

When a Grandchild Dies

No one expects to outlive their own children, much less experience the loss of a much-loved, much-wanted grandchild. 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 also 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 or 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, holidays) write and/or call your bereaved child. 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 grandchildren, 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 all 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; Adapted from the website of the Alliance of Grandparents, A Support in Tragedy, 2004.