



Seasons of Grieving

A GUIDE TO GRIEF AT THE HOLIDAYS

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Introduction

Any special day can be a painful time for someone who has lost a loved one. Holidays are a time to celebrate. But those who have lost someone may find it hard to feel happy. What used to be a time for making fond memories becomes a time of thinking about what you've lost.

Even years after a loss, many people find that holidays are still hard. Some people may not understand your sadness. Facing grief during a time of joy might make them uncomfortable. They may tell you to cheer up, not knowing what else to say. This can add to your stress.

It is normal to feel more intense grief during holidays. It's okay if you don't feel happy during this time. You can grieve in your own time and in your own way. Try to find friends or family who will support you. We hope this booklet will also help you to be gentle with yourself as you grieve.

*Remember that grief is a process,
not an event. Each of us works through the
grief process in our own way and on our
own timetable.*

Winter Holidays

Winter holidays can be the hardest to get through. This time is one of the most stressful seasons of the year. It is also the time most likely to involve a large family gathering. When a loved one is missing, time with family can bring feelings of grief and sadness. There could also be guilt about laughing and having a good time. All this can make grief even worse.

There are no “shoulds” when it comes to grieving. This is important to remember during the busy holiday season. People may tell you that there’s a certain way you should celebrate. There is no right or wrong way to spend the holidays when you are grieving.

You might want to spend the holidays on vacation. You might choose to eat out instead of cooking. You may not feel like putting up decorations — and you don’t have to.

Soften harsh “*I should...*” self-talk by saying, “*If I have time, I might...*” Don’t be afraid to scale back. Skip things that will add stress. Send cards or do shopping early, or not at all. Consider shopping online to avoid long lines and traffic.

“It’s okay to be joyful during the holiday season. Even when our hearts are aching with sadness.... In so doing, you will honor the memory of your loved one in beautiful ways.”

— Karla Wheeler

Other Major Holidays

Many people just think of the winter holidays as the “holiday season.” But other holidays during the year may be hard for those who have lost a loved one. Your mother may have loved Easter. Your father may have hosted a family BBQ for the 4th of July. Your spouse may have thrown huge Halloween parties.

Knowing that other people don’t see these holidays as a time for grief can make them harder. People may want you to be excited about holidays that are painful for you. Don’t be afraid to tell others about the pain you feel. Make plans for these holidays with people who understand your grief and your needs.

Personal Holidays

Personal holidays are days during the year that are marked only on your calendar. These may be your loved one’s birthday, the date they died, and anniversaries you shared. You may suffer in silent grief during these times.

There are usually less parties or gatherings on these days. This can be difficult, because you don’t have a lot of distractions from grief. Many people find that personal holidays are some of the hardest grieving days — even if a lot of time has passed since the loss.

You may want to plan these days ahead of time to keep busy. Start new traditions that focus on your loved one. Spend time with friends and family, or just have some quiet time alone. However you need to grieve is normal and valid. Remember, there is no right or wrong way to grieve.

Remembering Your Loved One

Many people want to include the memory of their loved one in their holiday traditions. Talk with family about what you'd like to do, or honor your loved one in small ways on your own. Below are some ideas to try, if you wish. Do whatever feels right for you and your family.

What you can do:

- **Talk about your loved one.** Sharing stories or photos of the person can bring warm memories. Some families make a “memory box” where everyone adds stories. All the memories can then be read together at a planned time.
- **Write about your loved one.** Write private letters to your loved one during times of sadness. Think about starting a journal or a blog. If you are connected through social media, share pictures or thoughts there.
- **Focus on favorites.** Cook your loved one's favorite food, or use one of their famous recipes. Watch your loved one's favorite holiday movie or listen to their favorite song. If the person was religious, go to a service at their church.
- **Hold their place.** Leave a seat open at the dinner table. Include their picture in family portraits. Some people give their loved one's share of food or gifts to people in need.
- **Look at old traditions.** Do you want to do the same thing you've always done? Do you want to do something different? After a loss, some people keep everything the same. Others want to “start over.” Reminders of their loved one may be too painful.
- **Make new traditions.** Leave flowers at your loved one's resting place. Light a special candle or add their name to family prayers. Make or buy holiday decorations to remind you of the person.

Ways to Cope

Holidays can bring on a time of strong grieving. You may feel like you are “starting over” in your grief journey. This is normal. Try not to be frustrated if you feel like all the progress you’ve made has been undone. This difficult time will pass.

It is normal to feel like you may never enjoy these holidays again. It is true that the pain of your loss will always be there. Even if your loss is not recent, the way you grieve will still be unique to you. Be aware that each year may bring new feelings. Look for small joys, like the taste of a good pie or hugs from children in your family.

What you can do:

- **Feel your feelings.** Even if you haven’t cried or been angry about the loss in a long time, you may want to now. Lean into these feelings as they happen instead of pushing them away. It’s also okay to laugh and be happy, even when you are grieving.
- **Help others.** Service is one of the best ways to feel better when you are grieving. Donate time or gifts to your or your loved one’s favorite charity.
- **Be healthy.** Eat a balanced diet, drink plenty of water, and get sleep. Avoid alcohol abuse, overeating, and other bad habits.
- **Look for support.** Call family if they live far away. Reach out to close friends and your community for support. We have grief support groups that you can join, even if it’s just for one or two visits. Please contact us for more information.
- **Honor your needs.** As you respect the needs of others, stay in touch with your *own* needs. Some people find they need time to themselves after a loss. Don’t be afraid to leave a crowd to find a quiet space to cry or reflect. Do something special just for you. Continue to be gentle with yourself.

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