer to it as “Setting the Tone” and making this tragic loss a meaningful event.

I am reminded of a family I served many years ago. Their infant son had died at birth. The family had requested that their baby’s body be embalmed to allow for family viewing and a small service to follow.

When I took the family to their visitation room, they all stood before the little white lambskin casket. When I returned to the room moments later, they were still standing where I had left them. The expression in their eyes conveyed they somehow needed more. Looking at the mom, I asked, “Would you like to hold your baby?” With an uplifting voice she replied, “Could I?” Everyone in the room sat down as I lifted the baby from the tiny casket and placed him in his mother’s arms. When I walked by the room sometime later, I saw this little baby being passed from parent to grandparent to older sibling. When the mom held her infant son for the last time with everyone looking on, she began to sing to her child, “You Are My Sunshine.” Yes, there were a lot of tears shed and as strange as it may seem, there was also an unexplained joy present in that room that day. Sometimes what is easiest isn’t always best and some-

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times what is the most painful can also be very meaningful.

When it comes to grandparent grief, as individuals and as a nation we need to validate this overlooked and routinely unrecognized grief. Grandparents need empathetic listeners who will allow them to talk and reminisce when necessary. If they begin to cry, it is important to understand that you did not cause the tears. It is the loss that hurts, not the dialogue that follows. Sometimes tears just need to be shed. And do not be afraid to send grieving grandparents a note periodically (or on anniversary dates) to let them know that they are remembered and are still in your thoughts. Honor their sorrow as best you can, even if it means putting your own discomfort with their grief secondary to their pain.

Even though a green twig has been nipped in the bud, the scar on the soul of the family tree will always be a precious heartfelt reminder of what the family roots are capable of bearing and the broken promise of what could have been. The choice is ours as to whether we, as caregivers, allow grandparents to wither up in their grief or remain rooted in familiar nurturing soil and continue blooming where they are planted.

Postscript

Grandparent grief can take on many forms; it is not limited to the death of a grandchild. As a grandparent, you can grieve for the

challenges that a grandchild may have to endure as the result of parental divorce or death.

When I began writing this article, I was a professional spectator who had witnessed the assorted grief of so many grandparents who had walked that stretch of lonely beach canopied by sullen gray skies raining tears of heartbreak.

In the early morning hours of Sunday, September 29, 2002, my wife and I received the tragic news of our son-in-law's sudden death resulting from complications following routine surgery. He left his wife, our youngest daughter, and three beautiful children, ages 5, 8 and 12, our grandchildren.

The most dreadful task I have ever had to perform was to rob our three grandchildren of their innocence and inform them of their father's unexpected death. Not only are we grieving for our daughter but our hearts just ache for those three young lives.

Now I end this article as a participant sinking my feet into that chilling cold, wet sand on that lonely stretch of beach. ■

About the Author

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# The Death of a Grandchild: A Complex Grief

By Nadine Galinsky

"Could you help me find a book for grieving grandparents?" That question, posed to me by my mother after my daughter's stillbirth, was innocent enough. However, I discovered quickly what bereavement professionals already know: not much was available. As a result of my limited findings, I decided to seek out and interview bereaved grandparents for their perspectives, hoping to provide the level of support to my mother that I was getting as a bereaved parent. The result of this research became a book, *When a Grandchild Dies: What to Do, What to Say, How to Cope* (Galinsky, 1999).



## Scope of Research

With my only experience being my own bereavement, I was unprepared for the complexity of the topic. Grandparents are a diverse group! My primary sample included nine individuals, all females, who ranged in age from 40 to 83 (men declined my request for an interview). I also spoke informally with several others.

The ages of the deceased grandchildren ranged from 28 weeks in utero to 18 years, and the time that had elapsed since the deaths ranged from two months to 17 years. Causes of death were varied and included heart defects, complications from spina bifida and cerebral palsy, SIDS, murder, and one unknown cause.

Seven grandparents were married, one was widowed, and one was divorced at the time of the interview. The group was evenly split between parents of bereaved daughters and sons.

