

For Grieving Grandparents



LOMA LINDA UNIVERSITY
HEALTH



Now your child has to face the loss of their own child, your grandchild, and you can only stand by, powerless to heal the deep pain you see.

Grandparents

The burden of grief that comes to grandparents after the death of a grandchild is unique. The loss of the child is devastating, but there is added pain because your own child is suffering a hurt you cannot take away.

As a parent you have comforted your child through many difficulties, and perhaps have even taken on the responsibility of resolving problems occurring in their adult life. Now your child has to face the loss of their own child, your grandchild, and you can only stand by, powerless to heal the deep pain you see. From being the one who has a greater store of experience and wisdom, you now feel helpless to ease the burden your child must bear. In addition, you have the pain of your own loss, your own dear grandchild, for whom your hopes and dreams will now never be realized.

This can be a very difficult time for you. Sorting out your own feelings of grief and trying to find ways to be supportive and helpful for your son or daughter can be overwhelming. Even though your child is an adult, your feelings of nurturing and caring have not changed and you may forgo working through your own grief as you focus on the grief of your child. You may have many confusing feelings about yourself as well as your child. You may feel angry, cheated, frustrated, powerless, or overwhelmed. You may see changes in your child that make you feel alienated, unloved, or intrusive when what you really want is to be helpful and supportive. It is important to remember that this is a very confusing time for your child too. He or she may lash out at you as you make suggestions about such things as funeral arrangements, care of other children in the home, or present ideas about ways to assist in the healing process. On the other hand, your child may simply withdraw from daily living, becoming unresponsive and deeply depressed by the loss of their child. It is not possible to predict how a person

will respond to a loss such as this. Your child may become a stranger to you, compounding the loss you feel as a grandparent. There is no set of rules to follow that will help everyone find a “normal” life again.

It may help to understand that there are four phases of grief. There is no set time frame for moving through these phases, and many people find that they move back and forth among them.

Shock and Numbness

The first phase is shock and numbness. During this time feelings can change very quickly. One minute your child may be in denial, the next minute filled with rage at the doctor, or overwhelmed by feelings of panic. During this time your presence may be the only way to help; holding a hand, a caring arm around a shoulder, or simply letting your child vent without trying to “talk sense” to them. This is not a rational time for your son or daughter, and trying to deal in a rational manner with the chaos immediately surrounding such loss as the death of a child may be met with hostility and withdrawal. Simply “being there” for your child will show your love, and as your son or daughter begins to accept the reality of what has happened, they may be able to express ways in which you can help. During this first phase, you too will have confusing and variable feelings. The four stages of grief apply to grandparents as well as parents. You also have needs, and must realize that others who love you want to help you just as you want to help your child. As you try to be present for your child, others will reach out to “be there” for you as well. This is not the time to be strong and hold up for the sake of your child. Realizing that you need support and that you are devastated and hurting is a positive step toward healing. You will also be a good role model for your child by taking steps to ease your own pain.

Reach out to others who have shared similar losses so you won't feel so alone. You will receive support on your journey through grief to find meaning in life again, even as you hold the memories of your grandchild close to your heart.

Searching and Yearning

The second phase of grief is searching and yearning. During this phase, parents as well as grandparents experience a great yearning for the child who has died and seek some reason for the loss. Perhaps your son or daughter will replay again and again a list of “could haves” or “should haves” in an attempt to make some sense of their devastating loss. This way of thinking can lead to a tremendous burden of guilt that deepens the pain already felt. Grandparents often feel guilt that they should have been able to somehow prevent the tragedy. Perhaps you are separated by miles from your loved ones and feel that if you had been there, things would have been different. Or, you may feel guilty to still be alive while a beloved grandchild has died. You may feel anger that you have lived so long and the young life just getting started has ended. All of these feelings are normal. Reach out to others who have shared similar losses so you won't feel so alone. You will receive support on your journey through grief to find meaning in life again, even as you hold the memories of your grandchild close to your heart.

Disorientation and Disorganization

The third phase of grief is disorientation and disorganization. You may see many behavior changes in your son or daughter during this time. You may experience changes in your own life as well. Often feelings of emptiness and hopelessness are overwhelming. Routine tasks become impossible. Social activities, especially those involving children in the age group of the one who has died, become unbearable and there may be a general withdrawal from “normal” everyday living. Some ways of helping your child might be to provide a dinner, share pictures and happy memories of the child who has died, take a walk together, or simply sit together and cry. As you comfort your son or daughter in this way, you too, will be comforted. No matter what changes you see in behavior, now is not the time to be critical or judgmental. Although there are definite phases of grief, there is no time frame for each phase. Your loving support is the greatest gift you can give at this time. It is also a gift you can receive from others who love you.

Resolution and Reorganization

The final phase of grief is resolution and reorganization. During this time you will see changes in your son or daughter that you will recognize as healing. You will also feel healing in your life. Energy will return, appetite will be back, interest in those around you and everyday activities will return. This does not mean that you have forgotten your loss or that you will no longer miss the child who has died. It simply means that you have reached the place in the journey of healing where the pain is no longer the single strongest force in your life. Now your son or daughter will be able to share memories of your grandchild with you and smile, and the close ties that you once felt as a family will be reestablished. This is a time of hope — a rebirth, for after such a loss you will never be the same again. You will see life differently, have different priorities, and perhaps have a deeper spiritual understanding of life's meaning. You will understand better how death is a part of life and the end of the earthly journey.

Nothing can ever completely take away the pain of losing a grandchild. The void in your life will always be there. What will change however, is the searing, numbing pain that is so much a part of your life early after the loss. You will be able to speak of your grandchild with a smile, go to familiar places, and be comforted by happy memories rather than wounded by the knowledge that you will never visit that spot together again. You will find yourself reaching out to others as others reached out to you to assist you in your grief. You will become a comforter as well as the comforted. No one can say when it will be, but one day the world will seem brighter, you will feel the healing warmth of the sun on your back and find that it is a good day to be alive. You will think of the grandchild you lost and count yourself blessed for that child's presence in your life, no matter how short that time was. You will have become a seasoned traveler on the road to the healing of grief, and although you would never have chosen the path you were forced to take, you will know the satisfaction of having had the courage to face your loss and the perseverance to heal your grief.

By Eileen Langford, RN



*You will become a comforter as well as the comforted.
No one can say when it will be, but one day the world
will seem brighter, you will feel the healing warmth
of the sun on your back and find that it is
a good day to be alive.*



LOMA LINDA UNIVERSITY
HEALTH

Bereavement Services • 909-558-7261

MANY STRENGTHS. ONE MISSION.
A Seventh-day Adventist Organization | LLUHEALTH.ORG