

How To Survive the Holidays While You Are Grieving

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Uh-oh, it's that time again. Many individuals who are grieving would like to skip from November to mid-January. The holidays are rapidly approaching, and it is supposed to be a joyous and festive occasion, but not everyone will feel like celebrating. Even though surrounded by family and friends, you may feel isolated, alone, as if no one understands. Adapting to the absence of a loved one is difficult enough, but the holiday season, with its constant reminders of celebration and tradition, can be especially painful.

Most holidays are one-day events but when it comes to Christmas, it is a long season that begins in mid-November and continues until after the New Year. The commercial lead-up to Christmas with holiday music, decorations, radio and T.V. advertisements and Christmas specials can all be very challenging as enormous expectations are placed on this day to be "picture perfect". You can't seem to escape this festive time of year unless you retreat from humanity.

I have many fond memories of Christmases past and I particularly treasure my recollections of family carol-sings, with my eldest sister Diane playing the piano. The Huron Christmas carol: 'Twas in the moon of wintertime... can still bring tears to my eyes. My departed family members seem particularly close to me during the holiday season and although it makes me feel sad, it feels good to remember them.

Keep in mind that sadness is normal during the holidays no matter how long ago your loss took place and feelings of sorrow and pain are unavoidable and heightened. Intense emotions will be felt as you realize that grief is an ongoing process not an event. It does get easier with time, but there will always be an empty space at the table.

Take into account that if your loss has been over a year many people will expect you to be "over it". They don't understand how shadow grief creeps up at special times such as holidays and anniversaries. Shadow grief is defined as being the part of the grieving process that is triggered



BEREAVED FAMILIES OF ONTARIO
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by various times, smells, places and/or events that remind us of a past grief. Signs of shadow grief include a loss of energy, focus and interest. Be prepared to educate those who expect you to be functioning normally. Let them know you will never be "over your loss" but assure them you hope to eventually enjoy the holidays again.

The first holiday season after the death can be especially difficult because it is your first one without your loved one. Often your pain during the first year is dulled by early grief, shock, and numbness and you may find that the second holiday season after the death of someone loved is actually more painful. By this time you have acknowledged the reality of the death, not only in your head but also in your heart. The protective numbness has worn off and your grief has deepened. If this happens, do not worry. You are not going crazy. What you are feeling is normal and natural.

It is important to view the holidays in perspective. We see "picture-perfect" families on T.V. shows and in Hallmark commercials and are brainwashed into thinking that we're supposed to have similar experiences. That's just not the way it is for most people. Acknowledge that this year things will be much different and consider that the anticipation of the holiday is generally much worse than the actual day itself. The power of planning your holiday time will not change your loss but it will give you more control over the situation.

Negotiate with friends and loved ones in deciding how to make the holidays more manageable. Family get-togethers may be extremely difficult so don't set expectations too high for yourself or other family members on the actual day.

Make this a time to re-examine your priorities. Ask the questions: "What do I really delight in doing? What should I delegate or change?" Give yourself and your family permission to take part in meaningful rituals. Remember, enjoying yourself is not a betrayal of your loved one and laughter and joy are not disrespectful and should be encouraged.

Some people find it helpful to be with family and friends, emphasizing their familiar traditions; others may wish to avoid familiar routines and find new ways to acknowledge the season. Some stay at home, others plan a trip to Disney or travel to the ski hills. There are no universal rules to follow and there is no right or wrong way to get through this. Do whatever feels right to you.

Consult with your children and check out their wishes, as Christmas can still be a special time for them. It is important to realize that children grieve in small doses and should be given the opportunity to enjoy anticipated festivities, family and friends. You can maintain their feelings of safety and security by continuing as many of their familiar traditions as possible. Encourage them to talk about special memories of their loved one, especially those related to past holidays. You might add some new activities such as visiting your loved one's gravesite, leaving a holiday wreath, Christmas ornaments or personal notes. You can commemorate your loved one's memory by burning a special candle or hanging a Christmas stocking for your loved one in which people can put notes describing their thoughts and feelings. Listen to holiday music especially liked by your loved one and look at photographs and memory books. Let your children bake a special holiday meal in memory of their loved one and invite family and friends to join in. If their loved one had a favorite Christmas candy or dessert, encourage the child to



BEREAVED FAMILIES OF ONTARIO
HALTON/PEEL

make those items and talk about how much the loved one enjoyed these favorite items. Remember to allow your children to spend time playing with their friends, even on Christmas day.

Be careful of “shoulds”. It is better to do what feels best for you and your family, not what you or others think you should do. Don’t let anyone “should on you” and give yourself permission not to do certain things. Do the Christmas preparations that you enjoy and look for alternatives for those you don’t enjoy. For example, this year you could purchase baked goods or let others bake for you. For Christmas dinner, you may decide to visit relatives or friends. If you have dinner at home, you might try changing the menu, the time, or the room. If you decide to decorate your home, let others help you. It’s okay to do something different or not decorate at all. Remember, what you choose to do this time can always be changed next year.

Don't give into holiday pressure. It is important to let go of the need to be perfect and of “doing it all”. If Christmas shopping is upsetting, it may help for you to shop early, to shop by telephone, catalogue, on the Internet, or to take along an understanding friend. Friends may be happy to shop for you if they realize how difficult this is for you. Talk about your feelings with caring people and accept their help.

Be gentle with yourself and don’t expect too much. Tears are normal; embrace your memories and find comfort in them. This is the bittersweet part. Allow yourself the right to talk about the person who has died and the process of sharing memories will help with the healing process.

