



Kansas Infant Death and SIDS Network

Grief of Grandparents

I am powerless. I am helpless. I am frustration. I sit here with her and cry with her. She cries for her daughter and I cry for mine. I can't help her. I can't reach inside and take her broken heart. I must watch her suffer day after day and see her desolation. I listen to her tell me over and over how she misses Emily, how she wants her back. I can't bring Emily back for her. I can't buy her an even better Emily than she had, like I could buy her an even better toy when she was a child. I can't kiss the hurt and make it go away. I can't even kiss a small part of it away. There's no band-aid large enough to cover her bleeding heart. There was a time I could listen to her talk about a fickle boyfriend and tell her it would be okay, and know in my heart that in two weeks she wouldn't even think of him. Can I tell her it'll be okay in two years when I know it will never be okay, that she will carry this pain of "what might have been" in her deepest heart for the rest of her life? I see this young woman, my child, who was once carefree and fun-loving and bubbling with life, slumped in a chair with her eyes full of agony. Where is my power now? Where is my mother's bag of tricks that will make it all better? Why can't I join her in the aloneness of her grief? As tight as my arms wrap around her, I can't reach that aloneness. Where are the magic words that will give her comfort? What chapter in Dr. Spock tells me how to do this? He has told me everything else I've needed to know. Where are the answers? I should have them. I'm the mother. What can I give her to make her better? A cold wash cloth will ease the swelling of her crying eyes, but it won't stop the reason for her tears. What treat will bring joy back to her? What prize will bring the "happy child" smile back again? I KNOW someday she'll find happiness again, that her life will have meaning again. I can hold out hope for her someday, but what about now? this minute? this hour? this day? I can give her my love and prayers and my care and my concern. I could give her my life. But even that won't help.

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 of a child who has died are sometimes referred to as the "forgotten mourners". In most cases we are. I think we even tell ourselves we shouldn't hurt as much as we do and concern ourselves with our bereaved child's pain to the neglect of our own. We need to recognize that we, too, have lost a part of ourselves, and we have a REAL reason to grieve. If we say to ourselves, "he or she was not my child, and I shouldn't hurt as badly", we are not being fair with ourselves. As grandparents, we have a double burden. We hurt because our precious grandchild is dead, and we hurt because our own child is desolate. We feel helplessness and frustration in addition to our pain. But if we are to be helpful to our bereaved child we need to be helpful to ourselves also.

Grandfathers may have an especially hard time handling their own grief. Men in our culture are not allowed to be emotional. From childhood they are told to "be strong" and take care of others -- never themselves. Some of us have other children who have children. We may resent their having "complete" families of two or three children, and our bereaved child may have had only one -- the one who died. This is not an uncommon reaction for grandparents. I was surprised and appalled when I realized I was angry with my oldest son who has three children and my bereaved daughter lost her only child. But feelings are not fact. I was not wishing one of my son's children to die. I was simply looking at how unjust life is, and my oldest son's family was where I focused. I felt guilty about this until I looked at my resentment for what it really was.

However, 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

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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. 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 not a 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 this is normal. In the early months our children do fairly well because they have not yet accepted the reality of their child's death. It isn't until one faces the 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 most. How desolate they must feel if the two people they could always rely on now turn away from them...

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.

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