

The death of a grandparent:

Kaey's story



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Abstract: The impact on children and adolescents of the death of a grandparent has been little researched, and may be under-estimated. In the western world, grandparents are increasingly likely to be involved in their grandchildren's care, whether for economic, practical or family reasons. Their death may therefore have a profound effect. It may also be the child's first experience in life of the loss of someone significant. This article starts with a short review and discussion of the literature before going on to publish a report based on an interview with Kaey, who lost his much-loved grandmother in adolescence, and the impact on him of her death.

Keywords: death, bereavement, grandparent, children, adolescence

The authors of this article collaborated to present Kaey's story (below) to *Bereavement Care* readers because they believe that the potential impact on young people of the loss of a grandparent has been rather underestimated by health care professionals and educators, and there has also been little scientific investigation relating to the topic. Kaey's story attests to the impact of this type of loss. It is a wonderfully vivid account of a teenage boy's loving relationship with his grandmother, Sammie, and his intense feelings of grief on her death. Kaey is remarkably open and honest about his feelings – unusually so for a 15-year-old boy. His account needs no further introduction – it speaks for itself - but we would like to add some observations about the loss of a grandparent and outline what is known to date from research on this topic.

How prevalent is the experience of the death of a grandparent among adolescents? Surveys typically show that it is a frequently-occurring bereavement experience. For example, in one study in England of adolescents between 11–16 years, 66% had experienced the death of a grandparent ever, and 31% had done so in the previous five years (Harrison & Harrington, 2001). In Canada, 55% of teenagers aged 11–18 years reported grandparent(s) death(s) (Ens & Bond, 2005). In another study, also

undertaken in Canada, 30.6% had experienced the loss of a grandparent between the ages of 14 and 19 years (Ringler & Hayden, 2000).

In some investigations, the death of a grandparent emerges as the most frequent kind of bereavement among adolescents. Glass (1991) reported that 46.2% of the students sampled at middle schools in a US survey had lost a grand- (or great-grand-) parent, compared with 22.9% who had lost another family member (the second most frequently reported experience of bereavement) and 16.7% who had lost a pet (the third).

Of course, frequency alone does not make loss of a grandparent a matter for concern; indeed, it brings it into the realm of normal human life events. Yet there are a number of features relating to the experience that makes it for some – by no means all – a life event that is likely to have ramifications. First and foremost, as Kaey's account illustrates and research has confirmed (see, for example, Milan & Hamm, 2003), special bonds between adolescents and grandparents exist, and can include a significant degree of grandparental care-giving (Abeles, Victor & Delano-Wood, 2004). The relationship can be based on very deep (as often remarked, unconditional) and mutual love, in a way that is quite unique and different to, for example, the parent-child relationship.

There are good reasons to assume that the role of grandparents has changed in recent decades (in the west certainly, but also in other parts of the world). Families have become smaller, the number of working mothers has increased, so it seems logical that children will often develop an intense bond with their grandparents. Of course, it is difficult to make generalisations; as Ens and Bond (2005) remark: 'The relationship that develops between an adolescent and a grandparent can be as varied as the individuals themselves' (p171). It is also the case that some grandparents may be too frail to develop such a relationship; others may live too far away; still others may not want to take on the role of grandparent in their later years (Milan & Hamm, 2003). Equally, adolescents may, for example, be more focused on developing relationships with their peers during these formative years, than on interacting with a grandparent.

Nevertheless, for those who are close to their grandparent, the death can have a major impact, for a number of reasons. It is often the first death that a young person encounters (Glass, 1991). In this case, the bereaved grandchild will have no personal acquaintance with grief and grieving, will be unfamiliar with his or her feelings and reactions to such a life event, and may not know what to expect over time or how to deal with the loss. In addition, the young person's own parent(s) are likely to be grieving the loss too, affecting many realms of their home life; the support network's attention is often focused on the latter as the 'primary griever(s)', and the young person can fall into the category of 'forgotten grievers' (cf. Abeles, Victor & Delano-Wood, 2004). Added to this, the death occurs at a time of turmoil in all young peoples' lives: adolescence is a period of significant transitions that may be affected by – and may affect – grief (Balk & Corr, 2001) (see further below).

