



When Your Grandparent Dies

by Tom McGrath

“I felt totally awkward at my grandmother’s wake,” said Tim. “Some people were crying. Others were laughing and telling stories. Lots of adults I didn’t know came up to me and told me I should be brave. I didn’t want to be brave. I wanted my grandma back.”

I understand how Tim felt. My grandmother died when I was 13. At the wake the crowds, the pats on the head, the smell of the flowers, all got to be too much to handle, so my brother, a couple of my cousins, and I snuck off to an empty room down the hall. There we told jokes and laughed.

CareNotes

Take One — And Take Heart
Give One — And Give Hope

I felt guilty when my Dad stuck his head in. I thought he'd be mad that we were being disrespectful, but he came in and sat down with us and told us how much our grandma, his mother, would enjoy seeing us kids laughing, that there was nothing she enjoyed more than seeing her grandkids having a good time.

He didn't stay long, but it was then I knew I didn't have to worry about acting right, I just needed to let my own feelings out. After he left, we began to tell stories about Grandma, the delicious cake she baked, her wonderful smile, and how much she loved us. I came to understand why people take time to grieve and remember.

Getting Through

No two people experience the loss of a grandparent the same. Maybe your grandparent's death was sudden, maybe it was no surprise. Yet each person who is left behind feels a loss. Here are some ideas that might help you deal with your loss.

Don't hide your feelings. For some teens, their grandparent is their biggest fan, the one who's always been on their side, maybe the most stable person in their life. No matter what your relationship with your grandparent, you are bound to feel many deep and varied feelings.

Realize that these are natural and healthy. They should not be ignored or passed over. Loss is real; it pays to take it seriously. You have a right to your real feelings. And you have a duty to yourself to honor them.

Find a way to say goodbye. Not everyone has the chance to say a personal goodbye before a grandparent passes away. You'll feel a lot better if you can think of a way to say farewell. Courtney wrote a poem for her grandmother and read it at the funeral service. Matt put a fishing lure in the casket with his grandpa who taught him how to fish. Whenever she hears accordion music, Carla thinks of her grandfather and says a quick prayer of thanks for the good times her family shared. By writing something down, or simply in your imagination, think about your grandparent and take some time to express your deepest feelings, whether of gratitude, disappointment, anger, joy, or loss.

Funeral rites may be a challenge, but they're important. Facing someone's death isn't easy. And as a person reaching young adulthood, you will probably be expected to participate in many of the grieving rituals of your culture and tradition. This may seem awkward to you, especially if you've never experienced them before, but these rituals can bring meaning and comfort at a time of confusion and pain.

Be gentle with yourself if you feel awkward and confused. You don't have to know what to do or what to say. Simply try to be respectful and attentive. If you can't find words to say, don't worry. Your presence is your most important contribution.

Give grief its time. Remember that one of your parents has just lost a parent. Just as your feelings are strong and real, so are those of your other family members. This time of intense grief will indeed pass, but it will take some time.

Whenever a new holiday arrives, or you do something you used to do with your grandparent, it will be difficult to go through it without him or her. "I remember the first Christmas without my Grandma was worse than the wake," said Colleen, 17. "We all tried to be happy, but I know we were all just thinking about how Grandma would never be there again."

But life has a way of going on no matter how big a loss you experience. Time and care (care from others, as well as the care you give yourself) will pull you through.

Watch how you fill the emptiness. You may be angry, sad, depressed. You may be tempted to soothe your feelings or distract yourself with drugs, alcohol, and other dangerous behavior. You'll help yourself more by dealing with those feelings in a positive way—by talking with friends, family members, or a counselor, and by trying to imitate the character traits you admired in the grandparent you miss.

Facing the death of someone close to us raises all sorts of questions about our own life and eventual death. We're all fearful of the unknown, and this is a good time to get

***"My advice to others going through this? Have someone you love and trust stand by you."
—Carla***

your questions about life, death, and the afterlife addressed.

Everything that lives, dies. The question is, How well are we going to live? Take the opportunity to learn from the life of the grandparent you've lost (what to imitate and what to avoid), and make some commitments to yourself and your deceased grandparent about how you hope to live.

Looking Ahead

My brother, cousins, and I grew closer to one another at my grandmother's wake. And by sharing our stories about Grandma, we learned the importance of hanging on to the example she gave us—the loving way she lived her life. That example remains alive in us, as does her memory, and it is a strength we carry with us throughout our days. May your best memories of your grandparent live on in you. □



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Tom McGrath *biography goes here. Lots of things about Tom. More things about the author here. Interesting things and more interesting things.*

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