

How To Survive the Holidays While You Are Grieving

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The holidays are tough for those who have lost a loved one. In good times there is no greater time of year however in times of loss and grief it can be the most difficult experience anyone has to endure. After a relative or close friend has died, the holidays will be forever changed. Holiday rituals can renew the pain of loss, even years after the death. Unpacking a favorite ornament, hearing a cherished carol, or using a treasured family menorah can reawaken and trigger grief reactions. Bittersweet memories and watching the carefree exuberance of others can intensify the pain of grieving and the sense of loneliness.

When it comes to holidays in general, Christmas really is the exception. Most holidays are one-day events but when it comes to Christmas we think of the season that begins in late November and continues on until after the New Year. You can't escape it unless you retreat from humanity. What with the holiday music, decorations, radio and T.V. commercials and specials and the overwhelming expectations placed on that day to be "perfect", it can all be very challenging.

Keep in mind that sadness is normal during the holidays, no matter how long ago your loss took place. Try to accept that feelings of sadness and pain are unavoidable and heightened during this season. The intense feelings will pass, but grief is an ongoing process not an event. Don't ever expect closure. It gets easier with time, but there will always be an empty space at the table. Grief is a chaotic, painful and challenging process that confronts every level of our being and changes our life.

Also remember that if the 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. Be prepared to educate those who expect the impossible. Let them know

you will never be "over it", 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 the pain is blunted 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 in your heart. The protective numbness has worn off and the ache deepens. 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 ideal families on T.V. shows and Hallmark advertisements and are brainwashed into thinking that we're supposed to have these "picture perfect" holidays. That's just not the way it is for most people. Acknowledge that this year things will be much different. Remember that the anticipation of any 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.

Some people find it helpful to be with family and friends, emphasizing the familiar traditions; others may wish to avoid old sights and sounds and find new ways to acknowledge the season. Do whatever feels right to you. There are no universal rules to follow and there is no right or wrong way to get through this.

Make this a time to re-examine your priorities. Ask yourself what you really delight in doing? What should you delegate or change? Give yourself and your family permission to celebrate and take pleasure in the holiday rituals, as much as possible. Enjoying yourself is not a betrayal of your loved one. Laughter and joy are not disrespectful.

Remember to consult with your children to see what their wishes are. Christmas can still be a special time for them even though they are grieving. It is important to realize that children grieve in small doses and should be given the opportunity to enjoy holiday festivities, family and friends. Children need to feel comfortable and secure and this may be achieved by keeping as many family traditions as possible

and creating new ones. Discuss their feelings associated with their loss, such as anger, depression, and fear. Talk about their special memories of your loved one, especially those related to past holidays. Encourage them to write a note or make a gift for their loved one. Such notes or gifts can be delivered to the gravesite. Allow them to spend time with their friends, even on Christmas day.

Take an active role in planning your holiday activities. Negotiate with friends and loved ones in deciding how to make the holidays more bearable. Family get-togethers may be extremely difficult. Don't set expectations too high for yourself or other family members on the actual day. Traditions can be comforting or difficult depending on what they are. It may help to do things just a little differently. Remember, what you choose to do this time can always be changed next year.

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. Give yourself permission not to do things. Once you have decided how your family will handle the holidays, let others know.

Do the Christmas preparations you enjoy and look for alternatives for those you don't enjoy. For example, this year you could buy baked goods, let others bake for you or do without. For Christmas dinner, you may decide to visit relatives or friends. If you have dinner at home, try changing the menu, the time, or the room. You may want to be involved in preparing the meal, or not. If you decide to decorate your home, let children or other family members and friends help you. It's okay to do something different, or do no decorating at all.

Don't give into holiday pressure. Don't feel that you have to go shopping or cook up a storm. It helps if these activities energize you, but avoid them if they cause stress. Set limits. It's important to let go of the need to be perfect or of "doing it all". If you're used to doing all of the shopping, cooking and decorating, perhaps this is the year to share those duties with others.

How do you respond to "Happy Holidays"? You could say "best wishes to you" or "thank you". Think of how you might answer ahead of time as this advance preparation will put you in greater control of

the situation.

Be gentle with yourself and don't expect too much. If you cry, don't let your tears ruin the day for you. Your example may provide others the permission to grieve and feel sad on a "happy" day. As the holiday approaches, share your concerns, worries and apprehensions. Let others know what is difficult for you and accept their offers of help. Christmas shopping can be upsetting and it may help for you to shop early, to shop by telephone, catalogue or 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 people you love and who love you.

