



## **GRIEF & MOURNING DURING THE HOLIDAYS**



**A GUIDE FOR THOSE WHOSE LOVED ONE  
HAS DIED**

## *Introduction*

When we are in the midst of grief, the approach of holiday season can feel daunting. Emotions intensify during a time of year that is laden with memories of holidays spent with our loved one who has died. Often, others' expectations can feel impossible to meet. Rituals that were once enjoyed together can feel impossible to enjoy again. The sense of isolation and the feeling that everyone but you is enjoying themselves can be overwhelming. This guide will help you take steps to cope well during a difficult time of year.

## *Accept that You Will Feel Pain*

One of the most important things you can do for yourself is accept that it is ok to feel the pain of your loss. So often we try to guard against our pain, shut it out, and "be strong." The more we try to disconnect from our pain, the more it seems to want us to acknowledge it—fatigue, stomach distress, tightness in the throat or chest, headaches—all of these are ways the body tells us to pay attention to our emotional pain.

In his book, How Will I Get Through the Holidays?, James Miller writes:

Your pain is a sign you have been blessed to draw very close to another. You have loved and you have been loved. The hurt you feel is an indication of your wonderful humanness, your sensitivity, your openness...While you may wish you did not hurt as much as you do, you dare not forget that your pain is none other than the result of your joy.

Once you accept that you will likely feel pain, and that your pain is a sign of your deep love for the one who has died, you can open yourself to some good times, too. As important as it is to accept the pain, it is also important to give yourself permission to feel good without feeling guilty. It is not a betrayal of your loved one to have moments of feeling good.

*"What will survive of us is love."*

*~Philip Larkin*

## *Identify Your Support Persons*

We all need supportive people in our lives, especially when we are grieving. Oftentimes, friends and family want to be there, but they don't know what we need, nor do we always know what we need from them. Grief Educator Dr. Ken Doka identified three types of gifts that our friends and family can give us while we grieve, and notes that most people do one of these naturally and very well:

- **Listeners**—these are the people we can call anytime, day or night, and they are able to really hear us and empathize with our pain. They want to hear about how we miss our loved one, and they are comfortable talking about our memories, wishes, and our feelings.
- **Doers**—the doers would happily do anything we ask. These are the people we can count on to help with the grocery shopping, shovel snow from the driveway, wrap presents or hang the outdoor lights.
- **Respite Providers**—respite providers are those we call on to give us a healthy distraction or break from our pain. They make us laugh, will go to a party with us so we don't have to go alone, or will

go to dinner, a movie, or a basketball game when we need to put our focus on something other than grief.

**Make a list of the people you know—friends, family, neighbors, co-workers, church members, etc. Place an L, D, or R next to their name to identify whether they are a Listener, Doer, or Respite person. Keep this list handy and be comfortable calling on those in your support network for what you need.**

### *Make Plans*

Making plans is an important way to take charge of what you want and need for yourself during the holidays. Often, we end up reacting to whatever happens instead of identifying ahead of time what would be most beneficial and helpful. Give forethought to which invitations you'd like to accept, which traditions are most important to you, and what you just can't do this year. It is ok to limit what you say yes to, and to let go of events, traditions, food items, and decorations that just don't feel right for you this year.

In making plans, allow yourself to change your mind if you need to. Plans are a way to have some structure, but

they shouldn't be so inflexible that they end up causing you to feel more overwhelmed or stressed.

Many bereaved individuals have said that having an "exit strategy" or a way out of a plan has been very helpful. For instance, driving yourself to a dinner party so you can leave when you need to can give you a sense of calm if you're anxious about going.

### *Remember Your Loved One*

Of course you will remember your loved one in your mind and in your heart. But remembering your loved one openly, and with a special tradition (either new or old) can be a way to bring the family together and make meaning of the pain of loss. In deciding ways to remember or memorialize your loved one, it is important to include family members' feelings, needs, and wishes, and discuss with them what is most important and comfortable for all.

Some ways to memorialize a loved one at the holidays include:

- placing a special ornament on the tree, perhaps one that includes a photo
- serving a loved one's favorite dish
- offering a prayer for him/her

- lighting a memorial candle
- visiting the cemetery or memorial site together
- offering a toast to him/her
- making a charitable donation in his or her name
- holding his/her photo while pictures of the entire family are taken

Memorializing your loved one can also give permission for others to speak more freely about your loved one, to say his or her name openly, to share memories, and to continue the bond of love. Often, people are reluctant to bring up the one who has died out of fear of upsetting others. Many people, however, long to hear their loved one's name and want to remember them openly.

