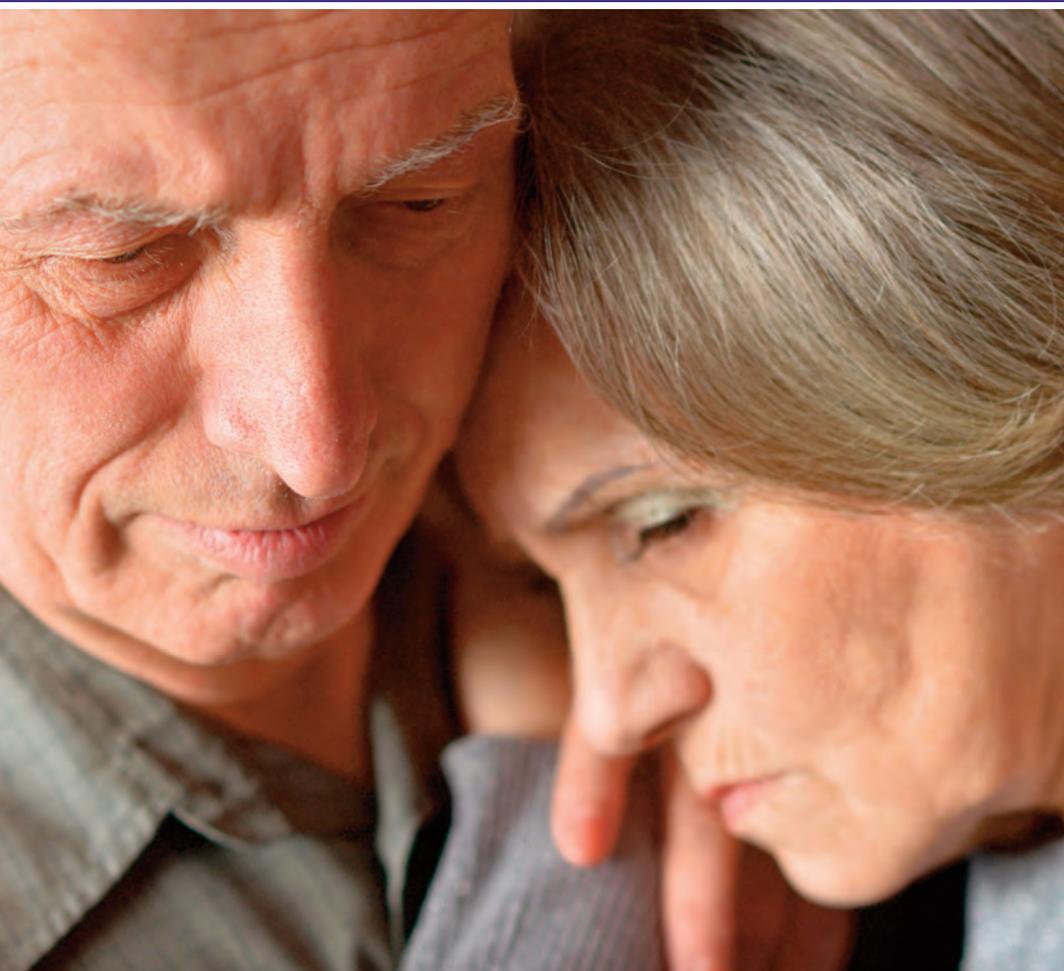


# GRANDPARENTS' GRIEF:

Suffering a Double Grief



**madd** 

**Saving Lives, Supporting Victims**  
**Sauver des vies. Aider les victimes.**



# GRANDPARENTS' GRIEF: Suffering a Double Grief

When you became a parent, you sought to protect your child from the pain and grief that life sometimes brings. Mostly, you have been successful; you have had the ability to solve problems and the power to lessen hurts.

Suddenly, your adult child is facing a pain far deeper than any other pain in life, the death of a child. The pain encompasses physical, emotional and spiritual aspects of one's being. It may be deeper than anything you have experienced or ever could imagine. You may feel powerless to help.

The relationship between a grandparent and grandchild is very special. If you are a grandparent coping with the death of a grandchild due to the violent crime of impaired driving, you may never experience pain as intense or urgent as what you feel now. You may feel the pain physically, centralized in one part of your body, such as in your chest or stomach. On the other hand, you may feel as though it has taken over your entire being. Some pain does not manifest itself physically but causes a person to suffer emotionally, mentally and spiritually.

