

COPING WITH GRIEF

During the Holidays



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Coping with Grief During the Holidays

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Address requests for additional copies to
Hospice of the Valley, 1510 E. Flower St., Phoenix, AZ 85014
(602) 530-6900 hov.org

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HOLIDAY SURVIVORSHIP SKILLS

by Ellen S. Zinner, Psy. D.

The holidays are a traditional time of joy and laughter, sparkle and glitter, sharing and gift-giving. But for people who are grieving, the holidays may seem inappropriate, affronting and painful.

The holidays are a time of remembrance of past celebrations, of present get-togethers and of future opportunities to break away from everyday stress. But for people who are grieving, the holidays may be a time of mixed emotions, feelings of being overwhelmed with multiple demands and the pain of loves lost. As the holidays approach, think about how you take care of yourself during this vulnerable time.

Helpful Hints for Surviving the Holidays

Acknowledge grief work as real work.

Adjustment to the death or dying of someone close to you does not simply come with time. The work of grief demands that you deal with all the feelings that loss engenders. This work takes psychic and physical energy that can leave you unable to deal with the extra demands of the holiday season.

Allow yourself to merely be human.

Avoid perfectionist expectations during the holidays. Let some things slide. If you really want to do all the cooking and baking, let the dusting go. Enlist the aid of others “in the holiday spirit of sharing.” You do not have to do it all yourself this time.

Plan ahead.

Sit down with your family and friends ahead of time to discuss and decide those activities, experiences and people that make the holidays special for you. Decide to do a few special things with a few special people, not everything with everybody.

Set limits.

Tell your family, friends and yourself now—and continue to remind them—that you are on a stress reduction diet this holiday season. You will not be over-doing, over-shopping, over-cooking, over-complying, or over-worrying this year. Put a sign on your bathroom mirror or refrigerator to remind yourself and others.

Change “shoulds” to “wants.”

Be aware of your own statements to yourself. Are you saying “I should do this or that?” Decide which of your “shoulds” you really “want” to do and make those your priorities. Remember: You should not “should” yourself; there are enough other people doing that already.

Strive for a balanced lifestyle.

With all the parties and demands of the holidays, it is difficult for anyone to get enough rest and exercise. It is easy to overindulge.

- Set exercise as a priority—it is an antidote to depression.
- Learn relaxation techniques—they are an antidote to stress.
- Don't overdo the eggnog—alcohol is an antidote for nothing.

Tell others clearly what you want and need for the holidays.

Do not be shy or embarrassed to let others know what you want from them in terms of emotional support, help, or sharing. Mind-reading of yours or others' needs is best left up to fortune tellers. Unknown expectations generally go unfulfilled and lead to disappointment and bad feelings.

Honor the old/create the new.

The memory of your loved one will be with you this holiday season no matter what you do. Consider honoring or acknowledging them in some way.

Be generous to yourself.

The holidays are a time of real and symbolic gift-giving. What are you giving yourself this season? When the New Year rolls in, what will be your answer to the question: "What supportive and caring thing did I do for myself this holiday season?"

Celebrate life.

It seems like an impossibility for someone in grief to find joy and peace at any time, but especially during the season for joy and peace. This is your challenge. Life is worth living only to the extent that we make it so. Survivorship means more than merely surviving; it means fully living. Search for the living path for you and start now.

This exercise has been prepared by Ellen S. Zinner, Psy. D., and based on materials developed in part by Sally Featherstone, RN.

CREATING YOUR OWN MEMORIALS

We now invite you to enjoy your own creativity. You may wish to adopt part of the traditions we have told you about, tailoring them to your family's tastes and needs. You may wish to venture on your own. The important thing is that rituals are a part of learning to cope. We follow with a few suggestions for the holidays. Developing a new ritual takes planning, care and love. The thought you put into it will reap you many benefits in the days ahead.

1. Buy a holiday plant or tree. Planting new life to commemorate the meaning and love in your life can be shared with family and friends who may also be invited for refreshments or a meal after the planting ceremony.
2. Make a toast to honor your loved one—create a special toast using your favorite beverage. This can be done on any of the holidays when family is gathered together or even when you are alone.
3. Purchase or make a memorial candle, which will be lit each morning or evening and extinguished only before bedtime throughout the holiday season. Candles can be used in various ways—a single candle lit at a certain time each night, a candle next to the picture of your loved one could be placed on the mantle or on a special piece of furniture.
4. Place a single flower on the table in honor of the "presence" of your loved one.
5. Observe a moment of silence or prayer before the meal or at another time you deem appropriate.
6. Spend some time together as a family with the family album. Make it a special celebration when the past is discussed, reviewed and relived.
7. Reserve some time to tell a favorite story at the table about your loved one. This could accompany the special toast to your memories.