### *Be Kind to Yourself*

In addition to taking care of yourself by eating well, getting adequate sleep, and exercising, practicing self-compassion and treating yourself as you would a good friend will make a difference in how you feel. You can do this by:

- prioritizing your health and well-being
- replacing self-criticism with understanding for your humanness

- nurturing yourself as you would someone you love
- lowering your expectations of yourself during the holidays—let go of the need to be perfect
- be forgiving toward yourself

### *If You Have Children at Home*

Remember that this time of year is difficult for grieving children, too. You may see varied reactions, feelings, and behaviors, including “grief bursts,” anger, irritability, as well as joyful anticipation. You may feel pressured to create the kind of holiday experience your children remember and look forward to from previous years. It can be difficult to find the balance between honoring what you need for yourself and what your children need, especially if you are exhausted and emotionally drained.

**Enlist the help of others.** Can you ask a friend to put up the tree with your kids this year? Or have the kids over to their house to bake cookies? Allowing others to participate in holiday rituals with your children can take some of the pressure off of you.

**Expect difficult behaviors from your children, and continue to set and reinforce the limits even though the children are grieving.** They will feel safer with the structure you are providing.

**Engage in meaningful rituals that honor the one who has died.** Talk with your children about a way to honor the one they love. Would they like to give to a charity in the name of their loved one? Making a special ornament with their loved one's photo or writing a note to leave at the gravesite can feel special to them. Allow them to talk about their memories and feelings if they wish, and give them space not to do so, if that is what they seem to need.

**Give choices whenever possible.** Even small children can choose whether to wear a red shirt or a green one, or whether they want their teddy bear or stuffed doggy tucked in with them at night. Choices help each of us feel a sense of control, and this is especially important for kids in grief. Teens may need the choice of whether to go to their cousins' house or whether they need the comfort of friends. Compromise and be flexible when it is reasonable to do so.

**Do not hide your sadness from your children, but do turn to other adults to support you.** Your feelings are important, and being real with your feelings helps your children learn to cope with their own emotions. You are modeling how to handle emotional pain, and this is an important skill for them to acquire. It is also important, though, that your children do not become your caretaker or protector—this potentially takes their childhood from them. Let them see you ask for support from other caring

adults. This assures them that you are taken care of, and it opens the door for them to ask for support, too—another important life skill.

**Teach them it is possible to be joyful and sad, often at the same time.** We often think in terms of one or the other, but in reality, part of us can feel sad while another part of us feels happy. To a child, you might explain this as a rainbow—what we see when the sun emerges while it is still raining. Help your children understand that all of their feelings are acceptable, frequently changing, and that opposite feelings can exist together.

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*“One secret to handling the holidays is to stay in the present moment as much as possible. Savor what there is to savor, however small. Accept the warmth that is yours to receive, however fleeting. Cry if tears are near, then let them pass and see what else you will feel. And don’t be afraid to laugh...you won’t be desecrating the memory of your loved one. You’ll be consecrating what he or she has brought to your life, and you’ll be doing your own mending at the same time.” ~James Miller*

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## Books

Many books are available that further address grief during the holidays. Some are listed below with a book jacket description.

Miller, James E. **How Will I Get Through the Holidays? 12 Ideas for Those Whose Loved One Has Died** *Willowgreen Publishing* (1996) “Gathering ideas from his extensive work with the bereaved, Jim Miller offers a host of suggestions to help people of all ages with the adjustments that must be made. This assuring, consoling book is both easy to read and sure to help.”

Roe, Gary **Surviving the Holidays Without You: Navigating Grief During Special Seasons** *GR Healing Resources* (2013) “Hospice chaplain Gary Roe has given you a grief survival kit designed for the holidays. Speaking from both personal and professional grief experiences, he will empower you to navigate special seasons with new confidence.”

Wolfelt, Alan **Healing Your Holiday Grief: 100 Practical Ideas for Blending Mourning and Celebration During the Holiday Season** *Companion Press* “Grieving the death of someone loved is always hard, but during the holiday season it can seem overwhelming. Is it possible to mourn and celebrate at the same time? Topics covered include honoring your thoughts and feelings, giving yourself permission to mourn, deciding what is important and what isn’t, creating new traditions, finding ways to de-stress, and incorporating healing rituals into your holidays. Specific, creative tips for blending mourning and celebration are also included.”

## *For Additional Support*

Visit our website at [www.MyMichaelsPlace.net](http://www.MyMichaelsPlace.net) for a schedule of our support groups, community events and educational workshops, Create-a-Keepsake workshops, as well as for further information and resources about grieving the death of a loved one.



231-947-6453

[www.MyMichaelsPlace.net](http://www.MyMichaelsPlace.net)

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