

A MESSAGE TO BEREAVED GRANDPARENTS

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I sat with a young bereaved mother who was pouring out her pain and utter desolation to me. She was angry and hurt that those around her couldn't understand what was wrong with her. After all, it had been eight months since her two-year-old son had died — she should be better by now. To her, they implied she was wallowing in her grief and not trying to “get over it.” Between sobs she said, “Even my mother and father now seem to avoid me. They don't even mention his name, and they change the subject when I talk about Tommy. That hurts so much.”

As I listened, I remembered how much I had wanted my parents' help when my son died, but they lived 600 miles from me. I also thought, “How would I be able to help my own grieving daughter today if I hadn't experienced my own child's death almost 13 years ago, and didn't KNOW what she was going through?” I could see how desperately this young mother needed her parents. I could also see how frustrated and helpless they must feel, how painful it must be for them. If only they knew how important they could be in helping their daughter how they, of all people, were needed by her, and how they had the opportunity to add a lasting element to their relationship with their child.

I wanted to tell them how very much she simply needed them to listen to her talk about her child and her pain. I wanted them to listen to her pour out her agony, without one word from them of how she should or should not feel.

The subject of death and grief is uncomfortable for all of us. We will accept anyone's discussion of happy things, but we shy away from talk of grief and death.

One of the reasons for this is that, in some way, it makes us aware of our own death and mortality. For those of us who are older it is even more true. We need to recognize how this unconscious fear might be one of the reasons we avoid discussing our own grandchild's death.

Grandparents who have not lost a child cannot know the depth of the grief their child is experiencing. We may have lost parents or spouses, but the intensity of parental grief is so much greater. We talk of how we felt when our parents or spouses died and say we know how it feels. We do NOT know how it feels if we ourselves have not lost a child. We are most helpful if we admit this to our child.

To be a helpful parent to a grieving parent, we should learn about what our child is experiencing. We can learn of that by reading the books on grief, especially

The Bereaved Parent by Harriet Schiff. When the children were growing up we read Baby and Child Care by Benjamin Spock or Haim Ginott's Between Parent and Child. Why not now read Harriet Schiff's book or Earl Grollman's Living When A Loved One Has Died? We need to know what the symptoms of parental grief are so that we, ourselves, are reassured that our child is not emotionally disturbed.

We need to know there is no timetable for grief. We should be careful of our expectations of how our child "should be doing" at this time. In the early months of grief our bereaved children may appear to be doing well. Then, at four to six months they seem to "fall apart." It is reassuring to know that this is normal. In the early months our children do fairly well because they have not yet accepted the full reality of their child's death. It isn't until one faces that reality that real grief begins. This is the most painful and the longest part of the grief process. This is the time we are expecting them to "get better," and when they get worse we can't understand it, and we fear for their sanity. At this time others turn away from them because they can't understand. This is the time our children need us the most. How desolate they must feel if the two people they could always rely on now turn away from them.

Grandfathers are needed at this time more than ever. Fathers have always been the ones who could solve every problem for their children. They are the strength in the family, and the bereaved child needs to tap that strength now. Fathers used to provide the biggest, warmest lap for comforting. Now their arms can provide the safe harbor that most grieving children crave at times.

Grieving is not done on a consistently upward path. We may talk to our children on a good day and rejoice that they were finally improving, only to find they have taken several steps backward when we next see them. We need to realize that the normal process of grief is a constant ebb and flow of terrible and not so terrible days. Even though our bereaved children seem to revert to more painful grief at times, they are not going back to where they started. They do, however, need extra support and understanding on the bad days. We must allow our children to grieve in their own way, according to their own personality. Some of our children are more verbal in expressing their emotions. Others may keep it all inside of themselves until something causes it to come out in a torrent. We accepted their personality differences from the time they were little children. We must accept them now.

Some of us, for whatever reason, are not able to be of help to our children. Maybe we simply cannot face our children in their misery. It may be more pain than we, ourselves, can take. Some of us cannot accept the fact that to grieve openly and with others is the "right" way to do it. For some of us, our own personalities will not allow us to express our emotions or tolerate such expression in others. As hard as it may be to admit, we can at least be helpful to our children by being open and honest and telling them that we cannot help. As cruel as this may seem, letting them know of our inability to help saves them from

the repeated disappointment of our backing away from them when they come to us.

Our grieving children need us. When our children hurt, we hurt. It has been said that a grief shared is a grief halved. No! We cannot take half of our child's suffering, as much as we would like to do so. But I can say from personal needs that were not met when my own child died, it can sure make it a lot easier. Over the years of rearing our children, we suffered many times for them or because of them. Now we are being asked to do it again. It was not easy then, and it will not be easy now. But because we love our children, we can do it.

Margaret Gerner is a bereaved parent whose son Arthur died at the age of 6. She became a bereaved grandparent when her 3-year-old granddaughter Emily died in 1982