Getting Through The Holidays

by Darcie D. Sims

The holidays are coming and I'm not sure I'm ready. I'm not sure I'll ever be ready again. It's winter and I feel as frozen inside as the landscape is outside. I tried making out my gift list today, but the tears kept getting in the way. It is so hard to think about gifts and fun and the holidays when a loved one has died.

As I get out the dishes and count the silverware, I am, acutely aware of the empty place at the family table. I'm trying to find the holiday spirit, but when the family circle has been broken by death, the only things that sparkle this season are my tears.

Working Your Way Through

When you've lost a loved one, the holiday season can be a painful reminder of the terrible loss you are feeling instead of bringing warmth, love, and excitement. The first few years are perhaps the most difficult, but even years later, the holidays may lack the joy they once had for you.

There are steps you can take, however, to help give the holidays a new meaning. The holidays can become a time of peace and reflection, a time to cherish the gift your loved one has been-and continues to be-in the life of your family. Here are a few ideas that may help you begin the journey.

- Be patient and realistic. Sometimes our own high expectations of the holidays make the pain and frustration more acute. We have a mental picture of how things ought to be. Often, however, those expectations are based more on fantasy than reality. Remember that you are grieving. Be kind and gentle with yourself, and realistic about what you expect. Leave the word ought out of the holiday season this year.

It is difficult to be realistic while you are grieving, but it is also an important strategy for health and well-being. Plan ahead so that you are not over whelmed by responsibilities at the last moment.

When you are grieving, it is difficult to concentrate, so make lists. Prioritize things. Decide what is important to you this holiday season, and scratch the rest off the list this year. You can always add things back in years to come.

- Listen to your heart and acknowledge your limits. Spend some quiet time before the rush of the holidays listening to your heart. Become aware of your needs and express them to family members and friends with whom you plan to spend the holidays.

Encourage others to share their feelings, too, so that everyone affected by the death of your loved one has an opportunity to express his or her wishes about holiday plans.

Remember that it is O.K. to say no. You do not have to accept every invitation or fulfill every responsibility that comes your way this holiday season. Accept invitations and take on obligations only as you have the energy and the desire to do so. Make all your "yeses" tentative this year.

Do what you can this holiday season, and let that be sufficient. If you can't decorate the yard, decorate the house. If the house seems too big to tackle, decorate a room, a corner, or a table. There is nothing wrong with simplicity. Meanwhile, take care of yourself physically.

Grieving is hard on the body and is a great source of stress. Eat well and wisely. Avoid the temptation to numb your pain through overindulgence in the season's many culinary delights. You will only feel worse later.

"Our loved ones are still and always will be a part of us. They are threads in our fabric and we cannot lose their love."

-Darcie D. Sims, TouchStones

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At the same time, do not deny yourself the pleasures of good food and companionship out of a sense of obligation to the deceased. Remember that your loved one would want to see you smiling, happy, surrounded by those whom you hold dear.

Exercise is an important stress reliever and a healthy mood elevator. Make time for exercise and rest so that your grief is not compounded by exhaustion or overwork. If you listen well to what your heart and your body are telling you, the holidays will pass more peacefully.

**Adapt cherished traditions.** When loss and grief overwhelm us at the holidays, we are sometimes tempted to scrap the whole thing, to do absolutely nothing. But you can keep traditions alive in ways that make sense given the new reality of your life.

For instance, if the fact that you won’t be buying a gift for your departed loved one this year saddens you, buy a simple gift that you know he or she would have liked and give it to someone who otherwise would not have a gift. Many charities are eager to accept such gifts at this time of year, and some will even arrange for you to present the gift in person if you wish. Remember that it is the exchange of love—the giving—that matters most.

Hang the stockings by the fireplace if you wish; lace a wreath on the grave if that seems appropriate. Do whatever feels right for you and your family. Try a new twist on old traditions—have Christmas dinner on Christmas Eve, open presents on New Year's Day or on the sixth of January, as is done in some traditions.

If you are alone this year as a result of your loss, find a way to share a part of the holidays with others. Visit a soup kitchen or stop by a nursing home. You may find yourself forging new bonds out of shared losses.