I found interview subjects through a variety of methods: personal acquaintance, a newspaper story, and the Internet. Whenever possible, I met with them in person. To assist the others I prepared a questionnaire, the goal of which was to provoke detailed responses. In personal interviews I used the questionnaire only as a guide, preferring to create an environment that would allow grandparents to expand beyond my questions. This was useful early on, when one grandmother discussed problems with her daughter-in-law, because in-law problems just weren't part of my personal experience.

One way my research differs from more objective, scientific research was my bias about the subject; my final product included my own observations and feelings, and I am sure my grief affected how I approached the interviews. I could relate more, for example, to newly bereaved grandparents because we were sharing similar experiences. However, I sought to keep my bias to a minimum by using open-ended questions, presenting all opinions whether or not I agreed with them personally, and seeking prepublication feedback to ensure there were no glaring problems.

Following are some selected observations from my conversations with grieving grandparents.

## Funeral Services: Setting the Tone

Five of the grandmothers interviewed were heavily involved in funeral arrangements. In two of these cases, the bereaved parents specifically asked the grandparents to take over. I was particularly interested in this, because my own response was to plan the fu-

neral almost entirely on my own. It felt like the only act of parenting available to me; perhaps this is because my daughter was stillborn and I had no other opportunity to be her mother.

Handling the funeral arrangements seemed to set the tone for the quality of family communication later on. One grandmother, who was not involved in making the arrangements, was surprised when one of her favorite poems was read at the funeral. Its inclusion helped her feel involved and supported.

On the other hand, resentments at the funeral tended to snowball afterward. The most extreme example was one family whose relationship had deteriorated to the point where the grandparents had virtually no contact with the bereaved parents. In that instance, religious differences came into play at the funeral, and family members felt that only the mother's wishes were considered.

The families that fared best were those who discussed family roles during funeral planning, whether or not the grandparents were involved in the details.

## A Dual Loss

In addition to the death, which is "out of the order of things," grandparents also feel helpless to console their children, the bereaved parents. Despite all their years of parenting experience, there is nothing a grandparent can do in this situation to make things better. One time I went to a memorial service, and I was called to the ladies restroom, where a grandmother was all alone, sobbing. She said, "I wanted to be so strong for my daughter on this day." She felt ashamed for losing control, and uncomfortable about sharing her pain with anyone.

A common reaction among grandparents is to feel guilty for being the one who lived. So many said to me, "I've lived a long life. Why couldn't it have been me who was taken?" Their desire to protect their children runs deep, and they believe their death would somehow make sense, instead of the senseless death of the grandchild.

## Relationships and Support

Most of the grandparents I spoke with did not talk to their families about their grief. Only three reported receiving support within the family, though one grandmother acknowledged that her family would probably be receptive if she would allow them to see her need. Most of the married grandmothers, five out of seven, were able to receive support from spouses. The other two, however, reported an inability to speak with their husbands. To one grandmother, married nearly fifty years to her best friend, this was devastating.

Two respondents were counselors and, though they did not seek counseling themselves, they benefited from their training. One grandmother frequently visualized her grandchild sitting across from her so she could speak aloud all the things she longed to tell her grandchild. Two others turned to grief counselors for "a few"

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## The Death of a Grandchild: A Complex Grief

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visits, mostly to validate that their experiences were normal. The remaining grandmothers had no interest in receiving counseling, and one grandmother was extremely hostile to the idea.

Three grandmothers found solace in churches, with one grandmother choosing a different religion based on how some of its members answered questions about death and the afterlife. Two others attended church services but felt their faith to be shaken. There did not seem to be a relationship between the length of time since the death and the level of faith. The most extraordinary story I heard was of the grandmother whose granddaughter had lived for 18 years with severe congenital defects. During that entire time, the church supported their family with calls, casseroles, and condolence!

Only one grandmother attended a support group, and she expressed discomfort at being the only grandmother there. In my own observation, having attended a support group that "welcomes" grandparents, separate groups for grandparents would appear to be a better idea. Both groups would benefit from being able to speak freely about family difficulties.

Several grandmothers were enthusiastic about support found on the Internet, and some had created memorial web sites for their grandchildren. This was a way for grandparents to find and connect with each other.