The hurt is so deep and the questions so many. The answers should be readily available. After all, most parents believe that they should care for their children and protect them from harm at all cost, even when their child is an adult. You may feel helpless as a parent.

As a bereaved grandparent, you are suffering a "double grief." You are grieving the death of a grandchild and grieving the lost part of your own child due to their grief.

Grandparents have a special relationship with a grandchild...one of unconditional love and unhampered by parental responsibility. You may now be experiencing a variety of emotions such as helplessness, frustration, sadness, guilt and anger.

## What you might feel now:

Numbness  
Physical Pain  
Emotional Pain  
Spiritual Pain

Helplessness  
Frustration  
Guilt  
Anger

Loss of Control  
Confusion  
Deep Sadness

## Everyone's Grief is Unique

There is no one way to grieve. Everyone grieves in their own way and on their own timetable. The different ways in which people cope may at times create a strain in relationships. You may feel ignored or forgotten. Always remember, you too had a special, unique relationship with your grandchild.

## **Your grief may not even be recognized by your own child, however you are most definitely entitled to it.**

You are grieving just as deeply for your own child. You may feel frustrated and helpless because this is one pain that you cannot wish away. All the little ways that you had to help your child in the past now seem useless. You can only sit by, offer support and watch your child learn to live with this loss and pain.

Grandparents often think that they should cope better, have all the answers, control the situation and set an example. Sometimes, all that you offer... advice, financial support, babysitting and help, is not accepted, asked for or rejected, which can lead to feelings of guilt, frustration and anger.

## Denial

In the beginning, you may feel numb. A protective numbness allows your mind to deny that your grandchild has died. Grief is not always rational, especially in the beginning. You may find yourself talking to or about your grandchild as if he or she is still alive. Feeling numb, stunned and dazed are healthy and normal reactions. Often, it is difficult to "take in" information. Your appetite may disappear. You may often feel completely exhausted, yet unable to sleep. The reverse may occur for some who may sleep most of the time. For a while, denial eases the pain, but gradually it fades away and you then become more vulnerable to the grief.



# SURVIVAL GUILT AND ANGER

Guilt and anger. Soon the two are so intermingled that it is difficult to determine where one begins and the other ends. You may experience survival guilt...it seems unnatural that a grandparent outlives a grandchild. You may often express the wish that you could change places with the deceased child.

You may feel guilty for things that you didn't do...“Why didn't I baby-sit every time I was asked?”

You might feel guilty for not having been a perfect grandparent or for not having appreciated your grandchild enough. The expectation of having your grandchildren forever is now gone, including all the hopes and dreams.

Anger is a common feeling associated with coping with the death of a grandchild due to a drunk driving crash. Anger can be directed to the responsible individual. Additionally, the anger may also be directed toward members of the legal system or hospital staff. However illogical it may seem, many people may direct feelings of anger at a spouse, other family members or at themselves for not preventing the unpreventable.

## Depression

Some depression is a normal part of the healing journey. Coping with grief may sometimes be overwhelming and you may fear you are going crazy. You may also worry about depression in your grieving adult child. Grief and depression share many similar characteristics such as sadness, crying, withdrawal and loss of interest in activities.

There are, however, distinctions that we can identify. The shame and low self-esteem connected with depression are not present with grief. The complete

Depression tends to be constant and long lasting. Grief, in contrast, is often described as coming in waves and then subsiding for a while.

sense of hopelessness that accompanies depression is often absent with grief. If you are concerned that you are suffering from depression, please seek professional help. Not everyone, however, will need the expertise of a professional counselor to recover from grief. If the circumstances of the death seem to be more than you can handle, or if you are not sure whether what you are experiencing is “normal,” a trained counselor will be able to help you sort out these feelings. He or she will also be able to offer understanding and support in ways that your family and friends, who may be locked into their own grief, may not be able to do. Look for a counselor who is specifically trained in dealing with grief and trauma.

## UNDERSTANDING THE FEELINGS

In addition to the feelings already mentioned, your adult child and you are likely to feel completely empty: empty of hope, of meaning and the desire to go on. The death of your grandchild may make everything else seem pointless. If you have these feelings, you may not want to relinquish them. You may feel that these feelings, connecting you to your grandchild, are all that remain. It may seem as though giving them up would be giving up that memory and accepting the gap in your life. It is possible you feel giving up these feelings would be letting go of the child, almost turning your back on the child.