Be sure to take time out to care for yourself, whether it is through pampering or just slowing down your pace. Treat yourself as you would your own best friend. Try to eat a nutritious diet, exercise, avoid excess alcohol, and get an adequate amount of sleep.

Celebrate life. Attend a holiday or religious service if faith is part of your life. If it is too painful to attend your regular place of worship, visit a neighbouring one. Some people find comfort in acts of remembrance such as donating a floral arrangement at church in memory of a loved one or making a donation in their name to a charity.

Don't isolate yourself but surround yourself with supportive people. Understand that pain and distress are normal feelings and no matter what you do, you will still love and miss your loved one. You can't change or “fix” your loss, but sometimes just understanding the issues can give you more control and strength.

Here are some additional ideas on how to navigate the holiday season:

- ★ Change family traditions, or create new ones. Send New Year's cards instead of Christmas cards or don't send them at all this year.
- ★ Buy a gift your loved one would have enjoyed and give it to charity.
- ★ Write a letter or poetry to your loved one. Leave it in his Christmas stocking or at the gravesite.
- ★ Make a photo collage, a memory book or a picture board.



- ★ Purchase or make a memorial candle to light whenever you want to feel a warming presence.
- ★ Place a single flower on the table in honor of the "presence" of your loved one.
- ★ Spend time together as a family with the family album. Make it a special celebration as the past is discussed, reviewed and re-lived.
- ★ Reserve some time to tell a favorite story at the holiday table about your loved one.
- ★ Plan a brief memorial tribute or prayer. .
- ★ Create a new holiday tradition to start this year that will memorialize your loved one. For example, purchase special candles or luminaries to light throughout the holiday season each year.
- ★ Share your holidays. Visit a soup kitchen or nursing home and do something for someone else. There are lots of lonely people who could use your attention. Remember that giving to and caring for others is a healing thing that you can do for yourself.
- ★ Accept social invitations according to your desire and energy and explain to hosts that you may have to cancel at the last minute. When you do attend, leave when you need to. If you have to leave early you might say, "It is a lovely party, but this is a tough time for me."
- ★ Finally, keep your holiday plans flexible. If there were certain plans that did not work this year, then change them next year. Holidays will never be the same without your loved one, but they can still be special days.

Candles... For centuries people around the world have burned candles in remembrance of loved ones who have died. Lighting a candle is viewed as a sacred ritual in many different traditions and religions. To light a virtual candle, go to the website:

www.gratefulness.org/candles/enter.cfm?l=eng

Computers... can supply a wealth of information about how to help those who are grieving. Myspace, Facebook and other computer programs provide unique ways to mourn and commemorate. Here are some helpful links to check out on your computer:

A website for grieving teens by BFO Toronto www.soul2soul.ca

Online Grief Counselling www.sharegrief.com

Compassionate Support www.kara-grief.org

Compassion Books www.compassionbooks.com

Create a Memorial Website www.memory-of.com/Public/

Linda Goldman: www.childrensgrief.net

Liana Lowenstein: Creative Interventions for Bereaved Children and Adolescents

www.lianalowenstein.com

ADEC www.adec.org

Bereaved Families of Ontario www.bereavedfamilies.net



Bereavement Ontario Network www.bereavementontarionetwork.ca
Bill Webster www.GriefJourney.com
Dougy Centre www.dougy.org
Sibling Grief www.siblingconnection.net
Virtual Hospice www.virtualhospice.ca
Grief Works B.C. www.griefworksbc.com
Winston's Wish www.winstonswish.org.uk



**“You will not always hurt like this”
These words are true.
If they do not reach your heart today,
Do not reject then;
Keep them in your mind.**

**One morning, not tomorrow perhaps;
but the day after tomorrow,
or the month after the next month...
One morning the dawn will wake you
with the inconceivable surprise:
Your grief will have lost one small
moment of its force.**

**Be ready for the time when you can feel
for yourself that these words
are true:
“You will not always hurt like this.”**

**Sascha
“True Words” Wintersun**



We Remember Them

**In the rising of the sun
and in its going down,
We remember them;**

**In the blowing of the wind
and in the chill of winter,
We remember them;**

**In the opening of buds
and in the rebirth of spring,
We remember them;**

**In the blueness of the sky
and the warmth of summer,
We remember them;**

**In the rustling of leaves
and in the beauty of autumn,
We remember them;**

**In the beginning of the year
and when it ends,
We remember them;**

**When we are weary
and in need of strength,
We remember them;**

**When we are lost
and sick at heart,
We remember them;**

**When we have joys
we yearn to share,
We remember them;**

**So long as we live,
they too shall live,
for they are now a part of us as
We remember them.**

Gates of Prayer: Reform Judaism Prayer



Holiday Grief Resources

A Not So Jolly Christmas, Dr. Bill Webster, 1996, Greenleaf Consultants.

Helping the Bereaved Celebrate the Holidays, James E. Miller, 1997, Willowgreen Publishing.

How Will I Get Through The Holidays? James E. Miller, 1996, Willowgreen Publishing.

Healing Your Holiday Grief, Allan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D., 2005, Companion Press.

Holidays and Hope, MADD, www.madd.ca

Light a Candle: www.gratefulness.org/candles/enter.cfm?l=eng

Thoughts for the Holidays: Finding Permission to Grieve, Doug Manning, 2001, In-Sight Books.

Tinsel and Tears: A Holiday Guide, Andrea Gambill, Bereavement Publishing, Inc.