Consequences of the death

As noted above, little research has been done on the consequences on children and young people of the death of a grandparent. For example, hardly any studies have examined the phenomena and manifestations of complications in grief and grieving among young people following any type of death (for notable exceptions, see Dillen, Fontaine & Verhofstadt-Deneve, 2009; Spuij *et al*, in press); none, to our knowledge, have investigated the consequences following the death of a grandparent. In the scientific literature, more attention has been paid to death of a friend or peer, sibling or parent than to grief over the death of a grandparent. For example, in Corr and Balk's (1996) classic *Handbook of Adolescent Death and Bereavement*, whole chapters are dedicated to the former types of losses, but none to the latter – although Hatter discusses children's loss of parents as well as grandparents

in Corr and Corr's companion text *Handbook of Childhood Death and Bereavement* (1996).

We do know that the loss of a grandparent is strikingly different from other types of loss, underlining the need for independent examination. For example, the death tends to be expected: grandparents typically die of an illness or natural causes, whereas, for example, peer deaths are more often due to accidents, suicide or homicide (see, for example, Ringler & Hayden, 2000). Peer deaths are more often seen as preventable; they are also more likely to be seen as somehow 'wrong' in that young people should not die young, before they can achieve their expectations in life; there may be more reminders of friends and nuclear family members in daily life and interactions and functions (eg. support) may be missing (Servaty-Seib & Pistole, 2006). But the very fact that the death of a grandparent tends to be expected and to occur when s/he is elderly may contribute to making it an unrecognised loss. An elderly grandparent's death is likely to attract comments that 'S/he has had a long and good life,' and the expectation that this fact will diminish the impact on family members. Its consequences may be underestimated.

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Features such as these suggest that loss of a grandparent may not have as great an impact as other deaths, but what do we know about comparative impact? A few scientific studies have compared loss of a grandparent with other types of loss, and found that the former have less severe consequences in general than the latter (eg. Servaty-Seib & Pistole, 2006). However, this picture may be misleading; it masks the vast differences in types of relationships that exist between adolescents and grandparents, as we discussed earlier. This is underlined by the findings from further analysis in this same study: when emotional closeness to the deceased person was taken into account, grandchildren who were close to their grandparent had higher scores on grief than children who were not, with levels much nearer to those from other types of loss (Servaty-Seib & Pistole, 2006). What emerges is the need to focus attention on those grandchildren with close bonds to their grandparent: this is the sub-group with the highest risk of problems following a grandparent's death.

Is there additional evidence of ramifications? Again, we have just a few leads, but these confirm the impact of loss of a grandparent on adolescents. Harrison and Harrington (2001) reported a higher risk of depressive symptoms in children and young people who had lost a grandparent

(some had scores denoting severe depression), compared with those who had not experienced loss. Importantly, further analyses showed that the effect of the loss of the grandparent was mediated by the extent of change that it brought to the young person's life. Nearly all of the young people in the Ringler and Hayden (2000) study reported that they were affected quite strongly by the death of their grandparent. Ens and Bond (2005) reported 'significant distress' among the adolescent respondents in their study of loss of a grandparent. Studies also reveal that a grandparent's death may affect the bereaved young person in a variety of other ways. For example, Ens and Bond (2005) found that adolescents who grieved most deeply for their deceased grandparent experienced higher levels of death anxiety than those who did not grieve so much.

Adolescent grief

For information about possibly unique grief reactions in adolescents, we have to surmise from the more general literature, beyond that on grandparent loss specifically. We know that grief and grieving among adolescents share some characteristics with the grief responses of adults. They typically include shock, depression, fear, loneliness, anger, difficulty sleeping, changes in study/work habits and poor performance at school/work (see Balk & Corr, 2001; Corr & Balk, 1996; Dillen, Fontaine & Verhofstadt-Deneve, 2009). Features unique to young people include rebellious behaviour, truancy, failing to complete school assignments and (perhaps more frequently than in adults) withdrawal into depression and somatic complaints (see, for example, Abeles, Victor & Delano-Wood, 2004; Glass, 1991).

