

Grief's Journey



This first year is full of special days – birthdays, anniversaries, graduations, weddings and religious holidays. All of these can be difficult for those who have lost a loved one. But, for many who grieve, the holiday season is the most difficult time of the year. It is almost impossible to escape the Thanksgiving preparations, the “Merry Christmas” wishes, the decorations – and the pain that someone you loved is missing.

We hope the material included here will help you get through this holiday season. These writings are only suggestions. Your situation is unique and what works for others may not work for you. Whatever helps to make this time of year more bearable for you is the right way of coping.

We do urge you to think ahead about ways to make the holidays more bearable for yourself. Even those who are not grieving often allow the frantic hustle and bustle and their own expectations to create more stress than pleasure.

It is especially important for you, having suffered a loss, to slow down and listen carefully to your own needs and limitations. Some of the natural emotions of grief may be stronger during the holidays. You may feel angry at families’ indulging in joyful togetherness. Holiday carols may start an endless flood of tears. The thought of a gift which would have been just right for your loved one may bring fresh regrets to your mind. Suppressing and rejecting these feelings only give them more power. Sharing the feelings with someone you trust can help you to accept them and move on.

We send you our warmest wishes for a holiday season which is meaningful to you and which honors the memory of your loved one. We all tend to lose sight of the true meaning of any particular holiday amid the holiday “hype.” However, grieving often gives us pause for thought. Reflecting on what this holiday truly means for you may help you transcend your pain and to keep the external hype in perspective. Stripped of commercialism, chores and obligations, the holidays often take on a deeper, more spiritual dimension. Connecting with the underlying message of this holiday season will hopefully sustain you in the days ahead.

Getting Through Holidays

When you grieve, the season that once brought joy may heighten your awareness of a terrible hold in your heart and in your life. The holiday season can bring intense pain but suggestions from other bereaved individuals can help you understand, cope with and grow through the pain you may face during the coming holidays.

- Consider doing only what is special and meaningful to you this year. Set limits and establish priorities. It is important to recognize that your energy may be lower than normal.
- Decide for yourself how you want to handle the days that are special to you (Christmas, Hanukkah, Thanksgiving, etc.). Family get-togethers can be difficult. It will be important to accept your own needs and those of others and to communicate your decisions clearly to family and friends. It helps not to expect too much of yourself or of the day.
- You may want to plan your holiday shopping ahead of time. If seeing decorations or being wished, “Merry Christmas” is painful, consider shopping early (before Thanksgiving) or by catalog.

- You may want to have a shopping list ready, so that when a good day comes along, you can shop efficiently.
- Consider cutting back on greeting cards, especially to those friends you will see over the holidays. If some friends are not aware of your loved one's death, you may want to enclose the simple funeral service card in the greeting card. Many bereaved people find special comfort in friends' concerned responses at this time.
- As the holiday season approaches, give yourself permission to share your concerns with friends, relatives or a counselor. Allowing yourself the love and support you need can help you through the holidays.
- Ask for and accept offers of concrete assistance with holiday chores, for example, decorating, shopping, cooking and cleaning. Look for ways to involve others in holiday planning. Chances are your loved ones are looking for ways to lessen your burden at this time of year. Help them to help you by letting them know what you would like them to do.
- Donate money to a charity or cause that has special meaning to you.
- Give a significant book, piece of jewelry or article of clothing that belonged to your loved one to someone special.
- Light a candle to include your loved one in the holiday activities.
- Reminisce during the holidays about your loved one's life and the holidays you shared together.
- Gather photographs, mementos and written memories to make a book of remembrances and experiences you shared with your loved one.

Acknowledging My Limitations

The whole world seems consumed with tinsel and glitter but those who grieve are only aware of the terrible hole in their hearts and in their lives. Knowing the intense pain of the holiday season, here are some helpful thoughts which other people have shared, with the hope of making the holiday easier to handle.

Realize that when you grieve, you have definite limitations; you do not function at normal capacity. Re-evaluate your priorities and decide what is really meaningful for you and your families.

1. Find help to sort out what you can handle comfortably and let these needs be known to family, friends and relatives.

Decide:

- Whether or not to talk about your loved one openly;
- Whether you can handle the responsibility of the family dinner, holiday parties, etc., or if you wish someone else to take over some of these tasks;
- Whether you will stay home for the holidays, or choose to go to a totally different environment this year.

