

Coping with Grief During the Holidays

By Micki Burns, Ph.D., and Brook Griese Ph.D.

The Holidays

Celebrations. Traditions. Friends. Family. Given the images portrayed in advertisements and popular media, one might wonder how anyone could feel anything but warmth, connectedness, and joy during such a festive season.

However, for many, the holidays signal a time of stress, loneliness, and sadness. For grieving families, including those affected by long-term illnesses such as cancer, these emotions are often overwhelming.

The widower who struggles to imagine how he will create the joy and traditions of the holidays for his children anywhere close to the way his beloved wife did. The bereaved mother who longs to buy the toy truck she sees for her little boy who has died - who would give anything to see his eyes light up just one more time. The young mother of three, grappling with what to say in the family holiday card, knowing that many of the people on the mailing list have not yet heard that her husband died just a few months ago. How do you cope? How do you survive?

At Judi's House - a nonprofit, community-based bereavement center in Aurora, Colorado - we recognize that grief is a painful journey that is unique for every individual. There are no timelines for healing, no right or wrong ways to mourn, and no orderly stages of grief. However, through our work with grieving families, we have found ways to support one another in the healing process. These shared experiences from the thousands of children and adults we have served have taught us about the challenges of grief, as well as the actions that lead to comfort, hope, and healing.

Following are some of these lessons that may ease the process of grief during the holiday season.

Reflect

Allow yourself and your family time to reflect on holiday memories. Use these reflections to thoughtfully determine what traditions you want to carry forward, what customs you want to change, and what new rituals you want to create. Include all members of the family who have played a significant role in your past celebrations.

Inform your family of your hopes for the reflection. Encourage multiple modes of expression such as writing, art, play, or conversation. Some family members may want to reflect alone.

Others may desire a communal conversation. Although there may not be consensus, providing space for internal remembrance and planning may avoid overlooking something meaningful. Reflection can bring forth strong emotions – let yourself heal.

Plan

Use your reflections to assess your family's wants and needs. This can be difficult. This may be your first holiday without your loved one. Tasks others may be able to assist with include shopping, cooking, cleaning, gift wrapping, and decorating. It is okay if you are not clear about your expectations. As much as possible, determine your limits and set boundaries. Kindness and goodwill go hand in hand with the holidays. Neighbors, friends, and family will offer to help. Others' generosity may feel overwhelming. You may want to appoint one individual to field offers for help and assistance. Know that at any time it is okay to change your mind and your plans.

Communicate

You have worked hard to prepare for and manage your grief during the holidays. Communicate your needs to those around you and use your supports. Empower yourself to ask questions. If you are invited to a community celebration, inquire who will be there and when it will begin and end. Although it is not possible to anticipate what triggers grief, having more information upfront may allow you to prepare for difficult questions and encounters. Ultimately you may choose to not attend and do something different.

Remember

Find ways to memorialize and create a presence for your loved one during the holidays. When we are grieving, we do not have to "let go" of the person who died, but we do need to learn how to hold on in a different way. Make time to share memories of the person who is evidently missing from the dinner table or gift exchange. Watch videos, tell stories, or look at photos. Hang an ornament or light a candle in memory of the person who died. Prepare their favorite recipe, play their favorite holiday song, or visit their gravesite. Engage in an act of kindness or give to a charity in their honor.

Cope

Grief is complicated. Forecasting when the waves of grief will come rushing in is not always possible. Your grief experience is unique to you and unique to each of your family members. It is not unusual to feel suddenly overcome by grief. When the waves hit, having reliable coping skills available can make a tremendous difference. Especially during the holidays, it can be challenging to meet your own needs, let alone those in your care because of loss. It is important to make time for rest and self-care. Doing so makes you more available to those looking to you for guidance, support, and nurturance.

The following are some elements of the coping and caregiving skills that are integral pieces of the *Pathfinders* program developed and used at Judi's House:

- **Relax:** Breathe, release tension, slow down. This can be through meditation or yoga, muscle relaxation techniques, or just deep "belly" breathing. Even a long run or a hot bath can help bring back a sense of calm and steadiness to face the next wave of grief or holiday rush.
- **Listen:** Take the time to hear your own thoughts and catch when they are making you feel worse. Challenge negative thoughts or self-talk that contribute to feeling overwhelmed or powerless during the holidays. Listen to your own wisdom without judgement. Create the space to really listen to your family and what they are telling you THEY need. Many times, it will be just that... to be HEARD.
- **Play:** Make time to enjoy the friends and family in your life. Play a card or board game. Shoot hoops in the driveway, toss a football in the yard, go sledding at the park. Go bowling, play video games, dance around the kitchen. Let yourself LAUGH. We need and deserve to take breaks from our grief.

By setting aside time to relax, listen, and play, you make space for the light and restored joy that the person or people who died would have wanted for you during this holiday season... and every season.

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