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These reactions have also been linked to developmental milestones: adolescents are coping with a number of fundamental, developmentally-related issues, described by Balk and Corr (2001, drawing on Fleming & Adolf, 1986) as:

- '...trusting the predictability of events
- ...gaining a sense of mastery and control
- ...forging relationships marked by belonging
- ... believing the world is fair and just
- ...developing a confident self-image.' (p. 201)

It is not hard to imagine that these core beliefs could be deeply shaken by the death of a beloved grandparent,

with behavioural, cognitive, social and emotional consequences.

Conclusion

The loss of a grandparent is a 'normal' part of life. However, it is often the young person's first experience of loss and can be an extremely harrowing experience, especially if the relationship has been close and/or interdependent.

In our view, the consequences of such a loss have been too little recognised. Some young people grieve intensely over the loss of a grandparent; the death may disrupt their health and happiness, and derail their schooling for a while. Scientific studies give us some leads on the consequences, but research is very limited. Further studies are needed to explore the range of cognitive, affective, behavioral and social consequences, particularly among those adolescents who enjoyed close and loving relationships with their grandparents.

Kaey's story

Kaey (now aged 19) lost his grandmother Sammie in 2007, when he was 15 years old. DW interviewed him in 2009. This is an account of his loss, based on the interview with DW, and first published in a collection of young people's personal experiences of bereavement, *Verder Zonder Jou [Continuing Without You]* (Westerink, 2010). For the book, each young person was asked to provide some words of advice to other young people facing the death of someone important to them (see box). They were also invited to choose a piece of writing for the book. Kaey chose the following lines from the Vera Lynn wartime song 'We'll meet again' – one of his grandma's favourites.

'After the rain comes the rainbow,
You'll see the rain go, never fear,
We two can wait for tomorrow,
Goodbye to sorrow, my dear.
We'll meet again, don't know where, don't know when,
But I know we'll meet again some sunny day.'

Kaey: My grandma Sammie meant everything to me. As a child I always thought, she's immortal, she will reach the age of 200 and then we'll go together. Now I've realised that life is finite and that you should never waste your time. That's why I am always busy right now. I just don't want to mooch around any more.

My grandmother and I were two of a kind. I was always at ease with her. We were very cuddly, and I wasn't ashamed about that. She always gave me a hug and a kiss when we met. Only once I did not return her kisses and she said 'Are you ashamed of me?' I never failed to return her kiss again.



Kaey and his grandma Sammie

Almost every day I stopped by her place. I could talk to her about everything. We liked to go to town or just sit and chat for a while and eat a sandwich together. In my mind, I still see her sitting at the table doing crossword puzzles, while I am watching a movie. If my parents were not around, she was at our place. She was very important to all of us. And if there were problems, my grandma solved them. She really spoiled me, she was the perfect grandmother.

Grandma married my grandfather and she gave birth to their first daughter in the Netherlands. My grandfather had always wanted to move to New Zealand, that was his dream. Although my grandmother was not very happy about it, they finally emigrated. Unfortunately, it was very difficult building a new life in New Zealand; Grandpa struggled to find work. On top of that, to grandmother's great sadness their second child, a boy, died shortly after he was born. As soon as the opportunity arose, the family returned to the Netherlands, although Grandma found it very difficult to leave her son's grave behind. Back in the Netherlands, two daughters were born, one of whom was my mother. When my mom was six years old, my grandfather died very suddenly and Grandma had to raise three children all by herself.

I had a very good childhood. My brother Dane is six-and-a-half years older than me; my sister Tara is ten years older. My parents are the sweetest and most caring people in the world but, nevertheless, when I was younger I tended to push at their boundaries. The funny thing is that I felt no desire whatsoever to push my grandma's boundaries. I enjoyed being with her and we were there for each other, for better and for worse.

My grandmother died two years ago, in the summer. She had pancreatic cancer for two years and during the last two weeks of her life we took care of her. When she still was in hospital, we took time to say goodbye because I was so afraid that she might die suddenly. She said to me I should go on with my life after her death, and these words still keep me going right now.

I had to do my school exams at the time when Grandma's health worsened, but I felt no urge to study. She encouraged me to do my best. I then decided to do the exams in honour of her, and worked as hard as I could. When I picked up the results from school, I ran to her with a stack of papers and threw them on her bed. She was so excited when she heard that I had passed. Two weeks later she died. I was torn to pieces when I saw her. I knew she had passed away, but didn't really register it. I felt a great void and deep hurt. I collapsed onto the sofa – I couldn't get my head around it.

