

Peace Arch Hospice Society

***Living with Grief
During the Holidays***



Helping Yourself Heal During the Holiday Season

By: Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

Holidays are often difficult for anyone who has experienced the death of someone loved. Rather than being times of family togetherness, sharing and thanksgiving, holidays can bring feelings of sadness, loss and emptiness.

Love Does Not End With Death

Since love does not end with death, holidays may result in a renewed sense of personal grief—a feeling of loss unlike that experienced in the routine of daily living. Society encourages you to join in the holiday spirit, but all around you the sounds, sights and smells trigger memories of the one you love who has died.

No simple guidelines exist that will take away the hurt you are feeling. We hope, however, the following suggestions will help you better cope with your grief during this joyful, yet painful, time of the year. As you read through this article, remember that by being tolerant and compassionate with yourself, you will continue to heal.



Talk About Your Grief

During the holiday season, don't be afraid to express your feelings of grief. Ignoring your grief won't make the pain go away and talking about it openly often makes you feel better. Find caring friends and relatives who will listen—without judging you. They will help make you feel understood.

Be tolerant of Your Physical and Psychological Limits

Feelings of loss will probably leave you fatigued. Your low energy level may naturally slow you down. Respect what your body and mind are telling you. And lower your own expectations about being at your peak during the holiday season.



Eliminate Unnecessary Stress

You may already feel stressed, so don't overextend yourself. Avoid isolating yourself, but be sure to recognize the need to have special time for yourself. Realize also that merely "keeping busy" won't distract you from your grief, but may actually increase stress and postpone the need to talk out thoughts and feelings related to your grief.

Be With Supportive, Comforting People

Identify those friends and relatives who understand that the holiday season can increase your sense of loss and who will allow you to talk openly about your feelings. Find those persons who encourage you to be yourself and accept your feelings—both happy and sad.

Talk About the Person Who Has Died

Include the person's name in your holiday conversation. If you are able to talk candidly, other people are more likely to recognize your need to remember that special person who was an important part of your life.



Do What Is Right for You During the Holidays

Well-meaning friends and family often try to prescribe what is good for you during the holidays. Instead of going along with their plans, focus on what you want to do. Discuss your wishes with a caring, trusted friend.

Talking about these wishes will help you clarify what it is you want to do during the holidays. As you become aware of your needs, share them with your friends and family.

Plan Ahead for Family Gatherings

Decide which family traditions you want to continue and which new ones you would like to begin. Structure your holiday time. This will help you anticipate activities, rather than just reacting to whatever happens. Getting caught off guard can create feelings of panic, fear and anxiety during the time of the year when your feelings of grief are already heightened. As you make your plans, however, leave room to change them if you feel it is appropriate.

Embrace Your Treasure of Memories

Memories are one of the best legacies that exist after the death of someone loved. And holidays always make you think about times past. Instead of ignoring these memories, share them with your family and friends. Keep in mind that memories are tinged with both happiness and sadness. If your memories bring laughter, smile. If your memories bring sadness, then it's alright to cry. Memories that were made in love-no one can ever take them away from you.



Renew Your Resources for Living

Spend time thinking about the meaning and purpose of your life. The death of someone loved created opportunities for taking inventory of your life-past, present and future. The combination of a holiday and a loss naturally results in looking inward and assessing your individual situation. Make the best use of this time to define the positive things in life that surround you.

Express Your Faith

During the holidays, you may find a renewed sense of faith or discover a new set of beliefs. Associate with people who understand and respect your need to talk about these beliefs. If your faith is important, you may want to attend a holiday service or special religious ceremony. As you approach the holidays, remember: grief is both a necessity and a privilege. It comes as a result of giving and receiving love. Don't let anyone take your grief away. Love yourself. Be patient with yourself. And allow yourself to be surrounded by loving, caring people.

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Living with Grief During the Holidays



One of the most painful issues for you to deal with is how to survive the holidays after the death of the person you loved. Because holidays are supposed to be family times, and because of the extraordinary (although unrealistic) expectation that you should feel close to everyone, this time of year can underscore the absence of your deceased loved one more than any other time. The important thing to remember is that you and your family do have options about how to cope with the holidays. These are a few things to keep in mind:

As much as you'd like to skip from November to January 2nd, this is impossible. Therefore, it will be wise for you to take control of the situation by facing it squarely and planning for what you do and do not want to do to get through this time.

Realize that the anticipation of pain at the holidays is always worse than the actual day.

Recognize that what you decide for this year can be changed next year; you can move to something new or back to the old way. Decide what is right for you and your family **now**. Don't worry about all the other holidays to come in years ahead. You will be at different places in your mourning and in your life then.

