

## **Grief of Grandparents**

I am powerless, I am helpless, I am frustrated, I sit here and cry with her. She cries for her daughter and I cry for mine. I cannot help her. I can't reach inside and take her broken heart. I must watch her suffer day after day and see her desolation.

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 bought 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 is no band-aid large enough to cover her bleeding heart.

I used to listen to her talk about a 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 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.

Where are the magic words that will give her comfort? What chapter in Dr. Spock tells me how to do this? He has told me everything else I needed to know. Where are the answers? I should have them. I'm a 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.

*Taken from AGAST (Alliance of Grandparents, a Support in Tragedy) website, an organization that supports grieving grandparents. <http://www.agast.org/>*

The subject of death and grief is uncomfortable for all of us. We will accept anyone's discussion of happy things, but we shy away from talk of grief and death. One of the reasons for this is that, in some way, it makes us aware of our own mortality. For those of us who are older it is even more true. We need to recognize how this unconscious fear might be one of the reasons we avoid discussion our own grandchild's death.

Grandparents of a child who has died are sometimes referred to as the "forgotten mourners." In most cases we are. I think that we even tell ourselves we shouldn't hurt as much as we do and concern ourselves with our bereaved child's pain to the neglect of our own. We need to recognize that we, too, have lost a part of ourselves, and we have a REAL reason to grieve. If we say to ourselves, "He or she was not my child, and I shouldn't hurt as badly," we are not being fair to ourselves. As grandparents, we have a double burden. We hurt because our precious grandchild is dead, and we hurt because our own child is desolate. We feel helplessness and frustration in addition to our pain. But if we are to be helpful to our bereaved child we need to be helpful to ourselves also.

Grandfathers may have an especially hard time handling their own grief. Men in our culture are not allowed to be emotional. From childhood they are told to "be strong" and take care of others - never themselves. Some of us have other children who have children. We may resent their having "complete" families of two or three children, and our bereaved child may have had only one - the one who died. This is not an uncommon reaction for grandparents. I was surprised and appalled when I realized I was angry with my oldest son who has three children and my bereaved daughter lost her only child. But feelings are not fact. I was not wishing one of my son's children to die. I was simply looking at how unjust life is, and my oldest son's family was where I focused. I felt guilty about this until I looked at my resentment for what it really was.

Grandparents who have NOT lost a child CANNOT know the depth of the grief their child is experiencing. We may have lost parents or spouses, but the intensity of parental grief is so much greater. We do NOT know how it feels if we ourselves have not lost a child. We are most helpful if we admit this to our child. We need to know what the symptoms of parental grief are so that we are reassured that our child is not emotionally disturbed.

We need to know there is not a timetable for grief. We should be careful of our expectations of how our child "should be doing" at this time. In the early months of grief our bereaved children may appear to be doing well. Then, at four to six months, they seem to fall apart. It is reassuring to know that this is normal. In the early months our children do fairly well because they have not yet accepted the reality of their child's death. It isn't until one faces the reality that real grief begins. This is the most painful and the longest part of the grief process. This is the time we are expecting them to "get better," and when they get worse we can't understand it and we fear for their sanity. At this time children need us most. How desolate they must feel if the two people they could always rely on now turn away from them.

Our grieving children need us. When our children hurt, we hurt. It has been said that a grief shared is a grief halved. NO! We CANNOT take half of our child's suffering, as much as we would like to do so. But I can say from personal needs that were not met when my own grandchild died, it can sure make it a lot easier. Over the years of rearing our children, we suffered many times for them or because of them. Now we are being asked to do it again. It was not easy then, and it will not be easy now. But because we love our children, we CAN do it.

*Written by Margaret Gerner, Bereaved Grandparent, St. Louis, MO Chapter, The Compassionate Friends.*

## When a Grandchild Dies

No one expects to outlive their own children, much less their grandchildren. It is so difficult to raise a family, see your children do the same, and see the cycle broken in this out-of-order way. No one is prepared for the grief that follows. As a grandparent you have a double grief. You grieve for your grandchild who has died, as well as for your own child who is now a bereaved parent. You not only feel your own pain and sadness, but feel helpless and frustrated at not being able to help your bereaved child.

It helps to remember that there is no timetable for grief. Don't expect too much of your child, his or her spouse or of yourself. At first no one believes it. When the reality "hits" everyone feels even more devastated. **It is important to consider your needs as well as those of your bereaved child.** Acknowledging and working on your grief will help you and, indirectly, your grieving child.

Don't be surprised if at first you can't reach out to your grieving child. Remember that you are grieving. Be patient with yourself. Eventually you may be able to talk, listen and help. If you find that you can't help specifically with the grief you can send cards, tell them that you love them, etc. Explain that you wish that you could be of more help but that you don't know what to do.

### Suggestions for Helping Yourself and Your Grieving Child (the Parents)

- Read about grief. It is important to understand what you and your child are experiencing.
- It helps to be open and share your feelings. Your openness sets a good example for your child. Share the good memories and the good days as well as the pain of grief and the bad days.
- Talk about your dead grandchild. Mention his/her name.
- Find someone with whom you can talk freely — a friend, support group member, clergy or counselor.
- Be available to **LISTEN** frequently to your child. Respect your child's way of handling the pain and expressing the grief. Don't tell your child how he or she should react.
- At special times (anniversary of death, birthdays, holidays) write and/or call your bereaved child (and his or her spouse). Mention that you realize what day it is. You are calling to say you love them and you wish that you could take some of their pain away.
- When adults are grieving, the child's siblings often feel neglected — plus they don't understand the grief that they themselves are experiencing. Try to spend extra time with your other bereaved grandchild(ren), offering to listen and reminding them that they are very important and much loved.
- If possible, offer to take surviving grandchildren for an afternoon or a day; help with practical matters, such as preparing food, doing laundry, shopping; spend time alone with your child.
- Most of us need hugs, even if we don't recognize that we do. It helps to hug and hold your child if you both are comfortable doing so.
- Allow yourself and encourage your child to cry when needed. Crying offers relief.
- Let the family know that you care; that you love them.
- Hold on to **HOPE** that eventually you/they will enjoy life again. Offer **HOPE** to your grieving child and family.

*From **Hope Bereaved Handbook**, available from HOPE FOR BEREAVED; 1342 Lancaster Avenue; Syracuse, New York 13210; (315) 472-6754.*