
MANAGING GRIEF DURING THE HOLIDAYS

How to keep memories alive

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The pain of grief tends to surface with great intensity during milestone events such as, birthdays, death dates or anniversaries and holidays. The intensity of grief is often highest during the first year. However, individuals will experience pain of varying intensity during these milestone events beyond the first year.

Experiencing emotional pain and yearning for the presence of our loved ones at any time during grief is to be expected. There is no timetable to resolve grief and, in many cases, journeys are lifelong.

Under normal circumstances, preparing for any holiday can be stressful as well as tiring. When a loved one dies, completing holiday tasks become complicated by the intense pain of grief, and the physical, cognitive and emotional changes that accompany it.

Our grief may be so intense that we question whether to celebrate the holidays at all. We may also question which traditions to keep or which ones to modify or eliminate.

We may also struggle with ways to keep our deceased loved ones' memories alive and the reactions from others who do not understand our experience. Anticipation of the holiday season and the days leading up to it may be more stressful than the actual day. If there are certain holiday functions that you don't feel ready to confront, it is okay to avoid them.

Empowerment is crucial to taking care of ourselves during challenging times.

People you know may have difficulty saying the name of your loved one for fear of upsetting you, or because they're uncomfortable with their own feelings. You may wish to initiate discussion about your loved one but are hesitant to do so because it may be very painful. However, your pain may be lessened or replaced by joy due to some wonderful, shared stories.

PREPARING FOR THE HOLIDAYS

Though there are no sure solutions as to how to prepare for the holidays, following are some suggestions that may be helpful.

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- ✓ Read books or articles on grief. I found these activities to be particularly helpful in the early phase of my grief following the death of my 18-year-old daughter Jeannine in March 2003. However, depending on your physical energy and ability to concentrate, you might only be able to read a little at a time, or simply a part of a book or article that resonates with you.

Lack of energy and inability to concentrate for long periods of time are normal physical and cognitive reactions in the early phase of grief.

- ✓ Attend a lecture on coping with the holidays. Local hospices typically host such as event.
- ✓ Identify strengths or strategies that helped you adjust to previous losses in your life.
- ✓ Develop as much support from family and friends as you can. Tell them that the holidays may be emotionally and physically draining for you, and discuss how they can best help you during this time.
- ✓ Don't suppress sadness or anger; these are normal emotions experienced after the death of a loved one.
- ✓ Be mindful of using alcohol and medications, either separately or together.
- ✓ Delegate! Let others share the workload by preparing food and helping with decorations.
- ✓ If you aren't up to a large family affair, consider having a scaled down gathering with a few close family members and friends.

CONTINUING BONDS

Following are some suggestions to help keep your loved one's memories alive.

- ✓ Hang a stocking for your loved one. It can hold small gifts from him/her (shopping done by someone you designate) to family members.
- ✓ At a family gathering, place a decorated box or basket near the door. As people arrive, ask them to write a remembrance on a piece of paper and leave it there. At some point during the day, read those remembrances. It can comfort you and encourage others to share remembrances as well.
- ✓ Get out a box of pictures and start looking at them. People will not be able to resist making comments and sharing stories.
- ✓ Carve out some quiet time for yourself. Burn incense and do an activity you or your loved one enjoyed. Quietly say their name. You may sense their presence or experience peace.

TAKING INVENTORY

After the holidays, take time to reflect on the progress you've made. In early grief, progress may be measured simply by your ability to survive the stress of the holidays without the physical presence of your loved one. You may also discover that you experienced more moments of joy than you anticipated during this holiday season, or in comparison to previous ones. You might have become aware that a sign received from your deceased loved one is a reminder of what you have gained, rather than what you have lost.

Any movement forward through grief should be honored as an indicator of our resilience and hope that we can embrace a different perspective following the death of our loved ones.
