

Grief During the Holidays

Have a plan. Bereaved individuals who experience the most difficulty with the holiday season are those who avoid creating a plan. Consider ahead of time what may be expected of you, both socially and emotionally, as well as your own preferences.

Accept your limitations. Grief consumes most of your available energy no matter what the season. The holidays place additional demands on your time and emotions. Plan to lower your expectations to accommodate current needs.

Evaluate the option of keeping or changing traditions. Your circumstances have changed. Expect to make necessary alterations in holiday plans to accommodate those changes. Consider changing your surroundings, rituals, and/or traditions to lower the stress. Sometimes we gravitate toward keeping tradition since so much has changed already. Remember, changing things this year does not mean it can't be changed back in the future.

Trim down to essentials. Re-evaluate priorities and forego unnecessary activities and obligations. Be open with yourself and others about what you can't do this year. Limit social and family commitments to suit your available energy. Shop early or online if it will reduce stress. Select which holiday parties and events to attend. If able, drive yourself to allow the option of leaving if strong emotions arise.

Ask for and accept help. Give family and friends the tools they need to help you through their holidays. Be specific about your preferences and desires, and update them when those needs change. Accept offers for assistance with holiday shopping, decorating, cleaning, cooking, etc. Chances are loved ones are looking for ways to lessen your burden at this time of year.

Relive the happy memories. Pick three special memories of holidays past with your loved one. Think of them often, especially if strong emotions seem to pop up and are difficult to release.

Give yourself permission "to be." Allow breathing space and expect fluctuations in mood and perspective. The bereaved work overtime; not only is life more complicated, but all energy is spent on mental and emotional work. Grieving is nature's way of healing the mind and heart from the injury of loss. Mark your calendar for days or hours you can be alone and grieve. You can more easily postpone your flood of grief in public if you have granted yourself these dedicated times.

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Don't let silence take over. Because family and friends love you, they will think they are doing you a favor by not mentioning your loved one. Be open with loved ones about how important it is for you to talk about your loved one, especially during the holiday season when they are even more present in your mind. If it feels too painful to talk about your loved one, consider acknowledging them in other ways (i.e. light a special candle, hang a stocking for others to put notes in, put out a favorite portrait, leave a chair empty at the dinner table).

Be open to feeling joy. While the holidays can feel somber at times without your loved one, it is possible to also experience some joy with those around you. This does not mean you have forgotten your loved one or that you love them any less.

Find a creative outlet. Write a memorial poem or story about your loved one and share it. Write a letter to them and keep it to read at future holidays. Donate to a cause your loved one cared about. Use the money you would have spent on a gift for your loved one to buy something for someone they loved.

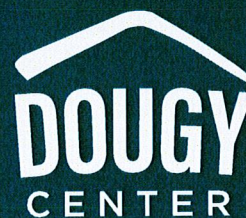
Include the rest of your family. Pay special attention to any children in the family and work to ensure it is a good holiday for them. Listen to them. Talk to them. Celebrate them. If decorating or buying gifts is too much, ask a friend to do it for you this year.

Use available resources. Seek out a support group or reach out to friends and/or family to help get through the holidays with extra support. If your faith is important to you, participate in special holiday services. Often times, worship leaders have a kind of serenity and healing wisdom that can bring peace of mind.

Be present in the moment. Grief is something we never recover from; it simply takes a different form. Take charge of the present and the future will be better with time.

***If you have questions or concerns about the grieving process,
please give us a call at (716) 836-6460.***

HOLIDAY PLAN WORKSHEET



1. The family meeting. We suggest working through this worksheet together with your children. Pick a place to meet (in your home or someplace else) that feels safe and comfortable and set aside enough time for everyone to be able to talk. Take breaks when necessary. If one long meeting seems like too much, break it up into shorter ones, or bring up a question/ topic to discuss one at the time. Let everyone know that their thoughts and opinions will be acknowledged and that each person will have a chance to speak. Because grief is so individual and unique, family members might have different feelings around certain holiday events and traditions. If a disagreement comes up, you can ask clarifying questions to help each person express their thoughts and feelings around wanting or not wanting to do something. A good communication skill is to repeat back your understanding of what someone said, to check on if you heard them correctly. By doing this, it will be easier to clear up misunderstandings and find solutions that work for everyone.

