

GRIEVING GRANDPARENTS

We all know that grief is different for each individual. We also know that the characteristics of grieving are different for different groups of people. Among these are grandparents whose grief is not always acknowledged, but is as graphic and heart-rending as the grief of any parent, spouse or child.

Grandparents grieve on many levels. When a child dies, the grandparent suffers a double dose of grief for not only is there a loss of a beloved grandchild, but the grandparent also feels heartsick for the parents, a daughter and son-in-law or a son and daughter-in-law.

The grandparents have a sense of helplessness. They spent their lifetimes raising their own children, protecting them and making life better for them. Suddenly, they are faced with a situation in which there doesn't seem to be anything they can do to heal their child. So grandparents feel anger, or guilt, even though it is a situation not of their making.

The situation sometimes is worsened because, in such circumstances, the grandparents may be relegated to a place in the background as the parents of the child occupy center stage in the grieving process. For grandparents, this may require forcing themselves to focus on the fact that they likely have had as much of a loss as their children, the parents of the deceased child. Grandparents usually believe their grandchildren will survive them, so they will battle feelings of unfairness at the loss of that comforting certainty.

The focus on the grief of the parents may mean that grandparents will have to find another way to grieve, or find a way to express and release their feelings. When the parents are so consumed with their own grief, grandparents can seek solace that is available elsewhere.

There are tools grandparents can use to help their children and assuage their own grief. The primary way is to provide support at a critical time. Grandparents can spend time with their other grandchildren, the brothers and sisters of the deceased child, to reassure them that the death of their sibling was not their fault.

Grandparents can offer to stay with the other grandchildren as they grieve. They can offer to ease the parents' burden by making airport pickups and otherwise chauffeuring mourners coming to the funeral. They can sit down with the deceased's siblings, the other grandchildren, in assembling a memory book for the family, planting a garden or a tree for the child who has died or, perhaps, even establishing a scholarship in the deceased grandchild's name.