

GRIEF & THE HOLIDAYS

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“Holidays are time spent with loved ones” was imprinted on our psyche from a young age. Holidays mark the passage of time in our lives. They are part of the milestones we share with each other and they generally represent time spent with family. They bring meaning to certain days and we bring much meaning back to them. But since holidays are for being with those we love the most, how on earth can anyone be expected to cope with them when a loved one has died? For many people, this is the hardest part of grieving, when we miss our loved ones even more than usual. How can you celebrate togetherness when there is none? When you have lost someone special, your world loses its celebratory qualities. Holidays only magnify the loss. The sadness feels sadder and the loneliness goes deeper. The need for support may be the greatest during the holidays. Pretending you don’t hurt and or it is not a harder time of the year is just not the truth for you. If it wasn’t harder you probably wouldn’t be here. You can and will get through the holidays. Rather than avoiding the feelings of grief, lean into them. It is not the grief you want to avoid, it is the pain. Grief is the way out of the pain. There are a number of ways to incorporate your loved one and your loss into the holidays.

Thanksgiving, Christmas, Chanukah, New Years

These are the biggest and usually most challenging of all. You can and will get through the Holidays. Rather than avoiding the feelings of grief, lean into them. It is not the grief you want to avoid, it is the pain. Grief is the way out of the pain. Grief is our internal feelings and mourning is our external expressions.

Ways to externalize the loss – give it a time and a place

A prayer before the Holiday dinner, about your loved one.

Light a candle for your loved one.

Create an online tribute for them.

Share a favorite story about your loved one.

Have everyone tell a funny story about your loved one.

At your place of worship remember them in a prayer.

Chat online about them.

Ways to Cope

Have a Plan A/Plan B – Plan A is you go to the Thanksgiving, Christmas Day or Christmas Eve dinner with family and friends. If it doesn’t feel right, have your plan B ready. Plan B may be a

movie you both liked or a photo album to look through or a special place you went to together. Many people find that when they have Plan B in place, just knowing it is there is enough.

Cancel the Holiday all together. Yes, you can cancel the Holiday. If you are going through the motions and feeling nothing, cancel them. Take a year off. They will come around again. For others, staying involved with the Holidays is a symbol of life continuing. Let the Holiday routine give you a framework during these tough times.

Try the Holidays in a new way. Grief has a unique way of giving us the permission to really evaluate what parts of the Holidays you enjoy and what parts you don't. Remember, there is no right or wrong way to handle the Holidays in grief. You have to decide what is right for you and do it. You have every right to change your mind, even a few times. Friends and family members may not have a clue how to help you through the Holidays and you may not either.

It is very natural to feel you may never enjoy the Holidays again. They will certainly never be the same as they were. However, in time, most people are able to find meaning again in the traditions as a new form of the Holiday Spirit grows inside of them. Even without grief, our friends and relatives often think they know how our Holidays should look, what "the family" should and shouldn't do.

Do's and Don'ts

Do be gentle with yourself and protect yourself.

Don't do more than you want, and don't do anything that does not serve your soul and your loss.

Do allow time for the feelings.

Don't keep feelings bottled up. If you have 500 tears to cry don't stop at 250.

Do allow others to help. We all need help at certain times in our lives.

Don't ask if you can help or should help a friend in grief. Just help. Find ways; invite them to group events or just out for coffee.

Do, in grief, pay extra attention to the children. Children are too often the forgotten grievers.

Valentines Day

Valentines Day is a day to honor our spouse, girlfriend / boyfriend or anyone we are romantically involved with in the present. The past can represent a hole in your heart where your loved one used to be.

Tips

Write a love letter

Smile a smile for them

Light a red candle

Tell someone about them.

Mother's Day and Father's Day

Mother and Fathers Day are often thought of as an invisible sad day of mourning while many people are rushing around trying to get that perfect gift or make sure they remember to send mom / dad a card. There are over one hundred million Americans that for them, this is a sad day. Either because they have a mother or father who has died or a child has died.

Tips

Find ways to honor and remember your mother/ father or both. Think of ways to honor your child.

Light a candle

Say a prayer

Donate time or money in their name.

Do something you loved to do together on that day.

It isn't as important how you remember, you honor them by the fact that you remember.

Just Remember

Holidays are clearly some of the roughest terrain we navigate after a loss. The ways we handle them are as individual as we are. What is vitally important is that we be present for the loss in whatever form the holidays do or don't take. These holidays are part of the journey to be felt fully. They are usually very sad, but sometimes we may catch ourselves doing okay, and we may even have a brief moment of laughter. You don't have to be a victim of the pain or the past. When the past calls, let it go to voice mail...it has nothing to say. You don't have to be haunted by the pain or the past. You can remember and honor the love. Whatever you experience, just remember that sadness is allowed because death, as they say, doesn't take a holiday.

Even without grief, our friends and relatives often think they know how our holidays should look, what the family should and shouldn't do. Now more than ever, be gentle with yourself. Don't do more than you want, and don't do anything that does not serve your soul and your loss.