Recognize, also, that your distress about the holidays is normal. Countless other bereaved people have felt, and do feel, as you do right now.

Ask yourself and your loved ones to decide what is important for you to make your holidays meaningful and bearable. Then, through compromise and negotiation, see if everyone can get a little of what he or she wants and needs. Give-and-take is important here.



Do something symbolic. Think about including rituals that can appropriately symbolize your memory of your loved one. For example, a candle burning at dinner, the hanging of a special decoration, or the planting of a tree on New Year's Day may help you to mark the continued abstract presence of your deceased loved one while still celebrating the holiday with those you love who still survive. Remembering your deceased loved one in this fashion can make an important statement to yourself and others.

Recognize that the holidays are filled with unrealistic expectations for intimacy, closeness, relaxation, and joy for all people - not just for the bereaved. Try not to buy into this for yourself - you already have enough to contend with.

Be aware of the pressures, demands, depression, increased alcohol intake, and fatigue that come with holidays. As a bereaved person you may feel these more than others. Take time out to take care of yourself during this time. You will need it even more.

Re-evaluate family traditions. Ask yourself and your surviving loved ones whether you need to carry them on this year or whether you should begin to develop some new ones. Perhaps you can alter your traditions slightly so that you can still have them to a certain extent but don't have to highlight your loved one's absence more than it already is.



Recognize that your loved one's absence will cause pain no matter what you do. This is only natural and right. After all, you are mourning because you love and miss this person. Try to mix this with your love for those you still have and your positive memories of the past. "Bittersweet" is a good word to describe this. You can feel the sweetness of the holiday but also the bitterness of your loved one's absence. Together they can give you a full, rich feeling, marked with love for those present and those gone whom you will never forget.



Plan ahead for your shopping tasks. Make a list ahead of time. Then, if you have a good day, capitalize on it and do the shopping you can. Try to consolidate the stores you want to visit. If you have trouble with shopping right now, do your shopping by catalogue or mail order, or ask friends to help you out.

Tears and sadness do not have to ruin the entire holiday for you or for others. Let yourself have the cry you need and you will be surprised that you can go on again until the next time you need to release the tears. Facing family holidays in your loved one's absence are normal mourning experiences and part of the healing process. Let your tears and sadness come and go throughout the whole day if necessary. The tears and emotions you do not express will be the ones which are destructive to you.

Ask for what you want or need from others during the holidays. One bereaved mother said that, as appropriate, she wanted to hear her dead daughter mentioned. She knew everyone was thinking of her daughter and wanted them to share their thoughts.

You may find yourself reminiscing about other holidays you shared with your deceased loved one. This is normal. **Let the memories come.** Talk about them. This is part of mourning and doesn't stop just because it is a holiday. In fact, the holidays usually intensify it.

Having some fun at the holidays does not mean you don't miss your loved one. It is not a betrayal. **You must give yourself permission to have joy when you can,** just like you must give yourself permission to mourn when you have the need.

You may have to let your limits be known to concerned others who are determined not to let you be sad or alone. Let others know what you need and how they can best help you. Don't be forced into doing things you don't want to do or don't feel up to solely to keep others happy. Determine what and how much you need, and then inform others.

Discuss holiday tasks and responsibilities that must be attended to - for example, preparing meals, doing the shopping, decorating the house. Consider whether they should be continued, reassigned, shared, or eliminated. Break down your goals into small, manageable pieces that you can accomplish one at a time. **Don't overwhelm or over commit yourself.** The holidays are stressful times for everyone, not just the bereaved, so you will need to take it slow and easy.

Look at your plans and ask what they indicate. **Are you doing what you want or are you placating others?** Are you isolating yourself from support or are you tapping into your resources? Are you doing things that are meaningful or are you just doing things?

Do something for someone else. Although you may feel deprived because of the loss of your loved one, reaching out to another can bring you some measure of fulfilment. For example, give a donation in your loved one's name. Invite a guest to share your festivities. Give food to a needy family.



Excerpted from Therese A. Rando's book, "Grieving: How To Go On Living When Someone You Love Dies"

Living with Grief During the Holidays Checklist

Check what you would traditionally do with a (T) and then check with a (W) what you want to do this year. Share this with your family or have them do one of their own and compare notes.