**Allow the tears to come, but look for joy amidst the pain.** As you unpack and sift through holiday decorations, understand that along with the warm, loving memories, you will be unpacking me heartaches as well. Don't deny yourself the gift of healing tears. Lay in a supply of tissues and don't be surprised if you find tears coming.

Sometimes all we can remember are the painful details surrounding our loved one's death. This holiday season, try also to remember all the wonderful moments of your loved one's life. Think of all the gifts your loved one has given to you—joy, laughter, affection, companionship.

Write these gifts on strips of paper. Put them in a gift box or place them in a stocking. Decorate the tree with them. or keep them in a memory book or a private drawer. Whatever choice you make, you will be celebrating the joy your loved one has brought into your life.

**Focus on the spiritual dimension of the holidays.** When you are ready, and it feels right, one way to refashion the holidays is to focus on the underlying religious meaning. In the Christian tradition, Advent can be a time of quiet reflection and spiritual preparation. Let this season of hopeful anticipation touch the yearning within your heart for a final reunion with your loved one in the life to come.

In this season of light, remember the light your loved one has brought to your life. Light a special candle—not in memory of a death, but in celebration of a life and a love shared. Spend a moment in a quiet prayer of thanksgiving for having loved and been loved by this person.

Holidays of other faith traditions are also steeped in religious significance. However you observe the season, let your grief lead you to a deeper appreciation for the time-honored traditions of the holiday season, traditions that bring home the meaning of God’s promise of everlasting love and life.

Right now, you may feel like the scattered pieces of a broken puzzle. Honor that feeling, but also take comfort in knowing that the pieces of the puzzle can be reshuffled, rearranged, and pieced together to form a new picture.

As you learn to create a new reality for yourself, temper your expectations with compassion and gentleness. You will heal, but only as you allow yourself to experience the full range of emotion on your journey through grief.

I know the pain of moving through the holidays after the death of a loved one. But slowly, gently, I have begun to focus on my loved one’s life—not the death—and that has made all the difference.

Healing requires intention and focused action. It does not just happen.

You must create a healing plan for yourself.

If you can not identify one very specific, concrete action you are consciously taking to heal...you are not healing.

Tom Zuba, Bereaved Dad and Husband

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RE T RET T A E T

Remember (Re-member)
Express yourself (Communicate);
Evaluate traditions
Travel slowly through this time; Trust your judgment
Reflect; Release; Rest; Refuel
EAT healthy diets, drink wisely, maintain exercise and sleep patterns as much as possible.

F O R W A R D

Freedom Feelings Forgiveness
Organize / Plan Ahead
Rituals: Reposition Yourself
Walk Forward~Watch for Triggers
Work the tools you’ve learned
Allow for the possibilities ~ Allow for Hope
Respect Yourself~Respect Others~ be Realistic
Do something for others~Depend on your faith

The holiest of all holidays are those kept by ourselves in silence and apart;
the secret anniversaries of the heart.
H. W. Longfellow

We Remember Them
from Gates Book of Prayer

In the rising of the sun and in its going down,
We remember them
In the blowing of the wind and in the chill of winter,
We remember them
In the opening of buds and in the warmth of summer,
We remember them
In the rustling of leaves and the beauty of autumn,
We remember them
In the beginning of the year and when it ends,
We remember them
When we are weary and in need of strength,
We remember them
When we are lost and sick at heart,
We remember them
. When we have joys we yearn to share,
We remember them
So long as we live, they too shall live,
or they are a part of us as
We Remember Them
COPING WITH THE HOLIDAYS

As we approach the time of year when we are expected to be happy, we may want to withdraw in fear if we’ve experienced a death of a loved one. Finding ways to cope with this difficult time are essential to our well-being.

Try to accept the likelihood that there will be pain. It is proof that another has touched you deeply.

Claim your own feelings and recognize each person is unique. Feelings may include sadness, depressions, anxiety, fear, anger and guilt.

Find ways to express these feelings by crying, talking, writing. Music and art may also help. Turn to others whom you can trust for support. Talk with others who are bereaved.

