

Research Article

Grandmothers' Grief after the Loss of a Grandchild

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The aim of the study was to describe grandmothers' grief after the death of a grandchild. The results increase our understanding of the grief grandmothers experience after the death of a grandchild and can assist in developing support mechanisms to help them cope with their grief.

Design and Methods: The data was collected from grandmothers ($n = 20$) who had lost a grandchild. No restrictions were placed on the age or the cause of death of the grandchild. The data was gathered through an electric questionnaire comprising background variables and an open-ended question asking the grandmothers to describe their grief. The data were analysed through inductive content analysis.

Results: Grandmothers' grief formed a continuum from inconsolable grief to lifelong yearning. The continuum of grief comprised crushing emotions, manifestations of grief, loss

of energy and a permanent change in one's life. The crushing emotions included inconsolable yearning, disappointment, shock and anger. Among the manifestations of grief were mental and physical symptoms and tearfulness. Loss of energy was manifested as joylessness, powerlessness, feelings of unconscionable loss, difficulty describing one's emotions and double grief. The permanent life change involved one's life inexorably changing and long-term yearning.

Conclusion: Grandmothers' grief after the death of a grandchild occurred on a continuum from inconsolable grief to a lifelong yearning. Grandparents dismiss their grief and bury it inside them, primarily to support the parents and the siblings of the deceased child.

Keywords: grandmothers, grief, death of a grandchild

Highlights

- Grandmothers' grief has not been widely studied.
- Grandmothers' grief is described as silenced and multi-layered.
- The research offers more insight into the characteristics of the grief grandmothers experience.
- The research provides more visibility of grandmothers' grief and helps us understand it better.

Introduction

It is part of the natural order of things that those who are older die before those who are younger. This is why parents expect to die before their children, and grandparents, in particular, expect to die before their grandchildren [1-4]. When a small child dies while an aged grandparent lives, it is natural for the grandparent to see the death as unfair and feel guilty

about his or her survival [2-4]. As life expectancy increases, the number of living grandparents grows as well.

The grief following the loss of a child has been studied extensively from the perspective of the grief experienced by parents, the child's mother or father [5-8]. When discussing the death of a child, the emphasis is usually placed on the special relationship between the parent and the child. However, there is a paucity of studies focusing on the grief of grandparents. People become grandparents when a grandchild is born, but they also remain parents to their children, the parents of the grandchild. It is however understood that following the death of a grandchild, grandparents experience pain for the loss of their beloved grandchild [9]. Grandparents also feel the pain of the parents for the loss of their child [1,3,4,9]. In international literature grandparents have been described as silent grievers [10]. This means that the grief of grandparents is not well understood or acknowledged. The grief grandparents experience after the death of a grandchild has also been described as multi-layered.

Grandparents suffer strong feelings of grief and losing control over their life. The feeling of losing control is induced by disbelief over the death of their grandchild and fear of their own death [2-4,9]. Grandparents dismiss their grief [2,3] to support their grieving children, the parents of the deceased grandchild [1,3]. Grandparents are also anguished by the grief of their own children, the parents of the dead child [3,9]. Feelings of guilt for failing to support their children due to their grief is also a central characteristic of grandparents' grief [2].

Following the death of a grandchild, grandparents often provide concrete assistance to their children to help them cope with everyday life [2]. There are conflicting attitudes towards the role of grandparents in families grieving the loss of a child. The grandparents are present, but they give the parents space to grieve. They are willing to discuss the child and exchange memories about him or her, but they expect the parents to initiate the discussion [2,4,11]. Grandparents act cautiously and try to anticipate the parents' needs and wishes to alleviate their grief. The death of a grandchild inflicts a personal loss on the grandparents as they lose both a grandchild and possibly their grandparenthood [9, 3].

The purpose of this study is to describe the grief of grandmothers after the loss of a grandchild. The results can increase our understanding of the grief grandmothers experience after the death of a grandchild and help develop support mechanisms to help them through their grief.