A common complaint was the lack of reading material for grandparents, which of course explains their enthusiasm to interview for a book. Part of my frustration in writing a book was having to be so general in my approach. One newly bereaved grandmother read the manuscript before it was published and was concerned I had not addressed the issue of widowed grandparents who carry the burden of trying to be both grandmother and grandfather. Another individual wanted to see more about cultural and racial differences in grief styles. In both cases, I chose to keep the manuscript "as is" because I felt that too much information would be overwhelming. My hope is that others will step forward and publish more on this subject, and I am grateful to see more information becoming available.

### Epilogue

Four years have passed since I conducted my research. Since that time another book has been published (see References), and more support is available on the Internet. I have met grief counselors who are starting new support groups for grandparents, and I am pleased to see this change occurring.

Closer to home, my mother has the book she was looking for, in part because she provided feedback on my work while it was in progress. She felt she benefited most from reading others' stories so she felt less alone, and from learning to recognize that the silence of others does not connote a lack of caring.

Once during a talk I was giving, a counselor expressed a feeling of helplessness to respond to grandparents who wished they had died instead of their grandchildren. "How do I respond to that?" he asked. We certainly cannot take away their pain. In the midst of the complexity and uniqueness of grandparents' grief, however, lies a simplicity in what helps the most: listening, caring, and validation. By providing places for them to share their stories, whether in groups, books, or other venues, we can certainly offer them that. ■

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### About the Author

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# My Nicky

By Wannie Pawley

It's been 21 months since my grandson, Nicky, had to leave and everyday is a struggle still. Many days I feel like it all just happened yesterday. I had never really had to deal with death before, so I never knew what real pain was until I had to let him go that night. I am learning that, for me, I will never "get over it" as people say I will.

Nicky got sick on September 13, 2000, thought he had pneumonia. For 3 days, they all thought he had pneumonia until they found the tumor in his left lung. They said it took up three-fourths of his lung, so they had to take him to surgery and try to get it out. He was in there 5 hours. The doctor came out and told us it was too big to remove and it was malignant. I actually felt my heart stop. I couldn't breathe, couldn't think, couldn't believe what I was hearing. That was when I began to pull back from my family. I comforted my son and daughter-in-law as much as I could, but I was really too busy praying and trying to bargain with God to save my baby.

I stayed with Nicky day and night for six weeks, all the time "knowing" this was a mistake and he would wake up and reach for me. But they were never able to take him off the respirator, so I never got to see his brown eyes, his smile or hear him say "nana" again. I just sat holding his little hands, stroking his head, talking to him, begging him to wake up, telling him how much I loved him. I can still smell that hospital smell, that soap they use. I can still see him on that last night struggling to live, but he was so tired.

His parents made the decision to turn off the respirator as they were told that they could lessen his suffering that way. Or, they could wait and let the cancer take him. I see in my dreams (nightmares) the nurse's hand turning off the switch. I see him in his mother's arms. I held his hand and begged God to help him breathe. When I saw that wasn't working, I begged God to let me go with him.

I am still here. I can look back at my journal and see I have "gotten better" since that night Nicky died, but I am not healed by any means. I am still going through what they call the "stages" of grief. I have finally realized there is no "quick fix" and God will not take me until it is my time to go. I still cry and dream of Nicky. I have not had a good night's sleep in a very long time.

There are places I used to love to go where I can no longer bear to be—the zoo, the beach, anywhere there are too many children about 3 years old. I just can't do it anymore. Sometimes my sadness overwhelms me when I think of all the times we were going to share. Now it's all just gone, taken away too soon. Walking on the beach, feeding the seagulls, riding bikes together—we had only just begun.

I was raised going to church with my grandmother. I still ask God why this had to happen, knowing I am not supposed to know the answer yet. Sometimes there is no answer, only questions. My heart still breaks daily and the emptiness will never go away. I love my daughter very much and, after many years alone, I have met a wonderful man (who also suffered in this very way). He has helped me so much to cope. But you know, I would go this very minute if God told me I could be with my Angel, Nicky.

