



Sands

the loss of a
grandchild

- When a grandchild dies, you have to cope with a double load – your own grief for the baby, and the suffering of your own child.

One grandmother wrote –

“For me the suffering was doubly dreadful for not only did I have to watch my loved grandson suffer and struggle for life, but I had to stand by and see my daughter completely heart-broken and be unable, perhaps for the first time since I gave birth to her, to help her in any way”.

Your grandchild

It is always sad when someone dies, but the death of a baby is especially tragic, as it comes when a new life was expected. A grandparent-to-be usually looks forward to a special relationship with the grandchild, but if the baby dies, that relationship is lost.

“She was my first grandchild,” said one woman “and I’d longed to hold her before her parents even met”.

The death of your grandchild may revive memories of other losses in your life, but at the same time, your grief may be overlooked as the focus is mainly on the baby’s parents.

Your child

As a parent, you feel pain when your child suffers. You may feel helpless because you cannot protect your child from sorrow. You may perhaps feel shut out if your child turns to someone else in grief.

Other feelings

You may experience many emotions, which may seem ‘wrong’ but are, in fact, completely normal.

Anger – which may be directed at health professionals, at the other side of the family (in-laws), at God or even the baby for causing such distress.

Guilt – may arise because you fear the baby may have inherited a problem from you, or because you had bad thoughts about the pregnancy, or because you feel your reactions and feelings are inappropriate.

Conflict – your religious beliefs, perhaps, may differ from your child’s, so you see these events in a different way. You may have been taught to ‘keep a stiff upper lip’ or ‘not to talk about these things’ and find it hard to accept or understand the way stillbirths and newborn deaths are approached today.

Things to do at the time of the stillbirth or death

- If you live close enough, go to the hospital and see the baby’s parents.
- If it is possible for you to see the baby, do so. This will be helpful to you in mourning your grandchild, and also to your own child who will value shared memories.
- There may be ceremonies – baptism or blessing, funeral or memorial service – and it may be helpful to attend.
- If you feel you can, offer to help with practical details which often fall to the father – help him to register the birth and death, help arrange the funeral, but try not to be too hurt if the offer is rejected.
- Your child has probably been given leaflets, which you can read. They may help your grief and also give you an idea of how the baby’s parents feel, and how you can help.

Afterwards

- Continue to visit, phone or write, and provide love and support.
- It will help your child’s grief and your own, if you can talk about the baby using his or her name.

- In many cases, parents have a photo of the baby – don't feel it is macabre if this is displayed. Perhaps in time you might like a copy.
- If you are emotionally close to your child, you can provide great comfort, but you can also cause great pain. Be careful about using comforting phrases, which may come easily to your lips. Don't say "you can have another baby" or "at least you have the other children", as this can be very hurtful. Their baby that died was wanted for him or herself. Other children will not be a replacement.
- Try to accept their emotions as valid and not offer platitudes, however well intentioned they may be.
- Don't feel you have to be strong. If you want to cry, do so. Children are usually helped by knowing that their parents care.

One young mother said –

"When my child was stillborn, it was my mother's first grandchild... I never realised that his death would affect her so much. She had looked forward to him, and now she missed him too. I was glad that she showed her emotion, as by doing that it showed she cared and that she had loved him too"

Long term

- It will take your child a long time to recover from the death of their baby – probably longer than you expect. Even when the first grief has passed, the sadness will last for years, with anniversaries and special occasions being particularly hard. Parents and families need to learn to live with their grief, as the loss will never disappear. As

well as sorrow, the parents may feel anger and guilt, and the mother, especially, may feel jealous of other parents with babies. Try not to condemn these feelings, they are part of the grieving process.

- A father will also grieve, but may hide his feelings more.
- Be aware of holidays and special dates (the due date, the day baby died, the day baby was born) and try to remember them if possible. It is helpful to talk to your son/daughter and their partner about what they hope and need for those days, rather than make a decision or do something for them.
- Future pregnancies will be very anxious times, and a new baby may be greeted with very mixed emotions. A new baby will not replace a baby who has died but will become another family member.



Your own losses

Finally, do be aware that experiencing this loss of your grandchild may remind you of other losses you have experienced in your life, whether it was a baby of your own that died, your mother or your husband/wife. Feelings you had at the time of that loss may resurface, this is natural and nothing to be alarmed about. Grief is not something that ends, that we 'get over'. Some say that grief comes in waves and while the loss you are remembering may have been many years ago, there are still feelings that may lap at your feet like a gentle tide, and others that may swamp you like an unexpected wave. Take things gently and slowly – both for yourself and for your son/daughter and their family.