

When You Face the Holidays in Grief

Helping Yourself Grow Through the Loss



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Sights, sounds, and smells of the holidays remind you this year that things are very different. In fact, you may find yourself dreading the holiday season more than any other period since you became a bereaved person.

The holidays are especially hard in grief because they are occasions of great sentiment. Everywhere we go—the shopping mall, worship, even banks and other places of business—remind us that someone very special has died. Familiar music reminds us of days gone by. The aroma of holiday spices cause bells to ring in our heads. Someone you love has died and your world is changed forever.

Holidays are also hard in grief because they are built around relationships. Family gatherings cannot ever be the same. And of course, memories of bad relationships cause us to realize the past cannot be changed.

The North American way of facing the holidays in grief is to *grieve and cope*, merely “surviving” the holidays, hoping to “get through them” with a minimal number of scars. But you can change the goal; by applying the following ideas, you can actually *grow through the holidays*.

We must *admit the pain of grieving through the holidays*. Saying goodbye to a loved one has not been easy. It has felt different than you expected and perhaps you have already not met the expectations of well-meaning friends and family members who want you to “just get on with your life.”

While the holidays are different this year, they can still be good!

Allow yourself time and space to cry this holiday season. Your holidays cannot be the same as before because of the “empty chair” at the table. Coming to this realization is painful, and there is no need to try escaping the pain this holiday season.

During this holiday season, *do only as much celebrating as you feel like doing*. Well-meaning friends or family may want you to attend parties and gatherings, hoping to “cheer you up.” Of course, you may want to participate in some of those events.

But remember that grief is very *tiring* and that under the best of circumstances, holidays are very *taxing*. Attending every event, party, or celebration may cause you to meet the new year feeling totally exhausted. You have permission to say “no,” even to well-intentioned invitations. Simply remind your friends, “My energy level hasn’t returned to where it was before he died; thank you for understanding my need to decline.”



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Evaluate your traditions and create at least one new one. If you stop now and make a list of all of your holiday traditions, the list may include a dozen or more activities—when you decorate the house, where and when you worship during the holidays, in whose home you share a family meal, and perhaps many others.

You probably don't need to be reminded that you can't do everything “just like when Mom was here,” because it won't be the same with Mom not here. Since you can't keep everything “like it was,” evaluate what you do for the holidays and determine, with your family's help, which of those traditions you want to preserve.

But don't forget to also create something new. You may want to light a special candle or purchase a special holiday decoration and hang it in your loved one's memory. Providing gifts to a needy family or hosting an international student in your home can also become meaningful holiday traditions.

Don't forget during the harried pace of the *holidays* to *take care of your physical well-being*. Adequate rest, good nutrition, and moderate exercise is essential for the grief process. Because grief is stressful, you must carefully monitor your consumption of caffeine, alcohol, processed sugar, and animal fat, substances that can significantly hinder the body's ability to deal with stress.

And though you should ask your doctor before undertaking a new exercise routine, a brisk walk or other moderate exercise can help you feel better—even emotionally.

You will also want to *consider the spiritual dimension* of your life. The holidays have spiritual roots and many people find themselves drawn to consider spiritual truth, especially when someone close has died. Worshiping with your faith community as the holidays approach or discussion with a member of the clergy can be vitally healing in this period of your life.

Above all else, *embrace your memories of holidays past* as you face this holiday season. While it is true that the holidays can never be the same, we hold in our hearts the memories of days gone by. Write the memories down in a book or leaf through the pages of the family photo album. Even though painful at first, “embracing” the memories, and even sharing them with supportive family members or friends, can be very healing in this season of the year.

The holidays will be painful—that is inevitable. But they can also be days of healing as you make a choice to not just “survive” but to actually grow through the holidays.



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