



WHEN OUR GRANDCHILD DIES

The death of our grandchild can overwhelm us with grief and have a profound and complex effect on us. At the same time as being a grandparent, we are also a parent who is unable to protect our own child from the pain and desolation of bereavement as they in turn mourn the death of *their* son or daughter. This is a double burden, where helplessness and frustration can add to the pain of grief. We will most likely feel deep sorrow not only at the actual loss of the grandchild at whatever age, but also that an important link in the continuity of the family chain has been lost.

Over the past forty years or so, there have been radical changes in the structure of the nuclear family in our country. Working mothers, a more mobile population, increased divorce rates, and second marriages have all affected the nature of many family relationships, including that between grandparents and the grandchildren. The intensity of our grief may be affected by how close the relationship was with our grandchild, and his or her parents. Sometimes, because of distance or circumstances, contact will have been limited, but we may still mourn intensely; we may also suffer the added burden of others not realising how much we are grieving and of our need to talk about our loss.

Following the initial shock, some of our physical reactions may be of weariness, of changes to appetite and sleep patterns. These reactions, and feelings of anxiety, lack of concentration and depression are common but not everybody will experience all of them. In addition, grief tends to come in waves, and without any pattern or predictability.

Helping ourselves

Many grandparents suffer feelings of guilt. One of the most powerful is survival guilt: that we are alive when others - much younger than us - have died. A grandparent may feel guilty about the things they did not do for, or with, their grandchild. Talking about these worries can help us as grandparents to realise that nobody is perfect and that each person does the best they can in the circumstances.

Anger may be another feeling that we experience. It is not always rational, but nevertheless it is there and needs to be faced. Anger is a strong emotion and may be directed at life, at God or at any individual person or authority we feel is responsible for the death of our grandchild.

It will help if the anger can be expressed safely, perhaps through physical activity or exercise, by talking to an understanding friend, or through writing. Such writing could be as a letter in which we pour out all the anger and frustration; once expressed, the letter can be destroyed.

Helping our child

The way our child expresses his or her grief may be different from our own and should be respected. It will not help them to be told what they should, or should not, be feeling, thinking, or doing. It *will* help if we can listen and empathise with them when they express their feelings of anger, anguish and despair. Emotional support at this time can be of great comfort.

If possible, grandparents could offer to help with the practical demands of family life, such as in the care of other grandchildren who will be grieving too, and who may be feeling very 'left out'. Looking after any family pets, or perhaps doing a little work around the home, could relieve some of the pressures on our daughter or son; this could be especially so if our child is a single parent for whom those pressures might be greater. Some people, especially men who feel more comfortable in the traditional role with the 'stiff upper lip' approach, have problems expressing their emotions, and sometimes find shared activities more helpful. Whatever the circumstances, it is important to pace ourselves so that we do not get overtired. We need to cope with our own grief and to find time to replenish our energies.

If the relationship between us and our child has been difficult, it may not be easy to speak about our thoughts, and fears. Bereaved parents may find someone outside the immediate family, perhaps a trusted friend, in whom to confide. They may find comfort in speaking to another bereaved parent.



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If our son or daughter is now childless, it may be helpful to know of the Childless Parents group within The Compassionate Friends (TCF). Through this organisation, it might be possible to make contact with others who have lost their only grandchild. This could perhaps bring some support and comfort especially where there is little or no prospect of another child of that generation.

Helping our other grandchildren

If there are surviving grandchildren in the bereaved family, we may find we are able to offer them much-needed stability, comfort and support, especially while the normal patterns of family life are disrupted and disorganised. For both grandparents and grandchildren this will be a significant time, and new bonds might well be forged which could last a lifetime. It is important to recognise that we and our grandchildren can gain great strength and companionship through being with each other, sharing in activities even if not talking about our grief directly.

Brothers and sisters of the dead child will have many fears and worries at this time, varying according to their age and understanding. It is best to answer their questions as simply and honestly as possible, even though this is painful and difficult for them and for us.

Grandparents living at a distance will be able to help and comfort their child and grandchildren with letters, cards, phone calls and emails. It is important that the surviving grandchildren feel 'special', loved and valued at this time; grandparents are well placed to help in this way with messages that are personal to each child.

Family occasions

In the early years after the death of their child, our daughter or son will need our understanding at family occasions, when the absence of a much-loved child is felt especially acutely. In later years, on birthdays, anniversaries, family weddings, or births, and with other deaths, recognition of the loss and the pain will be appreciated. (TCF's leaflet [Coping with special occasions](#) includes a number of suggestions to help the grieving family.) Even ordinary dates such as when the child would have started school, gone to college or started work, can be emotional. Of course, as grandparents, we too can find our thoughts at such times painful, and perhaps a reminder of the sad 'if only's' that can change our lives. Wherever possible and appropriate there can be much to gain from sharing our feelings and by being comfortable in leaning on each other.