Methods

The research data

The study recruited grandparents who had experienced the death of a grandchild, irrespective of the grandchild's age or cause of death. The study was announced on the membership mailing lists, websites and closed Facebook discussion groups of KÄPY ry, Huoma ry and Surunauha ry. The research data was collected through an electronic form from grandparents who had lost a grandchild. Collecting data through an electronic form was a quick and cost-effective method to approach informants [12]. Promoting the questionnaire through closed websites aimed to ascertain that the participants had personally experienced the loss of a grandchild [13, 14].

The electronic questionnaire comprised of background variables and one open-ended question, which invited the grandparents to describe their grief after losing their grandchild. The background variables included the grandparents' age, civil status, education, socio-economic status, the number of children and grandchildren and information concerning the deceased child.

The informants of the study were 20 grandmothers (maternal grandmothers $n = 16$, paternal grandmothers $n = 4$). No grandfathers participated in the study. The grandmothers' ages ranged between 40 and 68. The majority of the grandmothers (80%) were living in a committed relationship and were employed (75%). The majority of the grandchildren had died either during pregnancy ($n = 5$) or as newborns ($n = 7$). The age of death of the live-born grandchildren varied from two days old to 25 years old. The causes of death of the live-born children included illnesses ($n = 7$), accidents ($n = 2$),

premature birth ($n = 3$) and other causes ($n = 3$). At the time of answering the questionnaire, the time that had passed after the grandchild's death ranged from two months to eight years. For four grandmothers, less than one year had passed after the experience, for ten grandmothers the time passed was between one to three years and for six grandmothers it was between four to eight years (Table 1).

Data analysis

The data were analysed by employing a data-driven content analysis, which is often used when studying a phenomenon that has not been widely researched or for which little data is available [15]. In content analysis the data are condensed in order to obtain a general overview of the phenomenon under study. Firstly, meaning units describing grief were identified in the answers provided by the grandmothers. Phrases or words selected as meaning units were simplified to concise expressions, preserving the central idea [13]. In the written data, the grandmothers at times described their emotions through single words or lists of single words (i.e. "tearfulness, grief, resentment, powerlessness"). The original expressions were formed into 175 simple statements describing the grief experienced by the grandmothers.

In the next phase of the analysis, similar statements were classified under the same category.

Fourteen subcategories emerged from the simple statements. By combining similar subcategories, four categories emerged, which then formed one common category that answered the research question [13].

Ethics and reliability

Grief support organisations (KÄPY ry, Huoma ry and Surunauha ry) gave their permission to conduct the study. By answering the questionnaire, the informants consented to participate in the study. When investigating sensitive research topics, it is advisable to ensure that participating in the study will not create problems for the informants [14]. In this study, the contact information of the researcher was included in the letter accompanying the electronic form and the participants could contact her if they wished. Nobody contacted the researcher.

The reliability of the study has been examined throughout the process with reliability criteria used in qualitative research. The research material provided ample data, which were saturated. The original answers were revisited in the analysis phase in order to validate the inductive process. The original meaning was strictly preserved in the simplification of the data. Original quotes are presented along with the results to provide the reader with visibility of the analysis process. The results describe the grief experienced by the grandmothers.

Results

Grandmothers' grief after the death of a grandchild

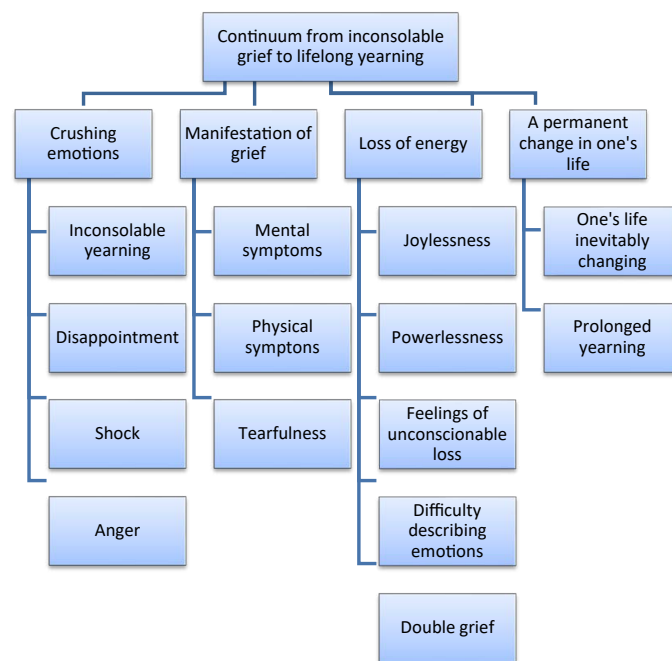
The grief grandmothers experienced following the death of a grandchild formed a **continuum from inconsolable grief to lifelong yearning**. The continuum was characterised by **crushing emotions, manifestations of grief, loss of energy and a permanent change in one's life** (Figure 1).