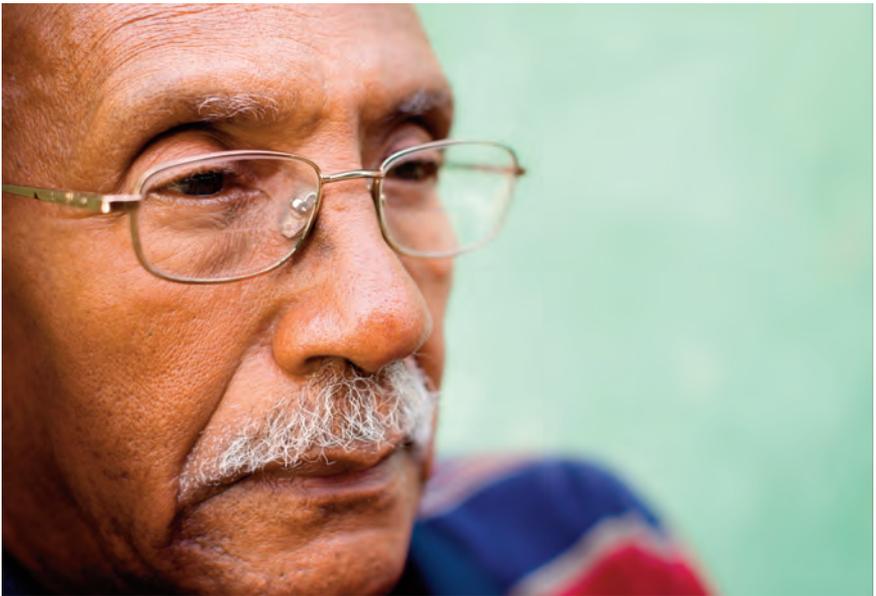
Exploring your feelings helps in coping with your loss and contributes to healing. Acknowledging your feelings will ultimately enhance your ability to emotionally support your child.



## HOW LONG WILL THESE FEELINGS LAST?

Loved ones who are coping with the death of a child say that after a couple of years, the pain subsides and there can be intervals, usually brief intervals, of not thinking about your grandchild. Within two to three years, life may begin to make sense again. It will come slowly, but it can be expected. Usually, after three or four years, there is likely to be less distress. There will still be bad days, but the pain will be easier to handle. There will be fewer occasions when everything feels overwhelming, and it will be possible to feel sad or to cry without being immersed in pain.

Give yourself plenty of time...  
be gentle on yourself.



## VULNERABILITIES DURING INTENSE GRIEF

You and your child may be consumed by grief. It is normal to have little energy for dealing with anything new. You may feel overburdened by reasonable requests for help or attention and as a result, seem irritable. You may notice these reactions in your child. Offer assistance with activities of daily living. Your child will need the added help.

Family life can become strained since everyone is in pain. For a while, everyone in the family may feel alone, and may place blame on one another. Sometimes people share their pain, but often it is hard for people to share openly the pain of grief.

### **Work at Coming to Terms Emotionally with Your Grandchild's Death**

Processing grief is hard work. It is time-consuming and involves tremendous pain. You cannot run away from it. You have to allow yourself to remember and feel the pain.

You may cry immediately. You may not cry for days or weeks. It is okay to cry. It is okay not to cry. When crying does come, it can feel like a release. This is true for men as well as women.

Gradually, you should become better able to tolerate memories. Thoughts or ideas will no longer overwhelm you. There may still be pain associated with them, but at a level you can more easily tolerate. You should be able, at times, to feel warmth in response to good thoughts, sadness in response to sorrowful ones.

Because there are so many memories and thoughts, the process of remembering will go on for a long time. It is important that you not get stuck, dealing again and again with one particular thought, one particular image.

### **Talk about your grandchild**

As a grieving grandparent, you not only feel your own pain and sadness, but you feel helpless and frustrated by not being able to help your bereaved child. Actively talking about your grandchild shows your child that you care. If tears come, it is because they are sad, not because their child's name was brought up. It can be very painful and does take patience to hear the same stories repeatedly, but it is healing and therapeutic.

