

GRANDPARENT'S GRIEF

A grandparent's grief can be a complicated journey. You may have thought about the first time you were going to hold your grandchild, or the special outfit you were going to buy, or those special times you were going to spend babysitting. You might feel cheated or angry that you no longer have those decisions to make for the baby.

A grandparent's grief is twofold. Not only are you mourning the loss of your grandchild, you have also lost a part of your daughter or son that will never be the same. Many grandparents feel a sense of helplessness because they are unable to prevent the anguish their own child feels. You may want to protect them as you did when they were younger, but you can no longer kiss their hurt away as grown ups.

Life may now seem more fragile and unfair than ever. These feelings may be frustrating, but they are completely normal for grandparents and family to feel as they too experience the loss of this baby.

IS MY GRIEF NORMAL?

The discovery that your grandchild has died has probably come as a complete shock, and the emotions you have can be overwhelming at first. You may be asking, "Why did this have to happen?" This news and process can be devastating. You have not only lost a grandchild but also the hopes and dreams you had planned for your future together.

Everyone's way of grieving is different. Many times grandmothers and grandfathers grieve differently. Women tend to talk and be more open emotionally, while many men that have been raised as providers and protectors feel that showing emotions such as sadness and crying is not acceptable. Showing these emotions is a very normal expression of grief, and promotes healthy healing. It is important to remember that you are grieving the loss of your grandchild, and you too need support at this time.

The following array of emotions makes up a normal process of grief. It is very unlikely that you or your child will experience these in an order or as stages. You may have very intense feelings at first, but as time passes the heartache becomes less painful. It is important for you to know that what you are feeling is normal for you. You may feel...

- ☐ **SHOCK, CONFUSION & DENIAL**

It is difficult to process the death of a baby. You may feel numbness emotionally. You may be asking, "Why did this have to happen to my grandchild?" or "Why does my child have to suffer the loss of their own child?" You may even talk as if the baby is still alive or continue making plans as if the baby were coming home.

- ☐ **LOSS OF CONTROL**

The emotions you experience may change quickly or surprise you. And, even though you are a parent too, unfortunately you cannot take away the pain of your own child.

- ☐ **DISAPPOINTMENT**

You too were expecting a healthy baby to hold. The loss of your grandchild can be disappointing because you lost your future memories together.

- ☐ **JEALOUSY**

It may be difficult to be around other babies at first. You too longed for a healthy pregnancy and baby

- ☐ **ANGER**

You may be angry at the situation, your child, grandchild, spouse, God, etc. You might also feel angry or frustrated because of the loss of control you experience.

- ☐ **GUILT**

You might feel that there was something you could have done that you did not. Or, you may question why your grandchild had to die while you continue living.

- ☐ **SADNESS & DEPRESSION**

Expressing your sorrow is normal. If you try to suppress your emotions, your sadness may become overwhelming.

- ☐ **PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS RELATED TO GRIEF**

Grief is a tiring emotion. Finding ways to express your sadness is an important part of the healing process. Physical symptoms of grief can include mood swings, fatigue, insomnia, inability to concentrate, irritability, and erratic energy levels and appetite. It is important to care for yourself, too. Because grief can have physical consequences it is essential to continue good sleep patterns, have a balanced diet, keep a regular exercise routine, and maintain your fluid intake.

HOW CAN I OFFER SUPPORT?

❑ WHAT TO SAY

If you can't find the right words, say, "I just don't know what to say." Avoid clichés such as "Everything happens for a reason," or "You're young, you can still have more children," or "God would never give you more than you can handle." What may seem comforting to you may feel very hurtful to them. Clichés tend to minimize the loss and the emotions a parent has toward the baby. If you say something insensitive, acknowledge it and apologize. Sometimes there is just nothing to say. Just be quiet, be with them, hold their hand, touch their shoulder, or give them a hug.

❑ CHECK UP

At first, offering to run errands, provide food, or do laundry may be helpful. After parents get settled at home, continue to call and check in on the family. Be specific with how you would like to help. After a few weeks, people generally stop coming by. Parents need a reminder that they are not alone. Make a call, leave a message, or write a note to let them know you care.

❑ HOW TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE BABY

One misconception is that the shorter the baby's life, the easier the grief process is. The opposite is true. Regardless of how old the baby was, or how far into the pregnancy the loss occurred, chances are, the parents had hopes and dreams for their future together. It is important to talk about the baby using his or her name. This is sometimes avoided, but by doing this you are showing you value the short life of the baby. Many parents are grateful when their baby is recognized.

❑ AVOID GIVING ADVICE

There are no rules that define how one should feel or how soon one will return to the norms of daily life. Giving permission to parents to grieve their own way can be healing. Parents need a safe person and/or place to talk about their baby and the feelings they are experiencing. They need to be heard without feeling judgment or receiving unwanted advice. Grief can make people more sensitive and vulnerable. Let the parents talk openly about the pregnancy, the birth, and any future plans or dreams they may be missing.

❑ PARENTS NEED TIME

It is very difficult to watch your own child grieve, and after some time you may wonder why they have not gotten better. The parents of a baby who has died will need more time to grieve than society allows. The average intense grief period is 18 to 24 months and parents will go through ups and downs during that time. The future holds many milestones that will be missed.

❑ REMEMBER SPECIAL DATES

Parents and grandparents may be saddened by special events or dates (birthday, due date, delivery date, Mother's & Father's Day, holidays) because it is a reminder their baby is not here. Acknowledge how difficult these days may be without the baby, and ask how they are doing. Showing your recognition with cards, gifts, or remembrances also helps to create special memories.

HOW DO I DEAL WITH OTHERS?

You have probably shared with others the excitement of a new grandchild. When friends ask, "When do I get to see that grandbaby of yours?" it can be difficult to find the right response. Regardless of the welling emotion that may occur when talking about your grandchild, it is important to be honest. Some people may not respond well to hearing that a baby has died, while others may be empathetic to the situation or even share a similar tragedy in their own lives. Regardless of how others respond, you have validated your grandchild's life by sharing his or her story. When talking to others you may actually find other grandparents that have lost a grandchild. Finding someone to share and confide in can be helpful to your own healing.

HOW CAN I MEMORIALIZE MY GRANDCHILD?

- Jewelry that includes the birthstone of your grandchild, or a special charm
- A shrub, tree, or flowers as a growing memorial
- Special pictures or picture frames
- A quilt or blanket
- Holiday ornaments
- Donations made to your favorite organizations in memory of your grandchild
- Create special rituals such as remembrances during holidays, gravesite traditions, etc.

HOW DO I TALK ABOUT THE FUTURE?

The future is best held in the hands and hearts of your son or daughter. Allow them to share with you their thoughts on future pregnancies or children without pressure or prodding. Grief is a long journey, and having more children will not ease the grief or replace the special baby that died. Even though you may have good intentions, encouraging or implying that parents should have more children may make them feel as though you are minimizing their loss. When the time is right, your son or daughter might tell you the good news that you will again have another grandchild. It might be exciting, or it might remind you of the grandchild you lost. Either way it is all right to share your emotions, but even more importantly, it is all right to remember and honor your grandchild that died.