A few days after her death I took part in a dance competition. Grandma had always come to watch my local dance contests; she was my biggest fan. I knew she did not want me to duck this one. I danced this competition for her. I won and the cup went with her in her grave. My parents involved us children in organising the funeral. I'm glad of that, but at that time I still didn't fully register that my grandmother was really gone.

During the funeral my grandmother's favourite music was played. The pastor spoke and so did several family members, including me. My brother played the guitar, accompanying my sister singing *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* and *We'll Meet Again*, her favourite songs. That was very emotional. I felt a kind of euphoria. I knew she was resting in peace and that she would always have a special place in my heart. But I also felt bad because she was no longer physically with me.

My parents involved us children in organising the funeral. I'm glad of that

The first week after my grandmother's death I was exhausted. I felt like a smashed mirror. She died during the summer holidays so I could not tell anyone at school. Still, many friends and former classmates dropped by to see me because everyone knew my grandmother. Some of them even came to the funeral. They were very understanding. I am a very outgoing person, so I talked a lot about it. That was my way of coping with grief. I liked to hang around with people who had experienced the same loss – friends who also had lost a grandparent and my own family. At first we found it very difficult to be confronted with each other's sadness, but we were there for one another. We were very close, and still are.

At first I visited the cemetery four times a week. It was something to hold on to. I took care of the flowers and sat quietly on the bench next to her grave. I wondered whether she could see us and in my mind I kept talking to her. Scientifically, it does not make any sense, but I really talked to her. I still didn't register that she was really gone. But after

a few months it suddenly dawned on me that she was gone for ever. I don't like to visit her grave any more since then. I cannot bear the thought of Grandma's body lying there.

I've often wondered why in the world it had to be my grandmother who died. I just could not understand that she was gone. I found it very annoying that I was constantly faced with her absence. She was not home after school, not during the weekend, not for Christmas – she loved Christmas and started buying presents in August. But the thought that Grandma will not be around for my 18th birthday or when I graduate from high school really breaks my heart. That's why I sometimes envy my brother and sister, because they've enjoyed Grandma's company much longer than I could.

Grandma and I saw each other as much as possible when she was alive: that's why her death still intensely hurts me, wherever I am. Sometimes I get really stressed out about it. The fact that my grandmother is gone left a void in my heart, although I have started filling it with

sweet memories. But in a way I still can't comprehend that she's gone, even though it is already two years ago. That sometimes makes me sad. But just suppose that I had not known her, then I would not have had all those beautiful memories. So basically I'm just glad I've known her.

Her death still has a big influence on me. It has made me think about what matters in life and about what choices to make. In a way it has made me more independent, more grown up. It has also made me appreciate the importance to me of my family and the friends who have supported me. Not a day goes by that I don't think of Grandma Sammie. I'm doing quite well. I'm a senior in High School. Life goes on and my grandmother would not have wanted otherwise. I think she is very proud of how I coped after her death. If I graduate at the end of this year, I will thank her first. I'd love to tell her how I miss her, that I will never forget her, and that she meant everything to me. ■

Kaey finished high school in 2010 and is now studying law at Utrecht University.

Kaey's tips for young bereaved people

- Find distractions
- Cherish the memory
- Go forward – don't pull back too much from others
- Be aware that first times are very confrontational
- Do things that you like; take time off from grieving
- Sometimes it can be helpful to your friends if you tell them that you need them
- You learn who your friends are

Kaey's tips for friends of a bereaved person

- Don't stay away
- Attend the funeral
- Don't forget to also have fun with your friend

Kaey's tips for schools

- Ask the student what s/he wants, eg. how s/he wants to manage the first day back at school (after the funeral)
- Be there for him/her, but also let him/her be
- Give him/her space
- Offer to talk about her/his loss, but don't force it on her/him
- School is an important part of young people's life, and grief should be something that can be talked about there

Kaey's tips for parents of bereaved children and young people

- Being together is important
- Try to support each other as much as possible
- Don't back away from pain and strong emotions, stay with the feelings
- Express your feelings
- Crying is natural

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