Table 1. Background information on the grandmothers (n = 20)

Background variable	n	%
Age (n = 19)		
40-49	4	21
50-59	8	42
60-68	7	37
Civil status		
In a relationship	16	80
Not in a relationship	4	20
Education		
No secondary education	1	5
Vocational education	15	75
Higher education	4	20
Socioeconomic status		
Employed	14	70
Unemployed	6	30
Number of children (n = 19)		
1	2	11
2	1	5
3	10	52
4	4	21
5	2	11
Number of grandchildren		
1-2	3	15
3-4	8	40
5-6	5	25
7-24	4	20
Number of lost grandchildren		
1	19	95
2	1	5
Sex of the deceased grandchild		
Girl	14	70
Boy	6	30
Age of the deceased grandchild		
stillbirth	5	25
less than 2 months	7	35
1-4 years	4	20
5-10 years	3	15
25 years	1	5
Cause of death of live-born children (n = 15)		
premature birth	3	20
illness	7	47
accident	2	13
other	3	20
Time passed after the death of the grandchild		
less than 1 year	4	20
1-3 years	10	50
4-8 years	6	30

Crushing emotions

The crushing emotions were marked by *inconsolable yearning*, *disappointment*, *shock* and *anger*. *Inconsolable yearning* was described by the grandmothers as a daily, blinding

**Figure 1.** Grandmothers' grief after the loss of a grandchild.

grief, inconsolable yearning, deep nostalgia and heartache. *Disappointment* was characterised by disappointment and being upset.

"I miss my little Princess like crazy <3"

Shock included terrible distress and an excruciating, consuming pain. According to the grandmothers' answers, the shock struck instantly after the death or upon the inevitability of death. The grandmothers also experienced horror and anxiety, and they could not immediately understand or believe what had happened. The grandmothers questioned the death of their grandchild, failing to accept it. *Anger* was described as bitterness, rage and anger towards death. The grandmothers felt resentful for failing to keep the child with them. They blamed themselves, as they perceived the death of their grandchild as punishment and a result of their inadequacy. They also blamed the hospital staff for the grandchild's death.

"My immediate emotion was of course this huge pain, which felt like it was tearing and consuming my body from the inside ..."

Manifestations of grief

The grief manifested as *mental and physical symptoms*, and *tearfulness*. The *mental symptoms* included depression, forgetfulness and difficulty concentrating. The *physical symptoms* included feeling suffocated, vomiting, screaming and physical illness. The grandmothers also suffered from insomnia. *Tearfulness* involved crying aloud, inconsolable crying, the tendency to cry easily and incessant crying.

"The night after it happened I felt like I was suffocating."

Loss of energy

The loss of energy presented itself in the grandparents' lives as *joylessness*, *powerlessness*, *feelings of unconscionable loss*, *difficulty describing emotions* and *the experience of double grief*. *Joylessness* manifested as a decline in the grandmothers'

will to live and finding joy in life, and a melancholy which had taken away their joy. Joylessness was also present as a feeling of emptiness, and the insignificance of their environment to them and their indifference towards it. *Experiencing feelings of powerlessness* involved feeling powerless and lethargic. The grandparents could not endure the loss and the heartache. The grandmothers experienced despair and helplessness for failing to do anything about the situation. Powerlessness also manifested as a feeling of falling into a deep, dark abyss. The grandmothers had uncertainties about coping with the grieving process and were anxious about the funeral.

“At times it’s like I’m facing a wall, nothing feels like anything, and there is nothing to be happy about anymore.”

