

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."

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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.

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