I wake up every day and breathe and work and try to do what I have to do. It is very hard to find the joy in life that I had before. I am trying, even though it seems like I take two steps forward and one step back a lot of the time. I don't know if I will ever get a chance to be a grandma again. If I do, I wonder if I can give my entire heart and all my love, or will fear make this impossible?

I suppose God will find a way to let me know as the days stretch on and on and on. Nicky was my Angel on earth, and now he is my Angel in heaven. I see him in the sunsets and the clouds over the ocean. My love for him will never change. ■

Always,

Nicky's Nana

## About the Author

Wannie Pawley is a bereaved grandmother who lives in Raleigh, North Carolina.



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## Upcoming Themes

If you would like to contribute an article to an issue with these upcoming themes, please contact Louis Gamino, Editor of *The Forum*. [lgamino@swmail.sw.org](mailto:lgamino@swmail.sw.org)

### Topics under consideration:

Deaths attended by public servants  
Grief and the Arts  
HIV/AIDS



## For Bereaved Grandparents

(an excerpt) By Margaret H. Gerner, MSW

*I am powerlessness. I am helplessness. I am frustration.*

*I sit with her and I cry with her.*

*She cries for her daughter and I cry for mine.*

*I can't help her.*

*I can't reach inside her and take her broken heart.*

*I must watch her suffer day after day.*

*I listen to her tell me over and over how she misses Emily, how she wants her back.*

*I can't bring Emily back for her.*

*I can't buy her an even better Emily than she had, like I could buy her an even better toy when she was a child.*

*I can't kiss the hurt and make it go away.*

*I can't even kiss a small part of it away.*

*There's no bandaid large enough to cover her bleeding heart.*

*There was a time I could listen to her talk about a fickle boyfriend and tell her it would be okay, and know in my heart that in two weeks she wouldn't even think of him.*

*Can I tell her it'll be okay in two years when I know it will never be okay, that she will carry this pain of "what might have been" in her deepest heart for the rest of her life?*

*I see this young woman, my child, who was once carefree and fun-loving and bubbling with life, slumped in a chair with her eyes full of agony.*

*Where is my power now?*

*Where is my mother's bag of tricks that will make it all better?*

*Why can't I join her in the aloneness of her grief?*

*As tight as my arms wrap around her,*

*I can't reach that aloneness.*

*What can I give her to make her better?*

*A cold, wet cloth will ease the swelling of her crying eyes, but it won't stop the reason for her tears.*

*What treat will bring joy back to her?*

*What prize will bring that happy child back?*

*Where are the magic words to give her comfort?*

*What chapter in Dr. Spock tells me how to do this?*

*He has told me everything else I've needed to know.*

*Where are the answers?*

*I should have them.*

*I'm the mother.*

*I know that someday she'll find happiness again, that her life will have meaning again.*

*I can hold out hope for her someday, but what about now? this minute? this hour? this day?*

*I can give her my love and my prayers and my care and my concern.*

*I could give her my life.*

*But even that won't help. ■*



### Acknowledgement

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### About the Author

Margaret Gerner is a bereaved parent and grandparent. In 1979, she founded the St. Louis Chapter of The Compassionate Friends. She continues to be active with Bereaved Parents of the USA. She holds a Master's Degree in Social Work and is a Certified Grief Counselor with the Chrysalis Center, a bereavement counseling and resource center for funeral directors located in St. Charles, Missouri.



# Helping a Grandparent Who Is Grieving

*by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.*

A child or young adult has died. Everyone who loved the child is now faced with mourning this tragic, untimely death. The child's parents are heartbroken. But what about the grandparents? How might they be feeling? How can you help them with their unique grief?

This article will guide you in ways to turn your concern for the grandparents into positive action.

## **Realize that a grandparent's grief is unique.**

When a grandchild dies, the grandparent often mourns the death on many levels. The grandparent probably loved the child dearly and may have been very close to him or her. The death has created a hole in the grandparent's life that cannot be filled by anyone else. Grandparents who were not close to the child who died, perhaps because they lived far away, may instead mourn the loss of a relationship they never had.

Grieving grandparents are also faced with witnessing their child-the parent of the child who died-mourn the death. A parent's love for a child is perhaps the strongest of all human bonds. For the parents of the child who died, the pain of grief may seem intolerable. For the grandparents, watching their own child suffer so and feeling powerless to take away the hurt can feel almost as intolerable.