The feelings of unconscionable loss contained the unbearableness of loss and the feeling of losing too much, too early. *Difficulty describing emotions* involved a distressing variation in the degree of heartache, from palpable heartache to one ever present in the background. The grandmothers also described a higher intensity of emotions compared to previous losses. *The experience of double grief* was characterised by a concern for the parents of the child and the intensification of one’s own grief because of the grief of the parents. The grief for one’s own child was perceived as more important. The grandparents also expressed pity for the siblings of the deceased child.

“supporting the mother of the child was my biggest concern.”

A life permanently changed

The permanent change in one’s life involved *one’s life inevitably changing* and *prolonged yearning*. *One’s life inevitably changing* involved one’s life being divided in half, into the time before and after the loss of the grandchild. The death of a grandchild was a life-halting event, after which life was different and quality of life was never restored to what it previously was. The grandparents described losing their grandchild as the most difficult experience of their lives, which also prompted them to reflect more actively on their lives. *Prolonged yearning* included prolonged grief and prolonged heartache and yearning. The grandmothers characterised their grief as a daily one, with yearning and heartache always present in the background. The grief would follow them for the rest of their lives.

“I don’t think I will ever recover from this grief and heartache. It’s just part of my life now and I have to keep it with me as long as I live.”

Discussion

The grandmothers’ grief after the death of a grandchild formed a continuum from inconsolable grief to lifelong yearning. The grief manifested itself in different ways and caused a loss of energy and a permanent change in their lives. The inconsolable grief directly following the loss transformed over time into lifelong yearning.

The results of the study supported the previous notion that grandparents’ grief is characterised by strong emotions, such as shock [9], pain [2], anger [1, 4] and resentfulness [1]. The

grandmothers who participated in the study described strongly experiencing these emotions, particularly during the period directly following the death of their grandchild. Over time the emotions lessened, but the grandmothers seemed to still intensely relive them while describing the grief they suffered directly after the death of their grandchild. Previous studies have also described grandparents wishing they could have died instead of their grandchild [2] or fearing their own death [3], but such emotions did not emerge in this study. However, the grandmothers expressed the fear of losing other grandchildren or their spouse after the death of a grandchild. The fear was very concrete in cases where the deceased grandchild was one of prematurely born twins and the survival of the other twin was uncertain. The intensification of fear has also been reported in previous studies [2, 3].

The grandmothers’ loss of energy was prompted by double grief. In addition to the grandchild they lost, the grandmothers felt grief and pain for the loss and grief of their grown-up children. The grandmothers worried and feared for their children’s and their children’s spouses’ ability to cope with their grief. Grandparents dismissing their own feelings and primarily focusing on the needs of their children has been evident in previous studies as well [1, 2, 3]. The grandmothers regarded supporting their child as their primary task. For a single mother, the support and help from her mother was often the only support available. The grandmothers also did not wish to burden the grieving parents with their own grief.

The results showed that the grandmothers’ grief was accompanied by changes in their life and values. The grandmothers described their life halting and dividing into two parts: time before and after the death of their grandchild. Over time the grandmothers buried their grief in their hearts, which meant that the grief and the heartache were always present in the background but no longer dominated their lives as it did in the early stages of the grief process. The grandmothers fell into melancholy, imagining how the child would be today had he or she had lived, what he or she would look and sound like. Songs and seasons changing could also reactivate feelings of grief.

Grandparents’ grief is a scantily studied area and has often been neglected both in care work and care education. The research data will render grandparents’ grief more visible and help us understand it better. The participation of grandfathers would be valuable for future studies on the grief experienced by grandparents.

Conclusion

In addition to grieving the loss of a grandchild, grandmothers’ grief is characterised by grieving the loss experienced by their child. Grandmothers dismiss their grief and bury it in their hearts, primarily to support the parents and the siblings of the deceased grandchild. For grandmothers, the death of a grandchild results in a loss of energy and in their lives permanently changing.

Grandmothers need understanding and support to cope with grief and to continue to live their changed lives accompanied by grief. More information is needed on the factors that help grandmothers cope with their grief and the kind of support

they wish to receive. More research is also needed concerning the grief of grandfathers and the coping factors specific to them in order to better design and customise support for both grandmothers and grandfathers to assist them in their grief.

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