

HOSPICE *of the* VALLEY  
*Bereavement Literature*

COPING WITH THE HOLIDAYS AND OTHER CELEBRATION DAYS

Living with loss is challenging enough, but it can be especially difficult when families gather together to celebrate special occasions such as birthdays, anniversaries, weddings, reunions, graduations, baptisms, bar mitzvahs, confirmations, and traditional holidays.

When our loved one dies, we grieve not only for that person, but also for the life we used to have, the love the person gave us and all the special times we spent together. Perhaps there is no time of the year when we're more aware of the empty space our dear one has left behind than during the winter holiday season. For some of us there is no celebration; there is only grief.

Holidays can create feelings of dread and anxiety in those who are bereaved. The clichéd images of family togetherness and the often unrealistic expectations of a season filled with picture-perfect, joyful gatherings can cause tremendous stress for those who are *not* grieving, let alone for those in the midst of the painful, isolating experience of loss. Holidays by nature are filled with nostalgia and tradition, but in grief, even the happiest memories can hurt.

Sometimes, for fear of "letting go," we may find ourselves "holding on" to our pain as a way of remembering those we love. Letting go of what used to be is not an act of disloyalty, and it does not mean forgetting our loved ones who have died. Letting go means leaving behind the sorrow and pain of grief and choosing to go on, taking with us only those memories and experiences that enhance our ability to grow and expand our capacity for happiness.

If our memories are painful and unpleasant, they can be hurtful and destructive. If they create longing and hold us to the past, they can interfere with our willingness to move forward in our grief journey. But it doesn't have to be that way. We can choose which parts of life we shared that we wish to keep and which parts we wish to leave behind. We can soothe our pain by thinking of happy as well as sad memories. The happiness we experienced with our loved ones belongs to us forever.

If we decide to do so, we can choose to embrace a holiday – or any other celebration day – as a special day on which to commemorate our loved ones and to celebrate our love for them. Death ends a life, but it does not end the relationship we have with our loved ones who have died. The bonds of love are never severed by death, and the love we shared will never die either. On any special day of celebration, we can find a way to honor our loved ones, to remember them and to show them that our love is eternal.

We can build a piece of "memory time" into that particular day, or we can pack the entire day with meaning. Think of it this way: *It's much easier to cope with memories we've chosen than to have them take us by surprise.* Whether we are facing Halloween, Thanksgiving Day, Hanukkah, Christmas, New Year's Day, Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, Father's Day, Memorial Day, Labor Day, the Fourth of July, an anniversary or birthday, or any other special day of our own choosing, we can immerse ourselves in the healing power of remembrance. We can go to a special place, read aloud, or listen to a favorite song. We can celebrate what once was and is no more.

When we're in the midst of pain, and the rest of the world wants to give thanks and celebrate, we need to find ways to manage our pain and get through the season with a minimum of stress.

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*Suggestions for Coping with the Holidays:*

(See also *Coping with the Holidays*, at [www.griefhealing.com/coping-with-holidays-articles.htm](http://www.griefhealing.com/coping-with-holidays-articles.htm) .)