Seasonal Cards

- Mail as usual
- Shorten your list
- Include a "letter"
- Email instead of mail
- Elect to skip this year

Decorations

- Decorate as usual
- Modify your decorations
- Ask for help
- Let others do it
- Scale back on the decorations
- Have a special decoration for your loved one
- Have no decorations

Shopping

- Shop as usual
- Give cash
- Shop through catalogues
- Ask for help
- Shop early
- Make your gifts
- Give baked goods
- Shop with a friend
- Ask for help wrapping gifts
- Do not exchange gifts now but perhaps later
- Make a list of gifts you want before you go out

Holiday Music

- Enjoy as usual
- Avoid listening to holiday music
- Shop early before stores have holiday music on
- Listen to it, have a good cry and allow yourself to feel sad

Traditions

- Keep the old traditions
- Attend holiday parties
- Don't attend holiday parties
- Go to an entirely new place
- Bake the usual holiday foods
- Buy the usual holiday foods
- Bake but modify what you would usually do
- Go to religious services
- Do not attend religious services
- Attend the religious service but at a different time
- Spend quiet time alone
- Visit the cemetery

Special Meals and Dinners

- Prepare as usual
- Go out for dinner
- Invite friends over
- Eat alone
- Change time of dinner
- Change routine of dinner, such as - this year do a buffet
- Change location of dinner, - eat in a different room
- Ask for help
- Cater or get take out

Post Holidays and New Year's Day

- Spend as usual
- Remove decorations early
- Go out of town
- Avoid New Year's parties
- Attend a New Year's party
- Have a New Year's party
- Spend time with only a few friends
- Write in your journal your hopes for the new year
- Go to a movie
- Go to bed early

Adapted from Thanatos Magazine Fall 1994

A Holiday Memorial

A holiday wreath is a traditional part of the holiday season in some homes. It is a simple wreath, usually of fresh greens in which you can place four candles. The wreath may be placed on any table or fireplace mantel. As you light each candle this year you may create a new ritual which will become a lasting tradition for you and your family. We hope this memorial will help you include your loved one in celebration.

As we light these four candles in honour of you, we light one for our grief, one for our courage, one for our memories, and one for our love.



This candle represents our grief. The pain of losing you is intense. It reminds us of the depth of our love for you.

This candle represents our courage to confront our sorrow, to comfort each other, to change our lives.

This light is in your memory. The times we laughed, the times we cried, the times we were angry with each other, the silly things you did, the caring and joy you gave us.

This light is the light of love. As we enter this holiday season, day by day we cherish the special place in our hearts that will always be reserved for you. We thank you for the gift your living brought to each of us.

We love you.

Helping Grieving Children Handle the Holidays

By: Ralph Klicker

This article is borrowed from a magazine of our neighbours to the south, but children's grief knows no borders. Here is some helpful advice for grieving children everywhere.

New Year's, Valentines, St. Patrick's Day, Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, and Christmas, just thinking of all these holidays I've spent with my family brings back a flood of memories. However, for some, happy memories are dulled by the pain and sorrow of experiencing the holidays without a loved one who has died. The first holidays without a person are usually the hardest due to the anticipation of the unknown. What will it be like without that person?



For children, holidays without someone they love are just as painful as for adults. Maybe more so, depending on what traditions end with the death. If Mom

was the one who bought all the great gifts at Christmas, her death means not only having lost Mom, but also the very practical loss of all those neat gifts. The gift certificate from Dad may not live up to their expectations. If Dad organizes the family boat trip over the Fourth of July, spending the day at home with Mom may be an added let down.

The magic of the holidays is usually more exciting for children than for adults. To help maintain some of the magic, it is important they have security and structure during this time. Children gain comfort from routine, so maintaining family traditions as much as possible is a good idea. A family tradition does not have to be celebrated exactly as it always was. You can modify it in some ways and it can still be meaningful.

After a death, the best way to find out what the kids would find most comforting and meaningful

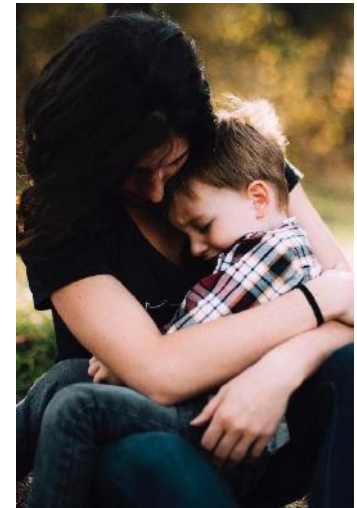
for each holiday is to ask them. This sounds simple, but you would be surprised at how often it is overlooked. It is not unusual for an adult to think they know what's best for a child and plan events without their input.