8. Buy a gift for the home in honor of your loved one, which will have a special place or take on a special meaning for the holidays to come.
9. Decorate your home with fresh flowers, berries, or other products of nature. The apple is the symbol of life. The pineapple is the symbol of welcome and hospitality. You may choose to use these two items to let your friends and family know that they are welcome in your home this holiday season. You could paint the names of each of your family members on ceramic apple ornaments and give them as a gift. You might also want to paint on the name of your loved one and give it to each family member in memory of that person.
10. Create luminarias to line your sidewalk or driveway. These are a Mexican tradition and are simple to make, yet lovely as they light up the night in a soft glow. They signify a warm welcome.
11. Make a donation to charity in the name of your loved one, or help a family in need by providing a holiday meal for them or sending small gifts for the children.
12. Set aside a time to discuss how your loved one contributed to the quality of your family's life.
13. Give a special picture as a gift—perhaps a family favorite that has been restored and put in a special frame. You may choose to place a single rose, the symbol of love, next to the picture of your loved one and put it in a special place.
14. Make a shadow box filled with special items that belonged to your family member. Let each family member choose something special to put in the memory box. Make this a family project.
15. Create special mantle arrangements using items that belonged to your loved one, perhaps a child's favorite toy, a musical instrument, or special item that had a sentimental meaning to you and your loved one.
16. Prepare a photo album of past holidays or special events, and have a copy made for each member of the family; take time to share those memories with each other.
17. Take some of Mom's favorite recipes and have them printed in booklet form and give a copy to each family member. This way, you are able to carry forward those special memories about Mom's (or Dad's) specialties.
18. If your loved one wrote poems or stories, have these printed and bound for family and friends.
19. The New Year may bring with it your own resolution toward hope. Drinking a toast to the future will still embrace the past and give you the time to look ahead. There is something about planning a new or renewed direction that is very encouraging.
20. Be gentle with yourself and ask for help when you need it.

CHILDREN AND THE HOLIDAYS

Children are often able to separate their grief from the joy of the season. This does not mean they don't care, but that they may need to celebrate as a relief from their pain and sadness. One suggestion for communicating with the members of your family is to discuss the holiday as follows:

- The part I'm looking forward to the most is...
- The part I'm not looking forward to at all is...
- To make the day still feel special to me this year, I think we should...
- This year, I don't want to...or I still want to...

Give each other choices. For example, each family member can decide if they want to get involved in the activity, sit back and watch from a distance, or not participate at all.

THE FOUR Ts

Touching

Tender touching says, “I love you and I care.” Most everyone needs to be touched and held. Young children especially need to be hugged, held and cuddled. Strong arms can provide security and comfort to a child. Make hugs a daily routine, introducing it with “I need a big hug” or “Can I have a big hug?”

Tears

Crying is a natural process of releasing sadness and other emotions. Let your children know that crying is okay. By allowing ourselves to cry in front of children, it gives them permission to cry. It also provides an opportunity for comforting one another.

Talking

Talking about our loved one is helpful.

- Listen attentively. Validate their feelings: “Mommy feels sad, too.” “I miss grandma, too.”
- Answer their questions simply and honestly. Sometimes, a simple “I don’t know” will suffice.
- Encourage sharing of memories.

Traditions

Children need to feel comfortable and secure during a holiday. This may be achieved by keeping as many family traditions as possible and creating new ones. A family tradition does not have to remain exactly as it was in years past. You may modify it and still preserve its special meaning. For example, if your Thanksgiving dessert was made especially by Grandma, why not take her recipe and make it yourself?

Other suggestions include:

- Volunteer at a local food shelter or nursing home (helping others can give special meaning to a holiday).
- Discuss memories of the loved one, especially those related to past holidays. “Remember how Grandma loved to....?”
- Encourage the children to write a note or make a gift for their loved one. Such notes or gifts can be delivered to the grave site.
- Create a new holiday tradition to start this year that will memorialize your loved one. For example, purchase a special candle holder and candles or luminaries to light throughout the holiday season each year.
- Keep your holiday plans flexible.

A DESERT HOLIDAY FOR YOU AND YOUR FAMILY

Thoughts on Coping

Talk about your loved one in your conversations—once others realize that you are comfortable talking about him or her, they can relate stories that will add to your pleasant memories. Before you make a decision not to go to a family celebration because you don't want to make others feel uncomfortable, list the pros and cons of why you should or should not go, then carefully analyze your results.

Consider a nature walk—a time of solitude. Let your thoughts (and your tears) flow freely.

Go to a special holiday celebration at a place of worship where you can enjoy the music and the celebration, but sit where you can “escape” inconspicuously if you need to.

Plan to be with the people you enjoy.

HOLIDAY MEMORIAL

A wreath is a traditional part of the holidays in most homes. For this ceremony, place five candles around a simple wreath. The wreath may be placed on any table or fireplace mantel. As you light each candle this year, you may create a new ritual which will become a lasting tradition. We hope this memorial will help you honor your loved one.

As we light these five candles in honor of you, we light one for our grief, one for our courage, one for our memories, one for our love and one for our hope.

