

Coping with Grief During the Holidays

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- “Who’s going to carve the turkey this year since Grandpa has died?”
- “I don’t have the energy or desire to shop, to decorate, or to be around others this year at Christmas.”
- “I just want to erase Chanukah this year. I’ll just feel too empty without my husband to celebrate.

Thanksgiving, Christmas, Chanukah, Ramadan, Kwanza and New Year’s Day are annual holidays that can be very difficult for people who have experienced the death of someone loved. Memories of good times and togetherness at the holiday season serve to remind us of our loss. Watching others who are feeling thankful and are celebrating when we feel overwhelmed, lonely or sad can be very painful. Holidays force us to realize how much our lives have been changed by the loss of our loved one. Particularly in the first year, many bereaved are left with having to develop new holiday rituals and traditions.

The first step in coping with grief at the holidays is to acknowledge that the first holiday season is difficult and then to prepare for it in advance by making specific plans and obtaining the support that you need. Remember too, that sometimes anticipation of a holiday can be more difficult than the arrival of the day itself.

Some tips for coping with Grief at the Holidays Include:

Set realistic expectations for yourself. Remind yourself that this year is different. Decide if you can still handle the responsibilities you’ve had in the past. Examine the tasks and events of celebrating and ask yourself if you want to continue them. Take others up on their offer to help cook, decorate, etc. Consider shopping by phone, internet or catalogs this year.

Surround yourself with people who love and support you. Share your plans with family and friends and let them know of any intended changes in holiday routine. Memories can sometimes be a source of comfort to the bereaved. Share your memories with others of holidays spent with your loved one by telling stories and looking at photo albums.

Try to avoid “canceling” the holiday despite the temptation. It is OK to avoid some circumstances that you don’t feel ready to handle, but avoid completely isolating yourself. Allow yourself some time for solitude, remembering and grieving, but balance it with planned activities with others.

Allow yourself to feel joy, sadness, and anger-allow yourself to grieve. It is important to recognize that every family member has their own unique grief experience and may have different needs related to celebrating the holidays. Not one way is right or wrong. Experiencing joy and laughter does not mean you have forgotten your loved one.

Draw comfort from doing for others. Consider giving a donation or gift in memory of your loved one. Invite a guest who might otherwise be alone for the holidays. Adopt a needy family during the holiday season.