If you are a surviving adult, you cannot expect to help your children without first trying to help yourself. Remember, children often take their lead from adults. How you are handling things can determine in part, how they will handle things. Discuss their needs in relationship to yours and then make some

concrete decisions on what you will do. Knowing ahead of time what's going to happen can help relieve some of the anxiety of anticipating the unknown.

Discussions like this are sometimes difficult. Young children may not be able to verbalize their feelings and needs. I have found having children draw how they feel can reveal things that are hard for them to express verbally. With teenagers, all those dynamics that make it difficult for adults to communicate with them under normal circumstances are intensified while grieving. When talking doesn't work, each of you write down what you are feeling and what you need. Once everyone's anxieties, fears and needs are out in the open, you can make your plans.

Some suggestions that have proven helpful to others are: Have the kids help bake cookies or cupcakes for a nursing home or a group that had meaning to the deceased or volunteer to help serve Thanksgiving dinner at a local shelter with the kids.



If you want to donate money to a charity, let the children write a note explaining that the donation is a memorial and include something personal about the deceased. Doing something good for someone else can give the holiday special meaning.



Encouraging kids to write a note, draw or paste up a picture, or even make some small gift for the deceased can be meaningful for them. Take the letter or gift to the cemetery and dig a small hole at the grave and bury it, or let it float away in a

river, lake or ocean, or have a small ceremony and burn it in the backyard or fireplace. Making a simple ceremony out of whatever you do with it, makes the gesture more meaningful.

Even though children can experience very intense grief emotions on a holiday, they can also act at times during the day, as if nothing is wrong. They may be depressed one moment and be playing with a Christmas toy, laughing and really enjoying themselves the next. This is the normal grieving pattern for them. They may want to spend part of the day with their friends. Don't insist that you stay together for the entire day. They may need the support and security that "hanging out" with their friends provides.

However, prepare for an opposite type of reaction to friends also. Your child may need to be comforted if kids make some comment that hurts them. One third grade girl got upset at a Christmas party when her friends said her brother was dead six months and she shouldn't still be feeling bad. Another child, a fifth grader, got upset at a friend's home. Seeing her friend's father cooking at the barbecue made her think of how her own dad always made a big deal doing the cooking on the Fourth of July.

Don't be afraid to talk about the person who died, share some holiday memories about them. This process can be sad and painful, but it can also lead to happy memories and even laughter. I have seen it happen a number of times, the conversation starts and everyone is crying and then someone says something such as "remember how crooked the trees were that dad used to pick out." This leads to another funny or happy memory and another. Whether it ends in tears or laughter, it can be helpful for kids and you.



I can't stress enough the importance of planning for the holidays especially the first year after the death. Let your children know you may not be in the best physical or emotional condition that day. Explain that if you are upset, angry or sad, it is not because of anything they did. Let them know no matter how they feel it's okay because they are not expected to feel any certain way. A child may feel guilty if his mother is crying and upset the entire holiday, and he/she doesn't have the same reaction. Give them permission to feel the way they do. Do not put too many demands on them or yourself for the day, keep plans flexible.

Be prepared for any type of response especially from adolescents. Their grief reactions can often be expressed as anger. They may say things or act in ways that can be hurtful. This is extremely difficult to handle if they were directed toward you, especially when your emotions can be stretched to the limits by your own grief. Give them some latitude, they are especially vulnerable. One mother told me that on holidays when her teenager was nasty or hurtful she would keep saying to herself, "this too shall pass".

Change it for next year if it "didn't work". Just as you plan ahead for each holiday, do a post-holiday evaluation. Discuss how things went, what worked, what didn't and what you want to do next year.

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If you're in need of grief or palliative support – ***we are here for you.***
Please call **604-531-7484** or visit our website at **www.peacearchhospice.org** for more information.

Our Vision

Creating a caring community that values quality living and dying.

Our Mission

A volunteer-based organization that is dedicated to supporting all who are facing the end-of-life journey, and that is committed to educating the community on dying and grieving.

Our Society

Peace Arch Hospice Society is a non-profit organization that provides our programs and services, *free of charge* to residents of South Surrey and White Rock. Our Registered Clinical Counsellors and specially trained volunteers provide compassionate and professional support to individuals, their family, and friends, who are facing terminal illness or bereavement. In addition, we educate the community on dying and grieving, and offer much needed support and resources to caregivers, senior's facilities, schools, hospice volunteers, and other community organizations.

Dealing with a terminal illness or the loss of a loved one is life altering, and it can be hard to cope with uncertainty and change. We offer a safe place to express all your emotions without being judged.



When you need us, we are here to help.



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