2. Don't be afraid to make changes; it really can make things less painful.

Consider:

- Opening presents at a different time than usual; having dinner at a different time or place; attending a different church/synagogue for your service; letting the children take over decorating, making cookies, etc.
3. Your greatest comfort may come in doing something for others. Some people feel they can acknowledge their loss more meaningfully by:
 - Giving a gift in memory of your loved one;
 - Donating the money you would have spent on your loved one's gift to a particular charity;



Personal Ceremonies for the Holidays

Because holidays are times of tradition and ceremony, you may want to create special new ceremonies that honor your loss and help you bridge the gap between the past holidays you shared with your loved one and the future holidays you now face without him or her.

- Visit the cemetery alone or with others to place flowers, pray, write in a journal or reminisce.
- Visit a place that your loved one especially enjoyed.
- Plant a special plant, bush or tree in memory of your loved one.
- Place a special ornament on the Christmas tree in memory of the deceased.

- Adopting a needy family for the holidays;
 - Inviting a guest (foreign student, senior citizen, etc.) to your festivities.
4. Whether it's greeting cards, baking, decorating, or a big family dinner, consider these questions before making any decisions.
- Have I involved or considered my children?
 - Do I really enjoy doing this?
 - Do other family members really enjoy doing this?
 - Is this a task that can be shared by other family members?
 - Would the holiday be OK without it?
 - If I chose not to participate, how would everyone react?



One family burns a “special candle” on all their special days to quietly include their absent loved one. One Mother buys a poinsettia for her home as a living memorial to her son for the holiday season; another always orders a bouquet of orange daisies.

Holiday shopping is definitely easier if you make the entire list out ahead of time. Then, when one of those “good days” comes along, you can get your shopping done quickly and with less confusion.

Remember to...

- Take one day at a time.
- Be realistic. Recognize that you need to set limits and do those things which are meaningful to you and your family.
- Know that whatever you choose to do this year, you may decide to handle things differently next year. Growth and change go hand in hand.
- Don't forget the comforting discovery confirmed by many people, that when the holiday finally arrives, it is rarely as bad as you anticipated.

Parent's Corner. Children and Grief at the Holidays

Holidays may be some of the hardest days to face when you are grieving. When someone in a family dies, everyone, especially children, feels a loss of control. As much as possible, include the children's needs in the holiday decision-making process. When discussing death and the person who died, follow the children's lead. Answer their questions directly in ways they can understand. The following tips may help you as you make decisions regarding your first holidays.

- Children grieve differently than adults. They need reassurance that the world will go on.
- Their grief may show itself only from time to time.
- Children often mix up fantasy and reality. Help them correct misinformation.
- Children imagine that the world revolves around them. If something bad happens, they think it is their fault. They often feel guilty when someone close to them dies because they feel they somehow caused the death. Reassure them with accurate information about the cause of death.
- Children fear that death will take someone else in their family, especially a parent. When a family member gets a cold or is injured, be clear about the nature of the problem and answer their concerns.
- Children have a strong need to be a significant and contributing member of their family. Assign them some meaningful tasks at the holidays so they may feel genuinely helpful.

Develop rituals together to keep the memory of the loved one alive. Some ideas for rituals are:

- At Christmas, have a stocking for the person and ask the children to write special letters to put in it, or write a special memory that they can share with everyone.
- When there is a gift giving, give a possession or something significant of the person who died to the children.
- For any special day, have the children light their own candles in their loved one's memory.
- Make a book of photographs and narratives of memories with your young children for any special occasion.



Understand that your children may have more energy and enthusiasm for the holiday than you will. Call upon others to help you as you plan for a meaningful day with them. Above all, be a model for your children and allow all the emotions to be present. Honestly expressed sadness can be a treasured part of any important day.

My Personal Holiday Plan

I predict that the most difficult part of the holiday season for me will be:

The most difficult people to be with might be:

My grief triggers will be:

Words that would help me to hear would be:

My support people (those who can hear my grief) are:

In the past I celebrated holidays by:

This year I want to include the following traditions in my holiday:

One thing which I've always wanted to do at the holidays but never managed to do is:

I would like the following people to be with me:

I do not want to spend my holiday with the following people:

The most difficult words (words I do not consider supportive) might be:

Some things that might help me when I am feeling intense pain are:

*Grief is an ancient universal power
that links all human beings together.*

– Molly Fumia



Grief support groups and meeting others who know what grief is can help during this painful time. For a complete listing of group meeting times and locations visit HopeWestCO.org or call (970) 248-8844.



**If you have questions or would like more information,
please contact us at 866-310-8900.**

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*Profoundly changing the way our community experiences aging,
serious illness and grief – one family at a time.*