

Grieving Grandparents

Grandparents have been described as “Forgotten Grievers” (Gyulay, 1975). They have challenges on several levels when it comes to the loss of a grandchild(ren).

- Your child has suffered the unthinkable and his or her child(ren) has died. You have not been able to protect or shield your child from this devastating loss.
- Your grandchild(ren)’s death is not the way things should play out. There may be some guilt experienced as you realize you have lived a full life and your grandchild(ren) are only beginning theirs.
- You have lost a precious, much-loved and anticipated grandchild(ren). With this loss, your hopes and dreams for the future have been shattered.

The grief process is a long, often painful journey, with no obvious timeframe or directions. There is no right or way to make the journey, only the way that works for you. We are changed forever by the loss of a child(ren).

It is natural to want to protect your child from any and all pain, but it is not always possible. You can only stand by and watch your child struggle with the loss of his or her child(ren). You feel powerless. As one grandmother put it, “She is crying for her daughter, and I am crying for mine.” For some grandparents, it may be difficult to offer or provide support when grieving themselves.

Here are some suggestions for helping you all with this loss:

1. If at all possible, try to see the baby(ies), to hold him/her, encourage naming the baby(ies). You might encourage your child to do the same, but be respectful of any decision not to see the baby(ies). Understand that one of the parents might want to see the baby(ies) and one might not. Don’t add any pressure or judgment to choices that belong to the parents.
2. Take your child in your arms. Hold him/her, cry with him/her. Let him/her tell you how they feel. Listen with your heart and soul, and with love, if this is what your child needs for support.
3. Remember that people express grief in different ways. Some will express themselves through words. They may cry, have low energy levels, feel anxious and very sad, and use words like, “I feel...” Others may express their grief through actions and thoughts. These types of grievors are more likely to say, “I think that...” They often take on projects that will memorialize the deceased child, submerge themselves in work, and become very active. Sometimes it appears that these grievors aren’t grieving at all; they are – it just looks different.
4. If you are able to share some of your own feelings of sadness, do so. When we share difficult moments, it makes the burden a little lighter, even for a time. Concealing your own pain or feelings may only make others feel that you don’t care.
5. Try to avoid comments that simplify or diminish the loss, like “You can have another baby,” or “Try to pick up the pieces and get on with your lives.”

6. You might suggest family photos, or photos of the baby(ies). Such photos can be very important over time, especially for the survivor(s). Many hospitals now have special photographers who have agreements with hospitals and are able to provide photography for families during this time.
7. Do not be afraid to use the baby(ies)'s name. After all, s/he existed and was a real part of your family's future expectations. Many grieving parents have stated, "I am not afraid to hear my baby's name, so much as I am afraid that I won't hear her/his name."
8. Take some time for your other grandchildren, especially if they are older. They may mistakenly get lost in the whirlwind around the loss, the emotions, funeral arrangements, perhaps their mother's recovery from a C-section, and will need someone they know, trust and love to be available for them.
9. Keep in mind that the loss of this baby(ies) is not your fault. You did not cause the baby(ies) to die nor could you have prevented it. You can be supportive and available to remind the parents that they are not responsible either.
10. Try not to feel badly if it feels as if your grief is initially ignored. As the parents try to come to terms with their new reality, they may inadvertently exclude you and not recognize the depth of your own grief.
11. Avoid blaming with statements like "Do you think you exercised too much? Did you drink too much coffee?" Try not to judge.
12. Take care of yourself and your partner. Make sure that you each eat nutritiously, and that your child and his or her partner do as well. Commonly after a death, people feel a loss of appetite and thirst. Snack on cheese, fruits and vegetables. It is vital to stay well hydrated and to get adequate sleep and exercise. If you find you have a physical reaction to the loss, you should see your doctor for symptoms that are persistent or troubling.
13. Your own grief may become sidelined by expectations put upon you by the grieving parents and the family. For example, you may find yourself as a mediator in conflicts between the surviving parents, or between them and other family members. Or, you may find that you are discouraged from expressing your grief, as it interferes with people's vision of you as the "strength of the family."
14. Grief for your grandchild may coincide with other challenging life events (i.e. coping with you or your partner developing dementia, retirement, downsizing, and chronic illness). This may affect your own grief process, as well as your ability to help your grieving children cope. If this is the case, set realistic goals and expectations for yourself – you can't take care of your own challenges and your grieving children. If need be, practice grace in accepting the help and support of services in whatever communities you belong.
15. There may be cultural or generational differences between how you and your children approach death rituals such as a funeral. For example, the parents may choose not to practice some traditional grieving practices that you find comforting, or they make decisions that you find



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upsetting. Some grieving parents may ask the grandparents to take complete control over the funeral arrangements, while others may exclude their parents from any input at all. Offer your help but be aware that some parents feel that planning the funeral represents their final acts of caring for their dead child.

16. You are likely to experience secondary losses related to the death of your grandchild. For example, there may be a disruption of family relationships. The usual contact, and relationship with the parents and other grandchildren may change. These changes may be almost as difficult as the death of your grandchild. If possible, talk with your grieving children about the changes and how they might be softened. Remember that there will be a “new normal” as a consequence of the death. Things will not be the same as they once were.
17. Try to keep the lines of communication open between family members. Offer to assist with meals, childcare, homework, and share resources when appropriate, given your family’s expectations and relationships, your own physical abilities and cultural and generational expectations.
18. There are things you can do to celebrate the memory of your grandchild(ren) no matter how short their time with you:
 - Plant a garden, a tree, or arrange a bench in a local park;
 - Do some volunteer work;
 - Make a donation to a favorite charity or to the hospital where your grandchild died;
 - Journal about your feelings, and perhaps give the journal to your child at a later date;
 - Do something special on anniversaries or birth/death days, either personally or as a family should the idea be agreeable; and
 - If photos are taken, ask for a photo.
19. If your child and spouse are comfortable with it, you may wish to include your deceased grandchild(ren) when speaking about your grandchildren, especially when mentioning how many you have.

One bereaved grandmother shared that her son and his wife told her she was never to refer to the babies again (her twin grandsons died at 5-1/2 months gestation). The grandmother felt battered and ignored by the disregard of her feelings around losing the babies. What made her feel even worse was the fact that both her son and daughter-in-law were doctors and she felt they should have better understood that the feelings of grief went further than those immediately involved.

If you find yourself in a similar position, i.e. your child and their partner do not wish any further referral to the deceased child, there are some things you can do for yourself to help you get through:

- Join a bereavement support group for either group and/or one-on-one counseling (some examples of online groups are included below);
- Speak to a caring friend, your doctor or grief counselor;
- Connect with other bereaved grandparents; and
- Read one of the many good books on grief, its many layers and how to work through them.

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You don't have to go through this alone. Your feelings are valid and painful. You, too, have suffered a loss, but you may need to be proactive in exploring some avenues on your own in order to obtain appropriate support. You need a place to speak your grief and be heard. One way to do this is through online support groups. Examples include:

- https://www.compassionatefriends.org/Find_Support/Online-Community/Online_Support.aspx
- <http://www.missfoundation.org/>
- http://dying.lovetoknow.com/Online_Grief_Support_Group

References

Gyulay, J.-Eileen. (1975). The Forgotten Grievers. *American Journal of Nursing*, 75(9), 1476-1479.

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