

The Journey of a Grandparent



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Grandparents-to-be often await the arrival of a baby with a similar sense of anticipation as the parents. Grandchildren are supposed to be one of the most cherished joys of growing older. When a grandchild dies, many grandparents feel strong and unexpected emotions. While you know there is nothing you can do to 'fix' things, the special kind of love and support you can offer can be invaluable to your family's emotional recovery.

While you provide support to others, remember that you too have experienced a loss and must also take care of yourself. Remember that all individuals experience grief differently and that men and women often have different ways of coping. It is normal to experience a range of intense emotions, including shock, denial, confusion, disappointment, anger, guilt, as well as sadness. Give yourself time to work through these feelings and be aware that they may also affect you physically. Exhaustion is common, as is disturbed sleeping and eating patterns.

You may question whether your feelings are justified, because you hardly got to know, and perhaps didn't even see, your grandchild. It is important to remember that feelings based on emotional connections can be just as strong as those based on physical ones.

Ways to help bereaved parents

Make contact

If you live close enough, visit the bereaved parents in the hospital. If this is not possible, you could call them, send a card, flowers or a gift. Being available by phone and email is a good way to provide support.

Listen

To just 'be there' for your child, when they are ready and willing to talk, is frequently a grandparent's most important role. This is a source of comfort to parents and can help ease their feelings of isolation. Bereaved parents often say that it doesn't take long for people to stop asking about their baby. But many parents desperately want to talk about their child. Even though it is painful to witness, don't try to stop them from talking about their baby and crying. It is helpful for them to have an outlet to express their grief.

Offer practical help

If you can help, ask what you can do specifically. This may include contacting relatives or friends, shopping, preparing meals, caring for other children or helping financially. Be mindful, however, that some parents (particularly those with no other children) may find comfort in the routine of housework. Ask first and provide choices before doing what you think are helpful things. For example, if you see some dishes that need washing, say "I'm just going to do these dishes, okay?"

Unless specifically requested to do so, don't take over any arrangements being made for the baby. Putting away the baby's things and planning the funeral are activities that should be left to the parents, as they are an important part of the grieving process.

If your child is able to spend time seeing and holding their baby, ask if you can too. Although you might find the idea a little confronting, it can help you to grieve. It also creates a shared family experience, which will become a particularly precious memory. Being able to talk in real terms to the parents about their child can be helpful.

Attend acknowledgments of your grandchild's life

If there is a baptism, blessing, funeral or memorial service, your attendance or participation can be very important.

Use your grandchild's name

This shows parents that you see their baby as an individual whose life had value and meaning.

Include your grandchild in all activities

Find ways to include your grandchild who has died in any activity you do with your other grandchildren. It is very meaningful to bereaved parents to include all of their children in family rituals.

"My advice to grandparents is to just be there. Be there when we need to talk, be there when we need a hug or just be there silently. Family is the most important thing and you will never have anything closer to you. Family will always get you through."

- Amy

Helping each other

Let your sorrow show

Don't be afraid to let your child see how much the death of their baby has affected you. You don't always have to be strong for them. If you cry, you are really saying, "I miss my grandchild too" and that is important to them.

Educate yourself

Bereaved parents are often given a lot of information to read. Consider reading this too, as it will enable you to better understand and support your child.

Ways to help bereaved parents—in the long term

Accept their grief

Parents whose baby has died need more time to grieve than society generally allows. Let parents grieve how they wish. Remember that grief is not like an illness parents need to 'get over', but something families must learn to live with as they adapt to life without their baby.

Give them space

While your child needs your support, they also need time for themselves, with their spouses, their other children, friends and other family members (including in-laws).

Remember special days, birthdays and anniversaries

During times that usually involve families coming together, bereaved parents may feel the absence of their baby more acutely. When these dates are approaching, talk to your son or daughter about what their needs are. It may simply be a case of making a time to chat on the phone or go with them to the cemetery. Some grandparents choose to send a card or buy a small present.

Be sensitive to subsequent pregnancies

A new pregnancy can be a very anxious time and some parents and grandparents even feel a resurgence of their original grief. Support your child by listening and discussing their hopes and fears.

Offer reassurance

Because your child is experiencing stress and emotional turmoil, they may likely be very sensitive to other people's words and actions. Remember to offer reassurance instead of judgment, and know that it is okay to say, "I just don't know what to say."

Parental values

Let parents make their own decisions: Remember that parents and children often have different values and beliefs. You and your child may not always agree on how to approach matters relating to the baby's death. Being receptive and supportive of their needs can make the world of difference.

Supporting other grandchildren

If you have living grandchildren, they can also benefit from your support. Be available to listen and help them make sense of what has happened. It is best to have a discussion with parents about how they want you to help their other children. While they may be relieved to have a break from the pressures of parenting, some parents may feel a strong need to be close to their living children.

Remembering your grandchild

There are many ways you can remember your grandchild. By creating your own cherished memories, you can also show your son or daughter that their child is loved, missed and remembered. Refer to the factsheet **Creating Memories** for ideas.

Where To Go For More Help

You may also like to speak with a GP or a health professional. Red Nose has trained parent supporters who have had a grandchild die, and you may wish to speak to someone who understands what you are going through.



Red Nose Bereavement Support Services We support anyone affected by the loss of a pregnancy, stillbirth or the death of a baby or child.

24/7 Support Line 1300 308 307

support@rednose.org.au

Support Library rednosegriefandloss.org.au



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