



Hope for the Holidays

Coping with Grief during the Holidays

- **You are not alone**
Holidays are often difficult for anyone who has experienced the death of someone loved. Rather than time of family togetherness, sharing and thanksgiving holidays can bring feelings of sadness, loss and emptiness.
- **Love does not end with death**
The holidays may result in a renewed sense of personal grief; a feeling of loss unlike that experienced in the routine of daily living. No simple guidelines exist that will take away the hurt you are feeling.
- **Talk about your grief**
During the holiday season, do not be afraid to express your feelings of grief. Ignoring your grief will not make the pain go away and talking about it openly can make you feel better. Find caring friends and relatives who will listen without judging you.
- **Be tolerant of your physical or psychological limits**
Feelings of loss will probably leave you fatigued. Your low energy level may naturally slow you down. Respect what your body and mind are telling you. Lower your own expectations about being at your peak during the holiday season.
- **Eliminate unnecessary stress**
Do not over-extend yourself. Avoid isolating yourself, but be sure to recognize the need to have special time for yourself. Realize also that merely "keeping busy" will not distract you from your grief. Experience suggests that it only increases stress and postpones the need to talk out thoughts and feelings related to your grief.
- **Be with supportive, comforting people**
Identify those friends and relatives who understand that the holiday season can increase your sense of loss and who will allow you to talk openly about your feelings.
- **Mention the name of the person who has died**
Include the person's name in your holiday conversation. If you are unable to talk candidly, other people are more likely to recognize your need to remember that special person who was an important part of your life.



- **Do what is right for you**
Well-meaning friends and family often try and prescribe what is good for you during the holidays. Instead of going along with their plans, focus on what you personally want to do. Discuss your wishes with a caring, trusted person in your life. Talking about these wishes will help you to clarify what you are able to do during the holidays. As you become aware of your needs, share them with your friends and family.
- **Plan ahead for family gatherings**
Decide the family traditions you want to continue, and the new ones you would like to begin. Structure your holiday time. This will help you anticipate activities, rather than just reacting to whatever happens. As you make plans, however, leave room to change them if you feel it is necessary.
- **Embrace your treasured memories**
Memories are one of the best legacies that exist after the death of a loved one. Holidays often make you think about times past. Instead of ignoring these memories, share them with your friends and family. Keep in mind that memories bring sadness, that it is all right to cry. Memories that are made with love can never be taken from you.
- **Renew your resources for living**
Spend time thinking about the meaning and purpose of your life. The death of one loved creates opportunities for taking inventory of your life-past, present and future. Make the best use of this time to define the positive things that surround you.
- **Express your faith**
During the holidays, you may find a renewed sense of faith or discover a new set of beliefs. Associate with people who understand and respect your need to talk about these beliefs. If your faith is important, you may want to attend a holiday service or religious ceremony.



Holiday Activities for Grieving Families

Ways to acknowledge and honor your loved one this season

- Light a memorial candle. Consider your loved one's favorite color or scent and/or decorate a votive. Invite children and others to share in the memory.
- Write a card or letter to your loved one who died. Share in fond memories and/or share your feelings of grief.
- Hang a special decoration in memory of the person who died, such as a wreath or stocking. If using a stocking, encourage the family to place items, pictures, cards, memories inside.
- Buy a gift your loved one would have liked and donate it to an organization in need.
- Make a family photo collage including pictures of your loved one. Display the collage in a special place in your home.
- Make a toast at dinner or a holiday even in honor of your loved one.
- Set up a memory table with special photos and items of your loved one.
- Write a story or poem about past holiday and special memories, or draw a picture of your favorite holiday moment from previous years to share with others.
- Give a monetary gift to a charitable organization in remembrance of your loved one, or donate time at a charity who needs volunteers.
- Visit the cemetery. Bring a grave blanket or holiday wreath. If you have children let them decide what they would like to make, say or do at the cemetery.
- Create holiday ornaments that memorialize your loved one.



Checklist to Prepare for the Holidays

Check with you would traditionally do with a "T" and what you want to do this year with a "W". Share this with you family or have them complete their own and discuss your wishes together.

Holiday Cards

- Mail as usual
- Shorten your list
- Skip cards this year

Decorations

- Decorate as usual
- Modify your decorations
- Ask for help
- Let others decorate this year
- Make Changes
- Have a special decoration for your loved one
- Eliminate decorations this year

Shopping

- Shop as usual
- Do not exchange gifts
- Ask for help
- Shop early
- Shop online only
- Make your gifts

Holiday Dinner

- Prepare as usual
- Go out for dinner
- Invite friends over
- Eat alone
- Accept invitation for dinner
- Change dinner routine and traditions

Traditions

- Keep the old traditions
- Attend holiday parties
- Don't attend holiday parties
- Go to a new place
- Bake the usual holiday food
- Do not bake the usual food
- Attend religious services
- Do not attend religious services
- Modify attending religious services
- Visit the cemetery
- Open gifts as usual
- Stay in town or travel



Preparing for the Holidays

Sometimes we spend a lot of time focusing on how “awful” the upcoming holidays will be. You may find yourself living in a land of “what if...” and adding to your pain rather than finding comfort. Be realistic; it will hurt but focusing on the “what if’s” increases the feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. Anticipation is often far worse than reality. Use this worksheet to help focus your energies on positive coping skills.

What are your fears about the holidays?

How do you anticipate handling what you fear?

What are your expectations of yourself this holiday season?

What is your perception on what others expect of you this holiday season?

What are some ways you can bridge the gap between expectations of yourself and others?

What has been the hardest part of this holiday season so far?



How have you handled it so far?

What else can you do?



Books on Grief and Holidays

Christmas Gifts, Christmas Voices by John Allen, HCI

A Decembered Grief: Living with Loss while others are Celebrating by Harold Ivan Smith, Alan D. Wolfelt. Beacon Hill Press

How Will I Get Through the Holidays? 12 Ideas for Those Whose Loved One Has Died by James E. Miller

Holiday Hope: Remembering Loved Ones During Special Times of the Year by The Editors of Fairview Press, Fairview Press

The Empty Chair: Handling Grief on Holidays and Special Occasions by Susan J. Zonnebelt-Smeenge, Robert C. DeVries, Baker Book House

Healing Your Holiday Grief: 100 Practical Ideas for Blending Mourning and Celebration During the Holiday Season by Alan Wolfelt. Beacon Hill Press

Remembering with Love: Messages of Hope for the First Year of Grieving and Beyond by Elizabeth Levang, Sherokee Ilse. Fairview P