

## Holidays after the Loss of a Loved One

The holiday season can be most difficult for families going through the loss of a loved one. This is especially true for those experiencing their first holiday season without their loved one. The contrast between a perceived traditional time of happiness and the emptiness felt by those who are grieving can be overwhelming and frightening.

Although there are no quick fixes to make the hurt go away, there are ways to prepare for the approaching holiday. If we have strategies on how to deal with our pain, it can help us feel more in control. The following suggestions are taken from many years of research on how to cope with the loss of a loved one.

Plan Ahead: Think about what you may want to do this year. Recognize there is no right or wrong way to spend the holiday. Some families decide to do something completely different like take a cruise whereas some families choose to maintain holiday traditions. Most importantly, keep your expectations realistic and discuss your wishes with family and friends.

Accept Your Emotions: Recognize that you will be flooded with a wide spectrum of feelings. It is normal to feel sad, mad, confused, scared, relieved, numb all at the same time. It is normal to have bizarre thoughts, confusion, depression and a sense of defeat. These feelings, even though unique for you, are also universal. All of us will go through loss. The key is to embrace with compassion your pain.

Express Your Feelings: Not only is it important to recognize and normalize feelings, it is critical to talk with people who can listen and validate your process. Find friends or support groups that will allow you to talk without interruption, advice or judgment. If you do not feel ready or safe with a group or friends, seek professional help. Asking for help defines our humility. Recognize you can not and do not need to do this alone.

Self-Care: This is a time where it is most important to pay attention to basic survival needs. Research has identified the following guidelines to maintain healthy functioning.

- Nurturing social network. Allow others to be there for you.
- Daily nutritional balance. Eat foods that will nurture your body.
- Adequate fluid intake. Drink extra water, necessary to carry away the body's toxic waste and to maintain appropriate electrolyte balance.
- Exercise. It is one of the most immediate, effective means for controlling depression.

Protect Boundaries: No one knows your grief better than you do. Be aware of your needs and what you can and cannot do this year. You may want to accept an invitation with limits. i.e. You may join an activity with the understanding you may leave early.

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Remember Your Loved One: The worst thing you can do is try to ignore or forget that your loved one is absent this holiday. Honor your loved one by sharing stories and memories with others, which may allow them to share also. Other ways you can remember your loved on can include, lighting a candle, planting a tree or making a special ornament. One family I recently saw, said they were going to bake their love one's favorite cake.

This will be my fifth Christmas without my parents. I am finally able to remember and celebrate their legacy. I now have a peace that they continue to "live on" within me. I am ready to give back to other what they have given me. By doing this I am comforted that their spirit will live on.

The poem "Death is nothing at all" by Canon Henry Scott-Holland gives me peace and hope during the holidays.

Death is nothing at all  
I have only slipped away into the next room  
I am I and you are you  
Whatever we were to each other  
That we are still  
Call me by my old familiar name  
Speak to me in the easy way you always used  
Put no difference into your tone  
Wear no forced air of solemnity or sorrow  
Laugh as we always laughed  
At the little jokes we always enjoyed together  
Play, smile, think of me, pray for me  
Let my name be ever the household word that it always was  
Let it be spoken without effort  
Without the ghost of a shadow in it  
Life means all that it ever was  
There is absolute unbroken continuity  
What is death but a negligible accident?  
Why should I be out of mind  
Because I am out of sight?  
I am waiting for you for an interval  
Somewhere very near  
Just around the corner  
All is well.  
Nothing is past; nothing is lost  
One brief moment and all will be as it was before  
How we shall laugh at the trouble of parting when we meet again!