



Walking with You... Grandparents are Parents Too.

Love, Loss and the Journey
of Loss for Grandparents

The Grief of Grandparents

"You want to take away the hurt and take it upon yourself, which is impossible."

-A Grandmother

Being a grandparent is life-changing. The unconditional love you have for your grandchildren and children is an emotion so unique that it can catch you off guard. With a love as strong as that, it comes as no surprise to experience such acute pain as one would experience after the loss of a grandchild.

The Immediate Aftermath

When a grandparent experiences the loss of a grandchild, most grandparents feel a protective numbness or shock. Even though they may know their grandchild has died, their minds may want to deny it and the numbness allows this. They may find themselves talking to and about the grandchild, as if it never happened.

Grandparents Are Still Parents

Grieving grandparents are 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.

Your children, so wrapped up in their own grief, may not recognize your pain.

"I was so wrapped up in my own pain, that I had no strength at the time to look at my mother and say, 'How are you doing?' I was focusing on what was going on at my end, and not on how she was handling it."

-A Mother

"We forget there are some other people hurting. We ran to the doctor, and he was able to explain to us as best as he was able to, but my parents, the grandmother and grandfather just sat home and experienced the hurt. They hurt for us and they hurt for their grandchild, and there was no one to care for them. They, too, were asked, 'What did you have, a grandson, a granddaughter?' They, too, had to explain. I wonder if it wasn't in a sense even harder for them. They lost the future we lost, and they have to watch us hurt, when they are so used to soothing us as kids but are now feeling powerless."

-A Father

As a parent, you probably remember seeing your little son or daughter hurt often. You would swoop them up in your arms, kiss the boo-boo, and somehow the hurt disappeared. The pain your child feels today cannot just be hugged away. Your child's loss of a baby through miscarriage, stillbirth or newborn death may have caused a pain deeper than you may have ever experienced before. Because of this, you may feel powerless to do anything to help the ones you love so much.

Part of the beauty as a grandparent which turns out to be a difficulty at times like this is that you never really stopped being a mother or father. Your child may be grown now, old enough to have a baby, and yet we cannot

extinguish the instinct to want to protect and make them feel better.

Also, grandparents make plans for the baby just the way parents do. You probably may have wondered if the baby would resemble your side of the family or if the grandchild would get into the same kind of mischief your own child did. You were looking forward to loving and spoiling this grandchild. Your dreams, too, have been shattered, and you may need a great deal of comfort. Your loss may not be apparent to others who, like you, expected you would have a grandchild, but it is still there. Allow yourself to experience all the hurt, sorrow, and pain that you are feeling at this time.

Physical Distance

If your son or daughter lives in a different community, you may not have as much close contact as you need. Grandparents talk about needing to see or visualize what is going on with their children. Telephone calls and letters can be a poor substitution, especially when your child sounds so sad and you are not close enough to do anything for him or her.

As grandparents, another thing to factor in is the second set of grandparents, who need their own space to grieve and you may not want to impose on their territory.

The Emotional Impact

It is important for you to understand the feelings parents –and often grandparents– have after a loss of this magnitude.

First, mourning after a loss is a way of adjusting to what has happened. It is necessary and helpful to express your feelings, regardless of what they are.

Parents and grandparents do not grieve for a baby according to the age of the baby when he or she died. While you as a grandparent may not be as attached to a baby who died in the mother's womb, the mother who was carrying that child, as well as the father who was making plans for the child, had formed some type of relationship with it. Parents may grieve the loss of their child's future.

Some of the emotions your child expresses may sound strange to you during the coming weeks and months. Some of them may sound strange even to them, but they are normal. The release of those feelings helps them along the way towards healing.

It is important to remember that grief lasts longer than you think it does. It can take a while until your child will get his or her life back together.

Parental Roles

Parents and grandparents often have talked about the need to take charge of their children's lives at the time of a loss. But most agree the best role a grandparent can take is to be supportive. Be there with them on their journey.

Your role as a grandparent still may be a guide, even if you do not take charge. Your role is as important in the first few days as it is in the months ahead.

As a grandparent, you always have some influence over your children, no matter how old they become. But you still need to understand your child's need to make it through this experience in his or her own way.

You may be wondering what your role should be during this time, especially right after the loss.

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 parent may want to share the same story about the death over and over again. 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, too. Simply listen and try to understand them.

In addition, realize that sometimes grandparents, especially grandfathers, don't want to talk about the death. They may have been raised to believe that talking about feelings is friv-

olous or selfish or unmanly. Simply spending time with someone you feel close to will give you the support that you need.

BE COMPASSIONATE

Give your children permission to express their feelings without fear of criticism. Don't instruct or set expectations. 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 parent.

AVOID CLICHÉS

Words, particularly clichés, can be extremely painful. Clichés are trite comments often intended to provide simple solutions to difficult realities. Parents are often told, "Don't worry, Chaim and Leah (can) have another child" or "You have to be strong." 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 this time, as well as in the weeks and months ahead.

