



Grandparents' Grief—Who Is Listening?

By *Mary Lou Reed*

If a grandparent/grandchild relationship is shattered by death, grandparents lose more than a cherished grandchild—they suffer a dual loss—simultaneously needing to mourn the death of their grandchild, while also grieving for their adult child's suffering. A grandchild's death seems perverse, absurd and totally unnatural; it defies the natural order. Grandparents expect to predecease their children, and certainly, their grandchildren.

But, who is listening?

Parental bereavement has received extensive study, publications and publicity from the counseling and bereavement community in the past couple of decades, and rightly so. But, what about the grandparents? They, too, need support and resources that address their specific double loss. A lack of societal and professional consideration for grandparents' grief may be attributed to the impression that since the death of a grandchild is one generation removed (i.e., it is “not *their* child that died!), grandparents, therefore, are immune to the intense pain of such a loss. That is not true, of course.

Another common cultural assumption is that because grandparents are older than the parents of the deceased child, they have had more experience with death. Consequently, they will not need as much consideration and support as they will “know how” to cope with the death of their grandchild. Many grandparents, unfortunately, have learned differently. Following the death of my grandson in 1989, I searched through death and bereavement literature in a near futile attempt to find assistance with my debilitating grief. Literature dealing with the death of friends, and pet loss, showed up more frequently than grandparents' grief.

My research located mostly tangential references to the role and needs of grandparents. A short paragraph by Rando (1986) did note the duality of grandparents' grief, “They not only lose their grandchild, but they ‘lose’ their child as well, as they cannot rescue their child from bereaved-parent status.” And yet, even today, not much has been written about the special needs of grandparents. Since Margaret Gerner (1990) wrote her excellent book, *For Bereaved Grandparents*, only a few other books (Kolf, 1995; Galinsky, 1999), including my own (Reed, 2000) have been published. This is “slim pickin's” for a large and growing segment of our society. Although much has been written regarding grief, particularly parental grief (which is useful to grandparents), there remains a deficiency of

specific information to assist grandparents survive an event they never believed they would live to experience.

Grandparents' Personal Grief from the Loss of a Beloved Grandchild

Most grandparents would gladly trade places with their dead grandchild—such a loss feels so devastating. Not often conscious of the enormous investment in their grandchildren as well as the strength of the attachment, grandparents are vulnerable to intense double pain on the death of a grandchild. The development of a cherished grandparent/grandchild relationship often grows from the fact that, because grandparents are no longer responsible for the day-to-day care of the child, they are spared from the usual conflicts between generations. Also, grandparents often have more leisure time and disposable income than the parents, thus making it easier to develop a closer and sweeter relationship between grandparent and grandchild. The hopes and dreams of the grandparent (sometimes even a namesake) are invested in a grandchild. Losing that child leaves grandparents struggling through a grieving process for what feels like a loss of part of themselves.

A grandchild represents the grandparents' immortality—the bearer of the grandparents' legacy to the world, one generation extended—a powerful concept that brings deep grief when a grandchild dies. A grandchild's death sends shock waves through the entire family. Rando (1986) mentions potential family relationship problems, the important role of grandparents and how difficult their role. Those difficulties extend far beyond the afore mentioned double mourning, as grandparents often are the ones a family looks to for strength, inspiration, understanding, and care.

Bearing Witness to Their Adult Child's Grief

Bearing witness to an adult child's grief is a process filled with *potholes*—a situation fraught with possible misunderstandings. A major stumbling block can be the many cultural and family learned grief customs on both sides of the family. Details such as how grief should be expressed, how death rituals should be handled, the right and wrong way to grieve, how long one should grieve, and idiosyncratic reactions to the loss can be a minefield for grandparents to maneuver while watching helplessly the anguish of their child's grief.

Communication with the adult child and his/her family (including in-laws) after such a devastating loss will depend in part on “the long history of your relationship with your child” (Galinsky, 1999, p. 51). There are no guarantees, however, that even in the best of relationships that there will not be confusion or misunderstandings. An example is Gerner's (1990) observation that, “one of the most talked-about subjects in groups of young bereaved parents is the lack of understanding from their parents.”