2. Questions to consider during the family meeting. What did this holiday mean to the person who died? What do each of us need for support (hugs, privacy, time with friends) and who can we ask for help? How will we handle it if one person wants to do something and another person doesn't?

3. Holiday family plan checklist. After creating your lists for each item, go back through and identify who will be responsible for tasks you wish to keep/create, and who can help.

☐ **Food:** What foods do we typically cook? What were the favorite foods of the person who died? Who can help this year? Do we want to cook at home or go out? What will we bring to parties?

- List what you normally do and star the items you want to keep.

- List new traditions you want to start.

☐ **Decorations:** Do we want to decorate this year? What were the favorite decorations of the person who died? Do we want to create decorations to honor the person who died?

- List what you normally do and star the items you want to keep.

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☐ **Events, parties, and family gatherings:** Do we want to attend our usual parties this year? Will we host a gathering? Do we want to include the memory of the person who died? How? How will we handle conversations about the person who died? What about conversations with people who do not yet know about the death?

- List what you normally do and star the items you want to keep.

- List new traditions you want to start.

☐ **Traditions:** Traditions to think about: sending cards/newsletters, attending faith or community services, taking a trip or vacation, visiting the cemetery or memorial spot for the person who died. What traditions are connected to the person who died? Which new traditions would we like to create? (Explore this without worrying what others will think!) How will we carve out time for ourselves and our reactions? Who can we go to for support and care?

- List what you normally do and star the items you want to keep.

- List new traditions you want to start.

☐ **Post-holidays:** What have you traditionally done for New Year's Eve and Day? What do you normally do during January and February? What did the person who died enjoy doing? You may want to plan a trip or some other special event for after the holidays end. January and February can be daunting months even during the best of circumstances, so it can be helpful to have something to look forward to that isn't connected to the holiday season.

- List what you normally do and star the items you want to keep.

- List new traditions you want to start.

☐ **Reflection:** Just as you set aside time to have a family meeting to create a plan for the holiday season, it's equally important to meet and talk about how things went for each of you. Let family members know ahead of time that there will be a chance to discuss what worked, what didn't, what you want to do differently next year, and to check in about how people are doing after the holidays. It can be important to let others know what they did that was especially helpful or caring.

Bereaved Parents: Getting Through the Holidays

1) We must decide what we can handle comfortably—and let these needs be known to family and friends:

- Whether to talk or not talk about our child openly.
- Whether we can handle past responsibilities (i.e. family dinner, holiday party) or if we wish someone else to take over some of these traditional tasks.
- Whether we will stay home for the holidays or choose to go away to a different environment this year.

2) Don't be afraid to make changes—it really can make things less painful:

- Open presents at a different time or on a different day, if this is part of your custom.
- Have dinner at a different time or at a different location.
- Let the children take over decorating, making cookies, etc.

3) Great comfort can come by doing something for others. Some parents feel they can acknowledge their loss more meaningfully with these suggestions:

- Give a gift in memory of your child.
- Donate the money you would have spent on your child to a charity.
- Adopt a needy family for the holidays.
- Invite a guest to share in festivities.

4) Whether you're considering greeting cards, holiday baking, decorating, or gatherings—first ask these questions before making decisions:

- Have I involved or considered my other children?
- Is this a task that can be shared by other family members?
- Is this something I actually enjoy?
- Is there a different way to carry out this tradition this year?

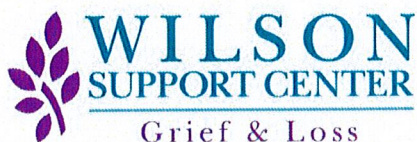
5) Remember:

- Take one day at a time.
- Be realistic—recognize that we need to set limits and do those things that are meaningful to our families and ourselves.
- Know that whatever you choose to do this year, you may decide to handle things differently next year. Growth and change go hand in hand.
- When the holiday arrives, it's usually not as bad as we anticipated.

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Adapted from Bruce Conley's "Handling the Holidays"



New Year's Resolutions for Grief

Adapted from David Kessler

Stepping into the new year with grief can bring up so much pain. As we move into the new year without our loved ones, the pain can intensify. In the new year, there can also be pressure around resolutions and our culture's quest for self-improvement. Enter 2022 with compassion for yourself. This is easier said than done. The New Year's resolutions for grievers are listed below to offer some help. You're invited to choose those that resonate with you.

Allow space for your feelings. Grief is a natural process. Your grief will guide you where you need to go. Let yourself experience your feelings without struggling to resist or edit them.