## **Acknowledge the grandparent's search for meaning.**

When someone loved dies, we all ponder the meaning of life and death. When a child or young adult dies, this search for meaning can be especially painful. Young people aren't supposed to die. The death violates the natural order of life and seems terribly unfair.

For grandparents, who may have lived long, rich lives already, the struggle to understand the death may bring about feelings of guilt. "Why didn't God take me, instead?" the grandparent may ask himself. "Why couldn't it have been me?"

Such feelings are both normal and necessary. You can help by encouraging the grandparent to talk about them.

## **Respect faith and spirituality.**

Many people develop strong commitments to faith and spirituality as they get older. If you allow them, grieving grandparents will "teach you" about the role of faith and spirituality in their lives. Encourage them to express their faith if doing so helps them heal in grief.



Sometimes, however, faith can naturally complicate healing. The grandparent may feel angry at God for "taking" the grandchild. He then may feel guilty about his anger, because, he may reason, God is not to be questioned. Or the grandparent may struggle with feelings of doubt about God's plan or the afterlife.

Talking with a pastor may help the grandparent, as long as the pastor allows the grandparent to honestly express her feelings of anger, guilt and sadness. No one should tell a grandparent that she shouldn't grieve because the child has gone to heaven; mourning and having faith are not mutually exclusive.

#### **Listen with your heart.**

You can begin to help by simply listening. Your physical presence and desire to listen without judging are critical helping tools. Don't worry so much about what you will say. Just concentrate on the words that are being shared with you.

The grieving grandparent may want to share the same story about the death over and over again. It's as if talking about the death makes it a little more bearable each time. Listen attentively. Realize that this repetition is part of the grandparent's healing process. Simply listen and try to understand.

Sometimes grandparents, especially grandfathers, don't want to talk about the death. They may have been raised to believe that talking about feelings is frivolous or selfish or unmanly. It's OK; they don't have to talk. Simply spending time with them demonstrates your love and concern.

#### **Be compassionate.**

Give the grandparent permission to express her feelings without fear of criticism. Learn from the grandparent; don't instruct or set expectations about she should respond. Never say, "I know just how you feel." You don't. Think about your helper role as someone who "walks with" not "behind" or "in front of" the grieving grandparent.

Allow the grandparent to experience all the hurt, sorrow and pain that he is feeling at the time. Enter into his feelings, but never try to take them away. And recognize that tears are a natural and appropriate expression of the pain associated with the death.

#### **Avoid clichés.**

Words, particularly clichés, can be extremely painful for a grieving grandparent. Clichés are trite comments often intended to provide simple solutions to difficult realities. Grandparents are often told, "God needed another angel in heaven" or "Don't worry, John and Susie (can) have another child" or "You have to be strong for your child." Comments like these are not constructive. Instead, they hurt because they diminish the very real and very painful loss of a unique child.

#### **Offer practical help.**



Preparing food, washing clothes, and cleaning the house are just a few of the practical ways of showing you care. And, just as with your presence, this support is needed at the time of the death as well as in the weeks and months ahead.

**Write a personal note.**

Sympathy cards express your concern, but there is no substitute for your personal written words. What do you say? Share a favorite memory of the child who died. Relate the special qualities that you valued in him or her. These words will be a loving gift to the grandparent, words that will be reread and remembered always.

Use the name of the child who died in your personal note and in talking to the grandparent. Hearing that name can be comforting, and it confirms that you have not forgotten this important child whom the grandparent loved and misses so much.

**Be aware of holidays and other significant days.**

The grandparent may have a difficult time during special occasions like holidays and other significant days, such as the child's birthday and the anniversary of the child's death. These events emphasize the child's absence. Respect this pain as a natural extension of the grief process.

These are appropriate times to visit the grandparents or write a note or simply give them a quick phone call. Your ongoing support will be appreciated and healing.