It helps to remember that there is no timetable for grief. Sometimes there are too many expectations regarding how or when someone is grieving. Do not expect too much of your grieving child, his or her spouse or of yourself. When the reality hits everyone feels even more devastated. *It is important to consider your needs as well as those of your bereaved child.*

## **Listen to Your Bereaved Child**

Bereaved parents are in dire need of someone who will listen to stories about their child without feeling uncomfortable, no matter how guilty or angry they may feel. They need caring people to say their child's name aloud without fear. It can be difficult to listen carefully to someone who is ravaged with fresh grief.

We are too preoccupied; thinking of what we are going to say that will be consoling. There is an overwhelming need to help alleviate the agony of grief. The motive is noble, but the method is wrong. Rather than doing all the talking to help heal the human spirit, allow the broken-hearted to talk. A good listener can become a personal, safe refuge.

You can be a nurturing listener for your bereaved child. If you really listen, you will understand. Part of listening is not filling every silence. Listening even to silent moments encourages more closeness and sharing.

There is an opportunity to cement a deep and lasting relationship with your child and to walk with them through the most difficult life experience they will ever endure. There are ample chances to help them in a special way and the bond that forms will not be broken. It is not easy, and the journey is long and hard. There are feelings of powerlessness, frustration and helplessness, but a grieving grandparent can help and make a difference.

Family and friends may offer support, but they may not understand or be good listeners. Some will be able to respond to your cues and talk when you want to, or be silent or talk about something else. Some will recognize their presence and caring are helpful, and they need not provide more than this. However, other friends may feel uncomfortable with your grief or their own inability to respond to it. Although their intentions may be sincere, they may not know how to continue being themselves with you. In this case, finding new friends and sharing your experience with them may be beneficial.

There may be others going through what you are going through. They can listen and share. In addition, you can be helpful to them by listening and sharing. Sometimes it is helpful to be together.

## Work Toward Renewal and Meaning in Your Life

To do this, you must recognize yourself as someone who is going on – to try to achieve goals, to enjoy opportunities for happiness, to live. You may find that the things you care about are different from those you previously cared about. This is to be expected. The death of your grandchild will always be a part of you. It will change you in fundamental ways. It would be surprising if your interests, concerns and values did not change too.

Writing to yourself, like talking to someone who understands, can help you keep in touch with your feelings without being overwhelmed by them. The process of grief work is lengthy and slow. You cannot expect it to ever be complete... there is no such thing as closure. Nevertheless, there is no other way to move through it.

Some victims/survivors find that it helps them enormously to work on ending impaired driving. You may feel as though it is the one activity available to you that might bring something constructive out of your loss and help others.

MADD Canada and similar organizations offer an opportunity to help ensure that others do not experience the same tragedy you have experienced. If you have other grandchildren and worry that they too are vulnerable, then working to end drunk driving may contribute to making them safer.



# HEALING

What does it mean to heal from the pain, rage, guilt and emptiness that the death of a child produces? Healing does not imply that you will forget your grandchild, and you will always feel some degree of sorrow for your loss. You are not disloyal to your grandchild's memory when you begin to heal.

Healing does not mean going on as though life is unchanged. When a child dies, life is permanently changed. You may decide relationships with the people you love are the most important things in life. Everything else, even activities that you once cared a great deal about, may now seem almost unimportant in comparison.

You may understand, in a way most people do not, how vulnerable we all are and how important it is to make each day count. You may never feel quite as safe as you once did, nor quite as trusting. These changes often occur after enormous loss. They are all compatible with healing from the death of a child.

Not all these things may be achieved for some time, but they can be. Today, you may feel as though even thinking about healing from the death of your grandchild makes no sense, as if you have no right to heal. These feelings are natural. As you heal, you will continue to grieve for your grandchild.

Going on can be a way of showing that life, as it was represented in your grandchild, matters to you. It can be important too for others who love you and depend on you. For your own sake and for the sake of those who need you and love you, you should do your best to try to heal. It is extremely difficult to heal from the pain and grief associated with the death of a child.