Embrace your memories and find comfort in them. This is the bittersweet part. Allow yourself the right to talk about the person who died. The process of sharing memories will help with the healing process. Our memories often bring us both tears and laughter, but they are what sustain us through the years.

You can commemorate your loved one's memory by burning a special candle or hanging a stocking for your loved one in which people can put notes with their thoughts or feelings. Think about listening to holiday music especially liked by your loved one. If you are comfortable, share photographs with family and friends and cherish your memories.

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

Celebrate life. Attend a holiday or religious service if faith is part of your life. Some people find comfort in acts of remembrance such as donating a poinsettia at church in memory of a loved one or making a donation in their name to a charity. You might decide to visit your loved one's gravesite and leave a holiday wreath or Christmas ornaments and personal notes.

Don't isolate yourself. Surround yourself with supportive people who are good for you. Understand that pain and distress are normal feelings. No matter what you do, you will still love and miss your loved one. It's only natural.

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.
- ★ 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.
- ★ Prepare yourself emotionally and physically with meditation, exercise, proper diet, and time to be by yourself. Recognize your limits and pace yourself.
- ★ Create a new holiday tradition to start this year that will memorialize your loved one. For example, purchase a special candleholder and candles or luminaries to light throughout the holiday season each year.
- ★ Share your holidays. Visit a soup kitchen or nursing home. 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 I am feeling overwhelmed by grief just now and I need to be alone.”
- ★ Finally, keep your holiday plans flexible. If there were certain plans that did not work this year, then change them next year. Discuss with the children which plans worked well and which ones did not. Holidays will never be the same without your loved one, but they can still be special days.

Holidays and Hope

Just know that there are no magical formulas to remove your suffering. It is not a choice of pain or no pain, but how you will manage that pain for that special day. Have faith that the sadness of your loss will be lessened through the hope and spirit of the holidays, through fond memories of the past, and through thoughts and prayers from friends.

HAPPY NEW YEAR

Happiness depends upon your outlook on life.
Attitude is just as important as ability.
Passion; find yours this year!
Positive thoughts make everything easier.
You are unique, with special gifts, use them.

New beginnings with a new year.
Enthusiasm; a true secret of success.
Wishes; may they turn into goals.

Years go by quickly, enjoy them.
Energy; may you have lots of it.
Appreciation of life; don't take it for granted.
Relax; take the time to relax in the coming year.

Holiday Grief: Bereavement Support Websites

ADEC	<u>www.adec.org</u>
Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D.	<u>www.centerforloss.com</u>
A website for the grieving	<u>www.griefnet.org</u>
Beyond Indigo	<u>www.beyondindigo.com</u>
Bereaved Families of Ontario	<u>www.bereavedfamilies.net</u>
Bereavement Ontario	<u>www.bereavementontarionetwork.ca</u>
Bereavement Care Centre	<u>www.bereavementcare.com.au</u>
Canadian Cancer Society	<u>webmaster@ontario.cancer.ca</u>
Compassion Books	<u>www.compassionbooks.com</u>
Crisis, Grief and Healing	<u>www.webhealing.com</u>
Dougy Centre	<u>www.dougy.org</u>
Fernside	<u>www.fernside.org</u>
Grief and Loss	<u>www.aarp.org/griefandloss</u> <u>www.goodgrief.org</u>
Grief Recovery Online	<u>www.groww.com</u>
Grieving Children at Seasons Centre	<u>www.grievingchildren.com</u>
Grief Support	<u>www.compassionatefriends.com</u>
Hearth Place	<u>www.hearthplace.org</u>
Hospice Durham	<u>www.hospicedurham.com</u>
Poems, Articles and Memoirs	<u>www.grieflossrecovery.com</u>
Robert's Press	<u>www.robertspress.ca</u>
Support Groups	<u>www.griefshare.org</u>
Pet Loss	<u>www.petloss.com</u>

The Elephant In The Room

By Terry Kettering



There's an elephant in the room.
It is large and squatting, so it is hard to get around it.
Yet we squeeze by with "How are you?" and "I'm fine..."
And a thousand other forms of trivial chatter.
We talk about the weather.
We talk about work.
We talk about everything else...
Except the elephant in the room.
We all know it is there.
We are thinking about the elephant as we talk together.
It is constantly on our minds.
For, you see, it is a very big elephant.
It has hurt us all.
But we do not talk about the elephant in the room.
Oh, please, say her name.
Oh, please, say "Barbara" again.
Oh, please, let's talk about the elephant in the room.
For if we talk about her death,
Perhaps we can talk about her life.
Can I say "Barbara" to you and not have you look away:
For if I cannot,
then you are leaving me alone...
in a room...
with an elephant.