*"When a grandchild dies, grandparents grieve twice. They mourn the loss of the child and they feel the pain of their own child's suffering. Sometimes we forget about the grandparents when a child dies. You can help by not forgetting, by offering the grandparents your love, support and presence in the weeks and months to come."*

Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.  
Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition

**About the Author**

Dr. Alan D. Wolfelt is a noted author, educator and practicing grief counselor. He serves as Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition in Fort Collins, Colorado and presents dozens of grief-related workshops each year across North America. Among his books are *Healing Your Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas* and *The Healing Your Grieving Heart Journal for Teens*. For more information, write or call The Center for Loss and Life Transition, 3735 Broken Bow Road, Fort Collins, Colorado 80526, (970) 226-6050 or visit their website, [www.centerforloss.com](http://www.centerforloss.com).



# The Grief of Grandparents

The grandparent-grandchild relationship is very special. When a grandchild dies, the grief of grandparents is complicated because not only do they mourn for their grandchild, but they also feel the helplessness of not being able to take away the pain felt so intensely by the parents of their grandchild, one of whom is their own child. Both parents and grandparents have lost a part of their future.

## *Grief Is Individual*

As with parents, grandparents often grieve differently from each other, and this difference may create a strain in their relationship. This does not mean one is right and the other is wrong. There is no one right way to grieve. Communication with each other remains critical. Knowing what to expect during 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*

There are many elements to grief. But because grief is not necessarily ordered or rational, there is no logic or pattern to how it is experienced. However, when a grandchild dies, most grandparents feel a protective numbness in the beginning. Even though they may know their loved one has died, their minds want to deny it and the numbness allows this. They may find themselves talking to and about the grandchild as if he or she were still alive. They may "see" the child somewhere, only to realize it is another child. Denial of the death gradually disappears as grandparents realize that all are vulnerable to loss. The ache in their heart can become a nearly constant companion.

## *Anger*

As denial lessens, grandparents feel much hurt and frustration. This can lead to anger directed inward and toward others. It may be focused on the spouse or even on the dead child. Their own grief-stricken children, whose pain they share, may become the object of their anger. They often are angry with themselves for not being able to stop the injustice that has devastated the family; they may feel anger with God.

## *Guilt*

Guilt, real or imagined, is always there, with the recurring "What if . . . ?" and "Why didn't I . . . ?" As grandparents try to resolve their guilt feelings, anger often returns in full force.

Because grandparents love their children, they often are torn between this love and the fear of loving too much, lest they then lose a child or another grandchild. Grief over a death long past may resurface. 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 the grandparents live on, while the young ones died.

## *Depression*

Some depression is a normal part of the grieving process. Yet it may be so overwhelming to bereaved grandparents that they fear they are going crazy. Bereaved grandparents also worry about sanity and depression in their grieving child. Friends may burden them further by voicing their concern in this respect.



Occasional thoughts of suicide are not abnormal when experiencing intense grief, but a focus on this aspect indicates professional counseling is needed.

### ***Time Is a Slow Healer***

The passage of time alone does not provide healing. How that time is used is what makes the difference. During grief, which lasts much longer than society wants 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 grandparents. They may be aided in helping their children 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. Oftentimes today's grandfather was raised in a home where tradition held that even after the death of a loved one, men didn't cry. Men may not give in to tears, instead believing they must maintain composure to properly support their wives and children in their grief work. A grandmother, being the matriarch of the family, may try to suppress her own grief, also in order to support others within the family. Studies have shown the healing power of tears, and crying should not be suppressed as this is a natural part of the grieving process.

### ***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 death struck, or that they are forgetting the dead grandchild. So often bereaved grandparents and parents are 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 the anniversary of the child's death, may be stressful times. Allow time and space for your own emotional needs. A deeper appreciation will grow for those children and grandchildren who survive. A greater understanding of others who experience similar loss will emerge. Many grandparents and parents become more compassionate because of the tragic event that has touched their lives. Healing will help the bereaved accept the new understanding that has been forced upon them.

### ***Love Remains as Healing Occurs***

Grief is the price we pay for loving. Grandparents love both the grandchild who died and the grieving parents. As grandparents grieve and try to understand and support the parents, healing will take place. Just as love remains and will never leave, time will bring healing. Though they retain hidden 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 they have come to know.