- *Have a family meeting.* List all the things you ordinarily do for the holidays (sending greeting cards, decorating the house, stringing outdoor lights, putting up a tree, holiday baking, entertaining business associates, buying something special to wear, going to parties, visiting friends, exchanging gifts, preparing a big meal, etc.) Decide together what's important to each of you, what you want to do this year, what you can let go of, and what you can do differently. For each task on the list, ask yourself these questions: *Would the holidays be the holidays without doing this? Is this something I really want to do? Do I do it freely, or out of habit or tradition? Is it a one-person job, or can it be a group effort? Who's responsible for getting it done? Do I really like doing it?*
- *Do some things differently this year.* Trying to recreate the past may remind you all the more that your loved one is missing. This year, try celebrating the holidays in a totally different way. Nothing is the same as it used to be anyway. Go to a restaurant. Visit relatives or friends. Travel somewhere you've never gone before. If you decide to put up a tree, put it in a different location and make or buy different decorations for it. Hang a stocking in your loved one's memory, and ask each family member to express their thoughts and feelings by writing a note to, from or about your loved one, and place the notes in that special stocking for everyone to read. Buy a poinsettia for your home as a living memorial to your loved one for the holiday season.
- *Do other things more simply.* You don't have to discard all your old traditions forevermore, but you can choose to observe the holidays on a smaller scale this year.
- *Take good care of yourself.* Build time in your day to relax, even if you're having trouble sleeping. Eat nourishing, healthy meals, and if you've lost your appetite, eat smaller portions more frequently throughout the day. (Sweet, sugary foods are everywhere, from Halloween until the New Year, but too much sugar will deplete what little energy you have.) Get some daily exercise, even if it's just a walk around the block. Avoid drinking alcohol, which intensifies depression and disrupts normal sleep.
- *Just do it.* We all know that we ought to think positively, eat right, exercise more and get enough rest — but grief by its very nature robs us of the energy we need to do all those good and healthy things. Accept that in spite of what we know, it's often very hard to do what's good for us—then do it *anyway*. Don't wait until you *feel*/like doing it.
- *Pay attention to yourself.* Notice what you're feeling and what it is you need. Feelings demand expression, and when we acknowledge them and let them out, they go away. Feelings that are "stuffed" don't go anywhere; they just fester and get worse. If you need help from others, don't expect them to read your mind. It's okay to ask for what you need. Besides, doing a favor for you during the holidays may make them feel better, too. Be patient and gentle with yourself, and with others as well.
- *Expect to feel some pain.* Plan on feeling sad at certain moments throughout the season, and let the feelings come. Experience the pain and tears, deal with them, then let them go. Have faith that you'll get through this and that you will survive.

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- *Seek support from others.* Grieving is hard work, and it shouldn't be done alone. You need to share your experience with someone who understands the pain of your loss. If your spouse, relative or friend cannot be the source of that support, you can find it elsewhere. Contact the Bereavement Office at Hospice of the Valley for information on holiday support groups offered throughout the valley.
- *Give something of yourself to others.* As alone as you may feel in your grief, one of the most healing things you can do for yourself is to be with other people, especially during the holidays. Caring for and giving to others will nourish and sustain you, and help you to feel better about yourself. If you can bring yourself to do so, visit someone in a nursing home, or volunteer your time at your church or synagogue. Do whatever you can, and let it be enough.

*Personal grief rituals* are those loving activities that help us remember our loved ones, and give us a sense of connectedness, healing and peace. Creating and practicing personal grief rituals can also help us release painful situations and unpleasant memories, freeing us to make our memories a positive influence in our lives.

### ***Suggestions for Creating Personal Grief Rituals:***

These ideas are as unique and as varied as the people who invented them; think of ways that you can adapt them and make them your own. You are limited only by your own imagination. (See also *Memorials ~ Funerals ~ Rituals*, at [www.griefhealing.com/memorials-funerals-rituals.htm](http://www.griefhealing.com/memorials-funerals-rituals.htm).)

- If you're a writer, *write*. It could be an article, an anecdote, a story, a poem, a song, a letter, an obituary or a eulogy. If you don't want to write for someone else, keep a private journal and write about your feelings as you journey through your grief.
- Buy a very special candle, decorate it and light it in honor of your loved one.
- Purchase a book - perhaps a children's book - on coping with the loss of a loved one, and donate it to your local library or school. Ask the librarian to place a label inside the front cover inscribed "In memory of [your loved one's name]."
- Plant a tree, bush, shrub, garden or flower bed as a permanent growing memorial to your beloved. Mark the site with a memorial plaque, marker, bench or statue.
- Memorialize your beloved in cyberspace by lighting a virtual candle online, at [www.gratefulness.org/candles/enter.cfm?l=eng](http://www.gratefulness.org/candles/enter.cfm?l=eng)
- Write a special note, letter, poem, wish or prayer to your beloved, go outside, attach the paper to a balloon and let it go - or place it in a vessel and burn it, and watch the smoke rise heavenward.
- If you are harboring bad feelings or regrets, gather symbols to represent those hurtful or painful situations, events, or feelings from your past, place them in a container and hold a private burial or burning ceremony, saying goodbye and releasing them as you do so.
- Ask relatives, friends, co-workers and neighbors to gather their contributions, and put together a scrapbook or box of memories containing mementoes, letters and photographs of your loved one.
- Celebrate the life of your loved one by continuing favorite traditions or eating favorite foods.

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- Select a greeting card that you wish your beloved would have picked for you, and mail it to yourself.
- Give yourself a gift from your loved one that you always wished he or she would have given you, and think of your beloved whenever you use it or wear it.

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