Plan how you will spend the holiday: This may include celebrating in your traditional way or trying something new.

Seek the support of others during this difficult time. Others not only want to help, they need to help.

Treat yourself lovingly by getting adequate rest, doing things that are refreshing. Shop by catalogues or don’t shop at all. Gift Cards work.

Find ways to remember your loved one by keeping a familiar object, creating a remembrance area, lighting a candle.

Reach out to others in small ways even if your energy is depleted. Give voice to your spiritual side. Recognize it is normal to be upset with God during this difficult time.

Finally, Remember to harbor hope by staying open to the experience and allowing yourself to be enlarged by it. If hope eludes you, it is permissible to ask someone to hold that hope for you.

None of us would part with a single one of our Memories, yet they are all so laced with pain. The need and desire to touch and hold our child again brings and ache that has no release.

-Willis Day, Nathan & Rachel’s dad

10 Tips For Dealing With Grief During The Holidays

In our lives, there are many holidays or special days. These are all difficult days for the bereaved, but for many, the most difficult time of the year is the holiday season. It is at this time we are so acutely aware of and feel the pain of our loss. Here are some ideas and suggestions that others have found helpful.

1. Family get-togethers may be extremely difficult. Sit down with your family and decide what you want to do for the holiday season. Don’t set expectations too high for yourself or of the day. Be honest about your feelings.

2. Keep in mind the feelings of your children or family members. Try to make the holiday season as joyous as possible for them.

3. Be careful of "shoulds" … it is better to do what is most helpful for you and your family.

4. Set limitations and do the things that are very special or important to you.

5. Try to get enough rest. The holiday season can be emotionally and physically draining.

6. If shopping seems to be too much, have your spouse, relative or close friend help you. Consider shopping through a catalog. Gift Cards.

7. Cut back on your card-sending. It is not necessary to send cards to those people you will see over the holidays.

8. Do something for someone else. Ask someone who is alone to share the day with your family.

9. Donate a gift or money in your loved one’s name.

10. Share your concerns, feelings, fears, etc., as the holiday approaches with a relative or friend. Holidays often magnify feelings of loss of a loved one. It is important and natural to experience the sadness.

Losing a child is like a broken down car. To go in reverse brings painful memories. To go forward is too scary without your child. So we sit in neutral with our hands clutched to the emergency brake, hoping someday to find a way to run again.

- Denise Bellion, Carl’s mom
I ache... I can’t breathe... I’m drowning in tears. Their names aren’t supposed to be in granite. They are supposed to be on diploma’s from medical school, hanging on the wall in their offices. They aren’t supposed to be gone.

-Brenda Adkins, Jason’s and Rick’s mom

Coping with a Loved One’s Death and the Holidays

How do you cope with the loss of a loved one, and the grief that is always more pronounced between Thanksgiving and New Years... and even between October 1st and New Years?

Specialists once believed the grieving process lasted about three to five months for a close relative. We have learned that we are considered NEWLY BEREAVED for the first fill five years and in GRIEF INFANCY to the 10th anniversary.

Each holiday is an anniversary of the one that has come before ... so you find yourself remembering what was done and who was there ... but is not there now. Anticipating memories of other years when the family was whole makes people more anxious than usual.

Communicate! Communicate! It bears repeating that because it is one of the most important things to remember during your grieving and certainly important during the holiday season.

Matters are made worse for the grieving when people go out of their way not to mention the deceased and try to pretend the holiday is like any other. Their greatest fear is that any mention of the dead will cause everyone to cry uncontrollably, and the dinner will be ruined.

Plan to mention the loved ones name. If you don't, other people in the family will "slip" and people are going to feel tense. This reinforces the feeling that mentioning the deceased person is what causes the tears and Sadness. Mention the loved one, feel his/her presence and put everyone at ease. Talk about who will carve the turkey this year or who will hang the special ornaments on the tree.