BE AWARE OF HOLIDAYS AND OTHER SIGNIFICANT DAYS

Both parents and grandparents 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 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 or write a note or simply give them a quick phone call. Your ongoing support will be appreciated and comforting.

The Grandparents' Grieving Process

As a grandparent, your grief is unique and complex from the standpoint of being in the middle. You'll find that you're vacillating from grieving the loss you are experiencing and hurting for your child who's hurting and facing a deep sorrow of their own. You may be suffering through grief without the acknowledgment or support of others as they focus on the parents who are grieving.

Most importantly, you need to remember to try to get some support for yourself so that you are better able to listen or empathize with your son or daughter and your grandchildren. You may have other family or friends that you can talk to. If your son or daughter feels that they have to look after you as well as themselves, this may make it hard for them to have you around. One grandmother described her role as:

Having one foot inside the grief while keeping the other outside, placed on firm ground.

Reach out to friends and family that will acknowledge your pain and be a supportive presence for you. Reach out to Knafoyim at (718)925-2113, as a resource of support as you are experiencing this loss.

ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR GRIEF

As you mourn the loss, it may tempt you to ignore the pain and go on with your life. When you ignore the emotional pain of your loss and bury your grief, you're only prolonging its effect.

The feelings and emotions that come with a devastating loss don't simply go away on their own. You'll find yourself dealing with your grief either now or years from now. The more you wait to acknowledge your suffering, the more

complicated your recovery will be. Allow yourself to grieve your loss and to accept the pain that's a part of your suffering.

ALLOW GRIEVING

Acknowledging and allowing your grieving to take place are two different measures. Yes, it can be one thing to recognize your pain and suffering, yet it is another to allow those emotions to manifest and allow grieving to take its course altogether.

The grief process is seldom easy, and you may not feel ready to confront the roller-coaster of emotions that come with experiencing your loss. Accepting and facing the pain, can remind yourself of how much it hurts. Part of the natural grieving process allows for a feeling of numbness after such a significant loss. The stages of the grieving process will naturally unfold if you allow them to take place.

PRACTICE SELF CARE

When taking care of others, it may seem nearly impossible to find the time for some self care. You'll want to be distracted with other things like taking care of the couple and possibly your child's family as they grieve over their loss.

Busying yourself by taking on these responsibilities might make you feel as if you're useful and supportive to others at their time of need, but doing it at the expense of your emotional wellbeing is counterintuitive.

Carve out some time for a little self care to avoid an emotional breakdown when least expected. Give yourself the time, space and permission to cater to the hurt you are feeling.

SHED SOME TEARS

Recognize that tears are a natural and appropriate expression of the pain associated with the loss.

You may want to be the strong one that holds the rest of the family together by not allowing yourself a good cry. Experiencing this type of loss, may be one of those times where you feel that you're the glue that needs to keep everything together.

Releasing your tears is not only therapeutic for you, but it helps in the healing process of grief. Tears are not only cleansing, but after a good cry, you may gain a different perspective surrounding this loss. You may feel a release of the intense pain you were feeling up until now.

ON FINDING MEANING

When someone you love experiences loss, you may search for a deeper meaning to explain this. Yearning to gain a perspective is a natural instinct you may feel and you may also want to get a better reframe about this situation. You may find yourself contemplating the meaning of life and death.

Spirituality, like grief, is unique to each individual. Finding hope and comfort after the loss will help you get through the many rough days and nights ahead.

Allow yourself to turn to your spiritual beliefs for comfort and support during these most difficult times. This can help you move forward as you learn to cope with your loss.

BE PATIENT WITH YOURSELF

Grief is a roller-coaster of emotions. You may be in denial one day and then sad or angry the next. Unfortunately, experiencing such a painful loss can't be summed up by one idea or emo-

tion. This process will change often and usually when you least expect it. As time goes on, you'll begin to have good days.

However, expect that without warning, you might have one of the worst days imaginable. Limit your expectations and be patient with yourself. Given enough time, with conscious grief recovery, the pain will subside.

LET HOPE LEAD THE WAY

Where there's light, there's hope. While you may feel the pain will never end, seek comfort in knowing that there's light at the end of the tunnel. Although you will never forget, the heartbreak will subside as you learn to move forward.

There's no actual timeline as to when you'll get through your grieving process. Have patience and know that emotions will improve with time. Experiencing loss helps you learn to appreciate more every moment of every day. In time, your life will develop new meaning.

AND AS YOU MOVE FORWARD REMEMBER...

You can get through this grief of losing your grandchild. In time, you'll learn to move forward with your life, and the pain will ease.

Try and surround yourself with friends and family to help you through your loss. There's hope in tomorrow that you will get past the intense pain of your grief and suffering of today.