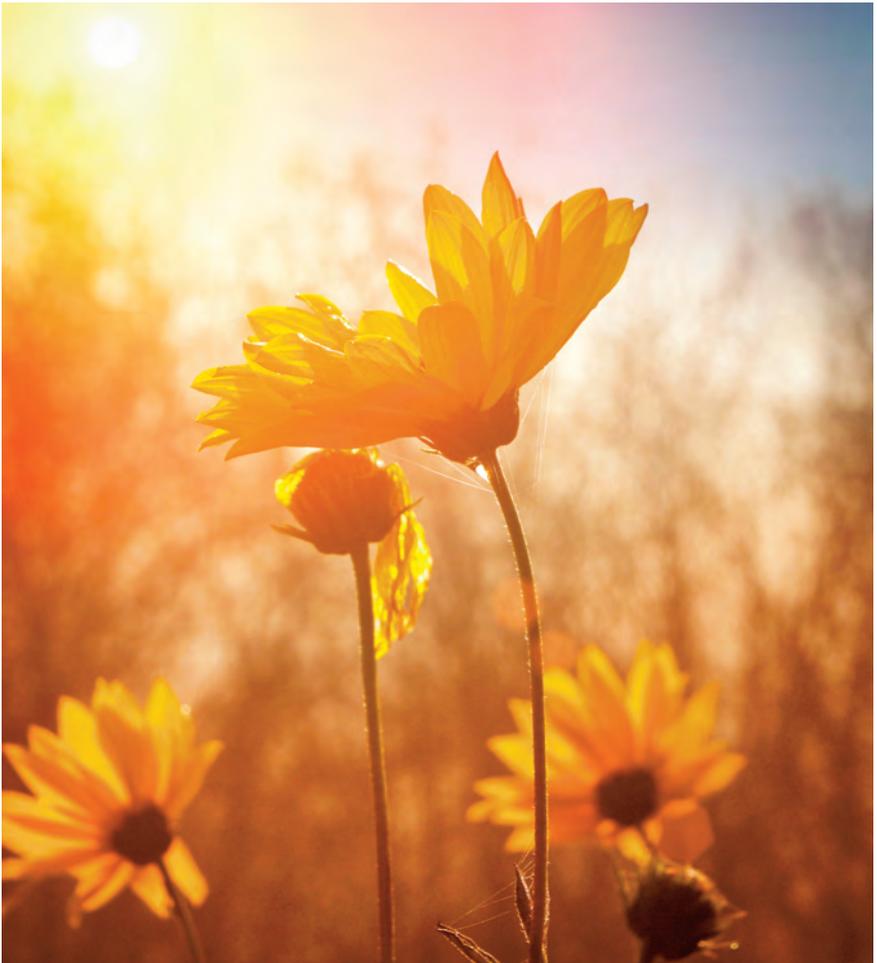
Most people who do not feel any relief over time are suffering from chronic grief. If you find yourself reviewing the very same memories repeatedly, and if they always have the same power to distress you, you may wish to seek assistance from a social worker, counselor or other mental health professional. Acknowledge the concerns of others if they feel you that they think your grief is detrimental or unhealthy, understanding that friends and relatives often significantly underestimate how long it takes for healing to even begin. Grief is an intensely personal experience.

A grandparent's grief may not be recognized by their own child or others, but

they definitely experience it. It is vital for bereaved grandparents to give themselves permission to grieve and to focus on their own needs, as well as their child's needs.

When you begin to heal, you begin:

- To feel good when something good happens
- To feel hopeful about the future
- To give attention and energy to everyday life
- To be cheerful
- To be at peace



## Hope for a Better Day

You and your child will learn to live without your grandchild/child, but there will always be the what ifs. For the rest of your life, there will be times that the distant look in your adult child's eyes will demonstrate thoughts of their child. This is absolutely normal.

Each day you will look for a little ray of sunshine to show on your bereaved child's face. As time goes slowly by, the healing process begins. In time, a ray of hope will show on their face and a smile will make their eyes light up again. There will always be a part of each of you that is gone, but in time each person can learn to live with the part that is still there.

### **Suggestions for Helping Your Grieving Child (the Parents):**

- Read about grief. It is important to understand what you and your child are experiencing.
- Be open and share your feelings. Your openness sets a good example for your child.
- Talk about your deceased grandchild. Mention his/her name.
- Be available to LISTEN frequently to your child. Sometimes there are no words.
- Respect your child's way of handling the pain and expressing the grief. Don't tell your child how he or she should react.
- Hug and hold your child if you are both comfortable.
- Hold on to hope that eventually you/they will enjoy life again. Offer hope to your grieving child and family.



For more information or assistance:  
Visit MADD Canada's web site at  
[www.madd.ca](http://www.madd.ca),  
email [info@madd.ca](mailto:info@madd.ca) or call 1-800-665-6233, ext. 222.

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