If you have been invited to a relative or friends home you might want to be the one to bring the floral centerpiece with a candle center to light in the name of your loved one. Someone may find it comforting to mention the loved ones name in a prayer at the meal. A sensitive ritual could be the sending of a floral bouquet with candle center to the house where you will be sharing dinner. Enclose a card of explanation suggesting an appropriate few words to be said when the candle is lighted recognizing the physical absence of the loved one. This is not suppose to be therapy. Just make it simple and respectful. The moment of recognition makes the bereaved feel less dishonest to be Sad in celebrating.

When a family member dies in a family with small children, it would be wise to recognize children grieve differently than adults. The children may want to bake cookies or pick out a tree, while the parent may not be able to face it. Consider let other adults do those things with the children.

If you have had a particular ritual or celebration that now seems uncomfortable you may want to think of new rituals or ways of celebrating (at least for the first holiday anniversary). Do not try to get away for the holiday unless you feel absolutely comfortable with that idea. Reassessing rituals is probably a more appropriate option and not quite so drastic.

That’s the only thing that could help me at times—someone to help me cry. Just shut up and sit and be quiet while I cry. This thing called grief is a strange thing indeed.

-Maggie Zarcufsky, Shaun's mom
25 Tips for Holiday Survival

1. Try to keep your expectations for the holidays realistic. If your family has never been "Picture Perfect" it won't magically change with the seasons. But you can change your own attitude by accepting the reality of your family.

2. Make a list of things for which you are thankful. Read it each day.

3. Eliminate or change family traditions that are too exhausting or cause too much pressure. If you feel uncomfortable changing too many things at once, try one or two this year. And remember: you can always go back to the "old way" of doing things.

4. Start a new tradition that has meaning for you.

5. Plan some sort of physical activity at least three or four times per week during the holiday season. It may be as simple as a walk. You can do this with friends or family, or enjoy it on your own.

6. Plan your days. If you need to, make a written schedule. If there are too many activities, drop some. If the days seem too empty or lonely try scheduling activities that increase your contact with other people.

7. If you feel lonely, share your company with someone else who may be lonely, too. Nursing homes or hospitals often seek volunteers for the season; shelters and soup kitchens are often short-staffed. You might meet other people who enjoy and value your company.

8. Listen to music you like. This can help you relax and lift your mood. If holiday music makes you edgy or nervous, treat yourself to a tape or disc of something different.

9. Ask children, family members and yourself "What are you giving" or "What are you making for gifts", rather than "What do you want?"

10. Do something GOOD for yourself—by yourself. every day. Take time to pamper yourself and recharge your batteries—whether it's a nap, a long bath, meditation, a chat with someone who cares or a half hour with a good book.

11. Eat and drink moderately.

12. Spend less time decorating.

13. Discuss the upcoming holidays with your family. Ask each person what would make the holidays better for them. Share your thoughts.

14. If being with your family on the holidays causes your great anxiety, consider Using this time for a vacation or a short getaway. It's often easier to decline a family invitation or a slew of them. By saying "Thanks, but I'll be away" rather than "I'd prefer not to come."

15. Think small. Huge events are overwhelming, it's okay to decline and say "We've decided to have a quiet dinner."

16. Keep it simple if you're entertaining. You don't have to prepare an elaborate feast laden with fat, calories and alcohol. Why not skip some of the big meals and invite people over for mulled cider or flavored coffee. Cheese, whole grain breads and fruit?

17. Don't be a holiday martyr. It's okay to say "no." If you've cooked dinner for the past few years for your entire extended family, suggest that someone else take over. Or switch to a potluck meal in which every family member contributes. You might even try a restaurant—and let someone else worry about the cooking and the clean-up.

18. Be silent and reflective.

19. Spend the holidays with people you care about, not with those with whom you feel obligated to spend time. If you must spend time with people who make you anxious. Try quick visits.

20. Take care of yourself. Get enough sleep, exercise and eat right.

21. Don't overspend. Set reasonable limits on what you'll pay for gifts.

22. Give gifts of your time.

23. Stop the present swapping-frenzy.

24. Try to remember the true meaning of each holiday. Both Christmas and Chanukah celebrate miracles of faith—not miracles of merchandising.

25. Bear in mind that spring is only a few months away and these major winter holidays will be behind you once again.