Grandparents cannot protect their child from, nor take away, the child's pain. Extreme effort is required to be available and helpful to their adult child and his/her family all the while watching their suffering. This puts an extraordinary demand on grandparents' love, understanding, knowledge, and abilities—not to mention stamina. The extraordinary emotional and psychological effort grandparents experience trying to cope with a

grandchild's death often seems to be a challenge far beyond what most grandparents believe they can endure. No one ever expects to have to fill this particular role in life and there aren't any training manuals!

The burden is a long-lasting one. Even grandparents who have found some feelings of "peace" about the death of their grandchild frequently mention that the pain they see in their own child over the years is a never-ending source of sorrow.

Helping Surviving Siblings (Other Grandchildren of the Same Family)

If there are other siblings in the same family where a grandchild has died, grandparents may be invaluable to those children and their parents at such a difficult time. Most grandparents will recognize the importance of being available to those children. Unfortunately, this is another area where grandparents may find it difficult to "help without hindering." It is another burden for grandparents, especially those ill-prepared to recognize and deal with the special needs of surviving siblings.

Being Available to Other Family Members

Being the "strength" for the entire family is a difficult expectation for grandparents to handle—to "carry on" with grace and dignity—with little support from either society or bereavement professionals. In one way or another, the entire family will be affected by the death of a child, generating emotions that "rattle around, and bounce back," unbalancing the family dynamics. Janice Nadeau (1998) uses a mobile to represent an extended family, demonstrating the "unbalancing" and instability that occurs in a family when a child dies.

When the figure of a child is removed, the mobile swings wildly. I cannot think of a better image for a family grieving the death of a child. Aunts, uncles, and cousins of the dead child have their own mourning to do also and often look to grandparents for assistance. A sibling of the parent who has lost a child, and who has children of his/her own, may go through tremendous fears for their own children. Their reactions to these fears may lead to confusion and distancing. "Why haven't (sister or brother's family) called, been to see us?" the grieving parents ask the grandparents. The grandparents are then put into the situation of being mediators for a family in grief—to be the peacemakers. What incredible demands the family may place on the already stretched physical, mental, emotional, and psychological strengths of the grandparents!

From Where Will Come Support and Validation?

I believe grandparents need and deserve an extensive examination of the depth and complexity of their grief—studies similar to those of parental loss. Validating grandparents' grief through scholarly studies and development of educational materials could be a fertile field for bereavement educators and grief counselors. This subject will require more attention in coming years as the aging of our country's population means more grandparents are living longer—long enough to suffer the death of a grandchild. While many grief groups and organizations encourage bereaved grandparents to attend their meetings, generally grandparents of today are reticent to speak of their pain in a group of non-peers. Providing grandparents with time to be heard in "a place of their

own” will help answer the oft-heard need expressed by grieving grandparents—they want someone to talk to who has experienced the same type of grief. They want someone who will listen. Grandparents’ grief may present multiple challenges, but the simple act of listening, as we all know, is a powerful healer.

References

- Gerner, M. H. (1990). *For bereaved grandparents*. Omaha, NE: Centering Corporation.
- Kolf, J.C. (1995). *Grandma’s tears*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.
- Galinsky, N. (1999). *When a grandchild dies: What to do, what to say, how to cope*. Houston, TX: Gal in Sky Publishing.
- Nadeau, J. W. (1998). *Families making sense of death*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Rando, T.A. (1986). *Parental loss of a child*. Champaign, IL, Research.
- Reed, M.L. (2000). *Grandparents cry twice: Help for bereaved grandparents*. Amityville, NY: Baywood.

About the Author

Mary Lou Reed RN, MA, has worked in both medical and mental health fields, most recently facilitating grief and caregiver groups at a local Senior Center in Mesa, Arizona where she helped develop and initiate a Peer Training/Peer Counseling Program for seniors. An ADEC member, she is the author of Grandparents Cry Twice: Help for Bereaved Grandparents and currently working on a book about grief and autism.

© 2003-2007 The Association for Death Education and Counseling
All rights reserved.