Rest when you are weary. Grief is exhausting. Give yourself the time and space you need to be still to restore your body, mind, and spirit.

Give yourself permission to say "no." "No" is a complete sentence. Choose to be with people you want to be with. Engage in activities that feel right for you.

Give yourself permission to say "yes." Say "yes" to nurturing yourself. Give your heart what it needs.

Engage in a community. We all need to be seen and to be with people who get it. Seek out people who understand you and your grief. Expressing your feelings and sharing your experience with others can be transformative.

Spark curiosity. Challenge yourself to try new things or take a different approach. Is there something you've been interested in but have been waiting to try? Step outside of your habits. Meet a neighbor for a cup of coffee, visit a different park, learn something new.

Move. Grief lives in our bodies. Movement helps us to reconnect to our physical body. Walk, dance, swim, stretch, connect your mind and your body by embracing movement each day.

Spend time in nature. When we grieve, we can get stuck in our own minds. Nature is a powerful reminder of the world around us. We were designed to be able to handle grief, just as the tides of the sea rise and fall, as a tree reaches towards the sun, as a squirrel knows how to reserve resources through the winter. Give yourself the gift of time spent in the natural world.

Breathe - Let the day be the day. If you find yourself in intense emotions such as crying, take a deep breath. Inhale acceptance and peace, exhale expectations and struggle. Connect with your breath and your body.

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ACTIVITIES FOR THE HOLIDAY SEASON

Share a Silly Holiday Memory

Share a silly memory of your loved one during the holiday season.

Discuss Traditions

Are there any traditions that you want to change this holiday season?

Gift giving

If gift giving is a part of your holiday celebration, before the gifts are exchanged, have each family talk about a special gift the loved one has given to them. It could be a tangible gift or perhaps even more meaningful would be an intangible gift.

Incorporating

Ask family members for ways they would like to incorporate the loved one that has died into the "season of family." This could mean including a portrait or belonging to be a part of the decorations, positioning an empty chair at the table, setting out their favorite coffee mug, or an array of other meaningful items. Look for ways to honor and remember your loved one as you go through the holiday season.

Memory Candles

Purchase cylinder candles. Use a variety of materials such as self-adhesive foamy shapes, letters, jewels to decorate candle. Written words /phrases and scrapbooking supplies can be attached with Modge-Podge. Especially meaningful could be including photos or pictures of loved ones and family that can be attached with Modge-Podge.

The family can choose a way to incorporate a family ritual when lighting this candle to remember your loved one.

Collage book

Staple blank pages to make a booklet. Have each family member make their own blank booklet. Create a book with the following:

Cover=Title

Page 1 - What the last holiday spent with the person who died looked like

Page 2 – What I imagine this holiday to look like

Page 3 - Gifts my special person gave me (talents traits, interests)

Page 4 – Future

Find a special time to share your booklets as a family.

All About _____

Place a notebook, journal, scrapbook in a place that is accessible to all family members through the season. Invite family members to write, draw, paste, thoughts and memories about your loved one. Choose a special time to share the book with each other.

Remember when . . .

Place a multitude of photos of your deceased loved one in a basket. Gather family members and take turns sharing photos and telling stories about your loved one.

Table Talk

Often when families gather for holidays, food and meal time are at the center of the gathering. It may be the time when it is most obvious that loved ones are missing. It also may provide the perfect setting for wonderful conversations. Clip out the following questions and use as conversation starters.

What is your favorite memory of _____?

What is a funny memory of _____?

What was their favorite holiday food?

What special touch did they add to the holiday?

What could they do better than anyone else?

If you could say something now to them, what would you say?

If they were here, what would be different?

What do you wish they knew about you today?

What will you always remember about them?

Who in the family has a similar personality to them?

What was the best time you ever had with them?

What was their favorite holiday or holiday tradition?

What special travel, trips, or vacation do you remember about them?

What special story can you share about them?

Great time to discuss favorite foods, dishes and heirlooms that have been passed down through the family

What is your favorite part of the holiday season?

What do you like least about the holiday season?

What are you looking forward to this holiday season?

Is there anything you dread or fear about the holidays?

What will be the most difficult thing you will have to do during the holidays without your loved one?

What can you do to feel close to your loved one this holiday season?

Discuss a holiday tradition that you want your family to continue.

Share a special holiday memory.