

## **You and Your Grief During the Holiday Season**

With good reason, holiday seasons are often the most difficult of times for people who have experienced the death of a beloved. Holidays are intended to be times of joy, family togetherness, gift giving and thankfulness. Yet, if someone in your life has died, holidays can also naturally bring times of sadness, loss and emptiness.

The full sense of loss of a beloved never occurs all at once. The onset of the holiday season often makes you realize how much your life has been changed because of the loss. A person that has been a vital part of your life is no longer present. You have every right to have feelings of loss, emptiness and sadness. Unfortunately, many people surrounding you may try to take these feelings away. Friends, family, and sometimes even professional caregivers erroneously believe that their job is to distract you from these feelings. To “forget about it”, or worse yet, to “try to be happy” is to minimize the profound loss you have experienced.

While there are no simple guidelines to follow that will make it easy to cope with your grief during this holiday season, hopefully the following suggestions will help you make your personal experience with holiday grief more tolerable.

1. **Talk about your grief.** Some people think that not talking about thoughts and feelings of grief will make the pain go away. However, the reality is you will help yourself heal faster by finding people who will listen and help you understand.
2. **Be tolerant of your inability to function at optimum levels during the holiday season.** Your feelings of loss will probably leave you feeling fatigued and your energy level will naturally show you down. This is ok. Respect what your body and mind is trying to tell you as you work to lower your expectations of operating at high levels of efficiency.
3. **Eliminate unnecessary stresses.** You will already feel stressed so there is no point in over-extending or over-committing yourself. While you do not want to isolate yourself, part of keeping your levels of stress in check is to respect your need to have time for yourself. Some people may try to keep

you busy as a distraction. Experience suggests that this only increases stress and serves to postpone the need to talk out thoughts and feelings related to your grief.

4. **Be with people you find supportive and comforting.** Work to identify those people around you that understand the holiday seasons heighten our feelings of loss and that will allow you to talk about your experiences. You don't need to be around people who want you to be miserable; however, you also don't need to be around people that want you to maintain "a happy face."
5. **Include your beloved's name who has died in your conversations during the holidays.** If other people sense you are able to talk about the person, it may help them recognize your need to remember the joy of having loved the person who was so important in your life.
6. **Do what is right for YOU during the holidays.** Well-meaning friends may try to prescribe to you what they think you should do at this time. These people assume they know what is best for you. Discuss your plans with a trusted friend who won't judge the decision you make and how and with whom you will spend your time. As you become more aware of your needs, share those needs with family and friends. Is this something I do strictly out of habit or do I really enjoy it? If you want to fix a large meal, don't deny yourself the pleasures of good food and companionship out of a sense of obligation to the deceased. Allow yourself to feel joy without guilt. You are not betraying your beloved. Remember that your beloved would want you see you happy and surrounded by those whom hold you dear.
7. **Do plan ahead.** Decide what family traditions you want to maintain and what new ones you may want to start. Knowing how you will structure your time tends to help you anticipate schedules rather than just letting things happen. During this normally painful time of grief, getting caught off-guard may result in feelings of panic, fear and anxiety. As you make your plans, also leave room to change plans if you decide it is something you want to do.



8. **Embrace your treasure of memories.** Perhaps one of the best legacies that exist after the death of our beloved are cherished memories. Holidays stimulate us to think of the past. So instead of ignoring them, share them with understanding family and friends. Memories are tinged with both happiness and sadness. If your memories bring laughter, let yourself smile; if your memories bring sadness, let yourself cry. Memories that were made in love can never be taken from you.
9. **Renew your resources for living.** Spend time thinking about your life as it relates to meaning and purpose. The death of a beloved often creates opportunities to take inventory of one's life as it relates to the past, present and future. The combination of a holiday and the loss in your life will naturally result in self-questioning related to the meaning and purpose of your life.
10. **Express your faith.** You may discover a renewed sense of long held beliefs or the evolution of a new set of beliefs during this time. Again, find people who understand your need to talk about whatever seems important to you.
11. **Do something for someone else.** Reaching out to someone who is in need can help with your feelings of loneliness. Give a donation in memory of your beloved. Give food and clothing to the needy. Invite someone else who has suffered a loss to join you.
12. **Final thoughts.** As people who have been blessed with the capacity to give and receive love, we are forever changed by the experience of death in our lives. We, as humans do not "get over" our grief because grieving is a process and part of the life journey. We work to reconcile ourselves to living with it. Holidays naturally bring a resurgence of intense feelings of loss and sadness. To acknowledge and move toward these feelings is healthier than attempting to repress them. Think about the gifts of grieving – what you are grateful for now. Who am I now that my beloved is no longer with me. How can I best celebrate their life by fully living mine?
13. **Begin each day with a prayer putting your grieving heart in God's loving care.** Ask for the gift of hope and peace. Trust God to fill your life with strength enough for another day. Focus on your beloved's life, not their death.

**REMEMBER:**

Don't let anyone take your grief away from you during the holiday season. Try to love yourself and allow yourself to be embraced by surrounding yourself with caring, compassionate people!!

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Some practical suggestions:

1. Light a candle for your beloved
2. Set a place setting for them at the holiday table.
3. Go through picture albums and tell stories about them.
4. Make a family memory book over the holidays.
5. Make a collage of the sympathy cards you have received.
6. Spend time doing old traditions and set up new ones.
7. Set up a small altar for your beloved.
8. Focus on the spiritual story of the holidays, the season of hope, light and joy, the birth of Our Lord.

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1. Getting Thru the Holidays When You've Lost a Loved One.
2. Overcoming the Blues at Christmas.
3. 6 Tips for Coping with Grief at Christmas.
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5. Pathways Thru Your Christmas Grief.