



Hope for the Holidays

The first holidays without a loved one who has died are times of transition. Feelings of sadness and loss are natural because holidays may magnify feelings of the loss. Anticipation of the unknown may be worse than the actual holiday. To pretend that nothing has happened is unnatural and will likely increase tension. We are changed forever when someone special dies. There is no right or wrong way to celebrate the holidays. You need to do what is best for you.

What about traditions?

It is important for you to discuss with your family the best way to handle the holidays. Even though you all have lost a special person, every family member has his/her own grief path. You may find comfort in following familiar traditions or you may want to change and do something different this year. A family tradition does not have to be celebrated exactly as it always was. You can modify the tradition and still make it meaningful. You can also resume old traditions another year when it will be easier to cope with them.

Plan a morning breakfast, have the holiday dinner a week earlier, put the tree in a different place or don't decorate this year. Whatever you choose to do is OK.

Share memories

Speak the name of the person who has died. This will help others to recognize your need to remember the special person who was part of your life. Sharing stories and remembering good times will bring you comfort at this difficult time of year.

Create a new ritual such as lighting a special candle, writing a memorial poem or playing a special piece of music that honours the memory of your loved one. You may also wish to set aside a certain time each day to remember and reflect on your memories. It may be comforting to include the person who has died in certain rituals e.g. hanging the stocking of your loved one and inviting family members to write special memories and place them in the stocking. You may then wish to share these thoughts, keep them in a scrapbook or symbolically burn them in the fireplace.

If your faith is important, you may want to attend a holiday service. You may choose to attend a different religious ceremony this year.

You may find that you need to reach out to family and friends and teach them what you need. Communicate your desires and feelings. It might be helpful for family members to share:

“The part I am looking forward to the most is...”

“The part I am not looking forward to is...”

“To make the day feel special to me this year, I'd like to...”

Plan your activities so you do not feel overwhelmed. Accept offers of help from others e.g. prepare a list for a friend who offers to do your shopping, shop by catalogue or give gift certificates, let another family member host the holiday dinner or do some baking for you.

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Try to balance the need for solitude with sociability. Avoid isolation and accept invitations to selected events, even if you only attend for a little while.

Consider doing something special for someone else. Donate a gift or money in your loved one's name. Volunteer your time at a community agency, church, synagogue or other religious facility, woman's shelter, senior's home, etc. Make a favourite food of your loved one and offer it to a nursing home.

Finding meaning

Honouring the memory of your special person may ease your pain a little. Buying and lighting a holiday candle, buying yourself a gift from your loved one, buying an ornament, preparing a special food, making a photo album, listening to special music are all ways to find meaning.

Grieving is exhausting and takes much energy. Listen to your mind and body. Be good to yourself and eat well, rest adequately and exercise daily. Try to eliminate excess stress in your life by deciding what your expectations are for the holidays e.g. shopping, baking, card sending, decorating, wrapping gifts, buying gifts, etc.

Helping children cope with the holidays
Children need security and structure and gain comfort from routine. Ask them what they would like to do. Involve children in holiday planning e.g. suggest they bake a favourite family recipe for a nursing home or group that had meaning for the person who has died; encourage them to make a small gift (or create a poem or drawing) for their

special person and then take it to the cemetery; help them to choose a special stone to leave at the grave side., make a collage of the person who died. Creating a simple ceremony makes the activity more meaningful and honours the memory of the person who has died e.g. a photo store can make a jigsaw puzzle out of a special picture.

Children grieve differently from adults. Children grieve in small "doses" and may express extreme sadness one minute and be off playing the next. This is the normal grieving pattern for them.

Share your feelings with your children. It is easier for children to be included in family grief than to be excluded. Give them permission to feel the way they do. It may be easier for them to draw how they feel than to express themselves verbally.

Remember that the relationships with our loved ones who have died have not ended, they have changed. Their legacies live on within us and become the special gift to each of us.