This candle represents our grief. The pain of losing you is intense. It reminds us of the depth of our love for you.

This candle represents our courage—to confront our sorrow, to comfort each other and to change our lives.

This candle is in your memory—the times we laughed, the times we cried, the times we were angry with each other, the silly things you did, and the caring and joy you gave us.

This candle is the light of love. As we enter this holiday season, day by day we cherish the special place in our hearts that will always be reserved for you. We thank you for the gift your living brought to each of us.

And this candle is the light of hope. It reminds us of love and memories of you that are ours forever. May the glow of the flame be our source of hopefulness now and forever. We love you.

From “Renewing Your Spirit: a guide for holidays and special days” by Sherry Williams-White. ©2011, New Leaf Resources, 2102 Button Ln., Ste. 102, LaGrange, KY 40031, 800.346.3087. Used with permission of the publisher.

COPING WITH THE HOLIDAYS

My Personal Holiday Plan

I predict that the most difficult parts of the holiday season for me will be:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

My grief triggers will be:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Words that would be helpful for me to hear would be:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

My support people (those who can hear my grief) are: (list name and telephone numbers)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

HOLIDAY CHECK LIST

Mark what you would traditionally do with a T, and then mark with an X what you want to do this year. Share this with your family or have them do one of their own and compare notes.

Holiday Cards

- _____ Mail as usual
- _____ Shorten your list
- _____ Include a "Holiday Letter"
- _____ Elect to skip this year

Decorations

- _____ Decorate as usual
- _____ Modify your decorations
- _____ Ask for help
- _____ Let others do it
- _____ Make changes, such as smaller or artificial tree
- _____ Have a special decoration for your loved one
- _____ Eliminate the tree or other decorations

Shopping

- _____ Shop as usual
- _____ Give cash
- _____ Shop through the catalogs
- _____ Ask for help
- _____ Shop early
- _____ Make your gifts
- _____ Give baked goods
- _____ Shop with a friend
- _____ Ask for help wrapping gifts
- _____ Do not exchange gifts now, but perhaps later
- _____ Make list of gifts you want before you go out

Holiday Music

- _____ Enjoy as usual
- _____ Avoid turning the radio on
- _____ Shop early before stores have holiday music on
- _____ Listen to it, have a good cry and allow yourself to feel sad

Traditions

- _____ Keep the old traditions
- _____ Attend holiday parties
- _____ Don't attend holiday parties
- _____ Go to an entirely new place
- _____ Bake the usual holiday foods
- _____ Buy the usual holiday foods
- _____ Bake, but modify what you would usually do
- _____ Go to a religious service
- _____ Do not attend religious services
- _____ Attend the religious service at a different time
- _____ Attend a totally different church, synagogue, mosque, etc.
- _____ Spend quiet time alone
- _____ Visit the cemetery
- _____ Open gifts on Christmas Eve
- _____ Open gifts on Christmas Day

Holiday Dinner

- _____ Prepare as usual
- _____ Go out for dinner
- _____ Invite friends over
- _____ Eat alone
- _____ Change time of dinner
- _____ Change routine, such as a buffet
- _____ Change location, eat in a different room
- _____ Ask for help
- _____ Remove the holiday decorations early
- _____ Go out of town
- _____ Attend a New Year's party
- _____ Avoid New Year's parties
- _____ Have a New Year's party
- _____ Spend time with only a few friends
- _____ Write in your journal hopes for the New Year
- _____ Go to a movie
- _____ Go to bed early

RESOURCES FOR GRIEF AND LOSS DURING THE HOLIDAYS

- *A Decembered Grief: Living With Loss While Others are Celebrating* by Harold Ivan Smith (paperback)
- *The Empty Chair: Handling Grief on Holidays and Special Occasions* by Susan J. Zonnebelt-Smeenge, Robert C. De Vries (paperback)
- *Surviving Holidays, Birthday & Anniversaries: A Guide for Grieving During Special Occasions (Grief Steps Guide)* by Brook Noel (paperback)
- *Grief and the Holidays* by Doug W. Manning (audio cassette – August 1995)
- *How Will I Get through the Holidays?: 12 Ideas for Those Whose Loved One has Died* by James E. Miller (paperback – January 1996)
- *Thoughts for the Holidays, Finding Permission to Grieve* by Doug Manning (paperback – October 2001)
- *Holiday Hope: Remembering Loved Ones During Special Times of the Year* by The Editors of Fairview Press, Editors of Fairview Press (paperback)
- *Remembering Special Days* by Jennifer Levine
A workbook to support grieving children that focuses on the value of remembering. Offers activities and art projects for various holidays and special days.
- *Tinsel and Tears* by Andrea Gambill
Booklet on hope and healing. Also available in Spanish. Order from Bereavement Publishing 1.888.604.4673.
- Web site with further resources: griefhealing.com/coping-with-holidays-articles.htm



1510 E. Flower St. Phoenix, AZ 85014
(602) 530-6900 FAX (602) 530-6901

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