

Twelve Tips for Getting Through the Holidays after Loss

Why write about loss and grief during the holidays? Nobody wants to talk or even think about grief this time of year. The focus should be on the festivities and good times, right?

While it's true, talking about loss and grief is always difficult; it can be even tougher this time of year. However the reality is that death and grief do happen, even during the holidays. All one has to do is turn on the news to know there is no reprieve from bad things happening this month. Illness and accidents still happen. Diseases continue to be diagnosed and treatments carry on. Lives begin and end in December too.

If you have recently experienced a loss, (or even not that recently), the holidays can be truly daunting as you wonder how you will maneuver your way through them without falling apart or spoiling everyone else's good times. You might even have started dreading the holidays as the first leaves started to drop off early last fall. The period from September right down to the end of the year can be very difficult for some. Add to that, the seasonal change of lessening daylight hours and more darkness, perhaps it's no wonder this period can be the most difficult of all for the recently (or not so recently) bereaved. The holidays may also unexpectedly trigger memories of losses experienced years ago.

Sometimes the anticipation of the holidays (or any special occasion) can be worse than the actual days themselves. Not knowing how one will react to them, or expecting the worst, can cause extreme sadness, anxiety or dread.

Three years ago my family received the devastating news that my mother's cancer had metastasized to her liver and that her prognosis was very bad. In fact, we received this news on Christmas Eve day. Each Christmas that has followed has been very different than the ones preceding her death. My mother's Christmases were events she planned the entire rest of the year. They were actual productions, filled with more decorating, baking, cooking, eating, shopping, gift giving and visiting than anyone else's I've ever witnessed. Learning how to celebrate the holidays without her took some doing. We are still trying to figure it out.

Here are a few tips that might be helpful:

- 1. The main thing to remember is just like everyone grieves differently, how you feel about the holidays will also be as individual as you are. They might not even BE difficult for you. Sometimes ordinary days are hardest, not holidays.**
- 2. Perhaps most importantly, acknowledge that the upcoming days or weeks might be really hard. Stating that out loud, even to just yourself, validates it somehow making it more OK to accept your own feelings.**
- 3. Decide what you want to do this year. Do you want to continue traditions or do you want to begin new ones? Or perhaps a combo?**

- 4. Do something specific for your loved one. Some people like to light a candle, display a particular ornament in a special place each year, make a donation in their loved one's name or volunteer someplace the loved one would have chosen or cared about.**
- 5. Talk about your loved one by sharing memories and stories about them, even if it makes others uncomfortable. Remembering honors them and keeps them with you in a very real sense.**
- 6. Set realistic expectations for yourself. If you don't feel like doing cards, don't. If you don't feel like baking, don't. If your house isn't the cleanest, so what?**
- 7. Take care of yourself by getting enough sleep and eating properly. Remember grieving is taxing physically, emotionally and spiritually. It's just plain hard work and it really does tire you out.**
- 8. Try to exercise every day. The benefits are pretty obvious, but worth saying anyway. Exercise relieves stress, helps deter depression and improves your self-esteem.**
- 9. I'll borrow a quote from a friend's recent blog post if I may, (which came from Oprah originally) "Surround yourself with only the people who are going to lift you up." No need to say more.**
- 10. If you need help, ask for it. If you can't manage with daily chores, shopping or whatever it might be, it's alright to ask someone to help you.**
- 11. There is now an actual clinical term called "complicated grief." Kind of a silly name in my opinion, because all grief is complicated. Simply put, it means there is no diminishing of your grief with time. You can't stop mourning or begin to move on. If you are experiencing this, you probably need professional help. Ask for it. You can find more information on this topic at Mayo Clinic's website.**
- 12. Remember most people eventually enjoy the holidays again. Hang on to that hope. You will get there. Also, experiencing some nostalgic or sad moments is not necessarily a bad thing; it's part of life after loss.**

This list is in no way complete, but thinking about these suggestions may perhaps be helpful to some. I hope so. I'm curious about what has been helpful for others, so I hope you'll consider sharing a comment or suggestion.

As Christmas rapidly approaches at my house, excitement builds even with "grown-up children." Memories abound, some painful, but most of them wonderful. My house, too, is probably "overdone" with decorations, many of them gifts I received from my mother through the years. The ornament featured in the photo seems to tie in perfectly for this post. It's a bit nostalgic, pictures a child eagerly waiting for Santa and it's a gift from; you guessed it, my mother. <http://nancyspoint.com/twelve-tips-for-getting-through-the-holidays-after-loss/>