



# The Compassionate Friends

Offering friendship and understanding to bereaved parents

## UNDERSTANDING GRIEF ..... WHEN A GRANDCHILD DIES

The Grandparent-grandchild relationship is a very special one. When a grandchild dies, grandparents grieve, too. They grieve not only for their grandchild, but also share in the grief of the bereaved parents. For some grandparents, the hardest part is the sense of helplessness they feel for the pain that the child's parents suffer. When a child dies both the parents and grandparents lose part of their future.

### GRIEF IS INDIVIDUAL

As with parents, a bereaved grandmother often grieves differently than does the grandfather and this difference may create a strain between them. This does not mean that one is right and the other wrong. There is no one right way to grieve. Knowing what usually happens in grief may help bereaved grandparents as they grieve, as they try to understand their child's grief, and as healing slowly occurs for all.

### ANGER

As denial lessens, grandparents sense much hurt and frustration. This could lead to anger directed towards others and also inwards. It may be focused on the spouse and even the dead child. Their own grief-stricken children, whose pain they share, may become the object of their anger. They may be very angry at God; they are often angry with themselves!

### GUILT

Guilt, real or imagined, is always there, with the recurring "What if.....?", "Why didn't I.....?", as they try to resolve their guilt feelings, anger often turns in full force. Grandparents may experience all of this twice; once for the grandchild who dies and then for the parents who have their own guilt, anger and pain, and who appear inconsolable.

Because grandparents love their children, they often are torn between this love and the fear of loving too much lest they then lost another grandchild or child. Grief over a previous death may return. Often, as in the multiple losses that may occur from an accident, the grandparents are grieving not only the loss of a grandchild, but also the death of a child in the same tragedy. Guilt may occur because *they* live on, whilst the young ones died.

### DEPRESSION

Some depression is a very real part of grief. It may be overwhelming to bereaved grandparents who may fear that they are going crazy. Bereaved grandparents also worry about the sanity of their grieving child. Friends may burden them further by voicing their concern in this respect. If thoughts of suicide occur, professional counseling may be indicated.

### TIME IS A SLOW HEALER

During grief, which lasts much longer than our society is yet able to admit, talking about those who have had the same experience is useful. Grandparents may assist other grandparents in this respect. Some find help in reading about grief and the experience of others, particularly of grandparents. They may be aided in dealing with their children's grief by reading about parental grief itself. Some obtain

relief by writing down their thoughts. Some draw comfort and strength from their religious faith, although that faith may be severely tested. Self-help groups, such as The Compassionate Friends, can provide needed support.

### **GRIEF WORK**

Those acquainted with grief speak of “grief work” and this is fitting, for grieving takes energy. Those who grieve are tired much of the time. Men may have grown up with the tradition that “big boys don’t cry,” although they know that this is not true in their private moments. They may feel that they must maintain composure so that they may properly support their wives and children in their grief work. The family may feel that grandfathers are not grieving, although they are feeling the same doubt, guilt, anger and despair as are the others. Tears have healing properties and should not be suppressed by grandparents since they are part of grief.

### **RESOLUTION AND REORGANIZATION**

Perhaps one of the most troubling aspects of grief is the question that grandparents continually face – “Why?”. Friends try to comfort with answers but, for the bereaved, no satisfactory answer exists. Thus grandparents must finally accept the unacceptable. This does not mean that they understand “Why?”, nor that they are forgetting the dead grandchild. Bereaved grandparents and parents will be told that they “must get back to normal.” But what is now normal to them will never be the same as it was before the child’s death. Life without that child must go on and, as healing occurs, it will.

Family occasions like holidays, birthdays and anniversaries, including those of the child’s birth and death, are stressful times for the whole family.

Don’t think that a phone call, card or visit on such dates will cause pain or ‘remind’ the parents ..... they can’t (and don’t want to) forget – and you can’t hurt them more than they are already hurting.

Remembering and sharing together helps to remove the fear that the child will be forgotten. Allow time and space for your own emotional needs. There will be a deeper appreciation for those children and grandchildren who survive. There will be a greater understanding of those who experience a similar loss. Many grandparents become more compassionate because of the tragic event that has touched their lives. Healing will help the bereaved accept the new understanding which has been forced upon them.

### **LOVE REMAINS: HEALING DOES OCCUR**

Grief is the price we pay for loving. Grandparents love both the dead grandchild and the grieving parents. As they grieve and try to understand the parents, healing will occur. For, as love remains – and that love will never leave – time will bring healing. Though they retain scars, grandparents will recall the happy times they once shared with their children and grandchild and not just the tragedy and sense of loss that they have come to know.

WE NEED NOT WALK ALONE

WE ARE THE COMPASSIONATE FRIENDS

**This brochure was funded by THE G.A. NIVEN TRUST**

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