

BEREAVEMENT NEWSLETTER

COPING WITH THE HOLIDAYS

The questions.

- How will I get through the next few weeks?
- What is happening to me? I have always loved this time of year, and now I'm miserable.
- Am I losing my sanity?
- Would I be better off to ignore the holidays this year?
- How long am I going to feel this way?
- Should I just try to act normal so I don't ruin the holidays for anyone else?
- Should we change our holiday traditions?
- Why don't people just leave me alone?
- Where is everyone who said they would "be there" for me?

And the list goes on

There are many factors that affect the grief that is associated with the loss of a family member or friend. They relate to your own personal beliefs, what your family is like, who it was who died, when and how they died, what your relationship with that person was, and what role that person played in your holiday traditions.

This year your holidays will be different, but they can still be meaningful. And in the midst of your pain, you can experience hope.

You don't have to pretend that this year will be like others. The energy you would spend evading the issue can be used more wisely to plan for a different kind of holiday.

In reality, few holidays are as picture perfect as they are portrayed on TV commercials, movies, glossy picture books and songs. So give yourself permission to feel what you feel. You will be advised to cheer up, join the festivities, get with the program. That's pretty hard to do when you feel sad, depressed, anxious, fatigued, angry, apathetic, guilty, confused. These feelings are normal. They're a sign that you have cared deeply about someone.

Acknowledging your feelings is one thing, but expressing them in a healthy way is an important next step. **Do what works best for you.** It might be a long, hard cry; talking to someone else about your loved one, writing a letter to your loved one, writing a story or poem about them. It may be expressed in creative artwork, quilting, or music. Whatever means appeal

to you, take time to indulge in it. Overeating and drinking alcohol may seem like an acceptable escape during a season of parties, but it really won't help.

Perhaps the most practical advice we can offer is to **plan ahead**. Think about what the most difficult situations will be and prepare for them. What concerns you most? What do you want others to understand about how you are feeling? What can other people do to help you? What can they refrain from doing? What can you do to help others?

Give yourself the freedom to change your plans as you go, but don't be slam dunked by situations because you tried to avoid them. **Take charge where you can**. You aren't an invalid, and you don't have to allow others to make your decisions for you. For example, if a sister-in-law in Montana insists that you come for Thanksgiving, and you never cared much for her anyhow, I would suggest that you decline the invitation.

Other choices might be to plan to go out for dinner, invite friends and family to dinner and ask them to bring part of the meal, change your traditional menu, or fix all the favorite family recipes as a remembrance. Decide who should take on the ritual of carving the turkey. Light a candle at the table in remembrance of your loved one. Place a basket on your table and ask each person to put a written memory in it. Watch a video that includes your loved one who died. Give yourselves permission to cry (and laugh). Remember to give thanks for the life you shared with your loved one.

Simplify. Make a list of the things you want to accomplish. Break it into smaller tasks. If you don't want to do it that day, don't. Get enough rest. If you are sleeping too much, limit your time in bed. It is not unusual for sleep patterns to change when you are grieving. Practice disciplines that give you energy. Take a walk, try water aerobics, enroll in a yoga class. It's important to take control of your life. You don't have to be a victim.

Turn to others for support. People who understand and care, not only want to help, they need to help. That is a way for them to work through their grief and honor a person they cared about too. Try to be understanding of those who are hesitant to express their caring. Often they are afraid of upsetting you or saying the wrong thing. It can create a feeling of abandonment and distance. If you can be straightforward and let them know what would be helpful to you, chances are very good that they would be more than happy to be there for you. You can give direct explanations and still be gracious. If you prefer to decline an invitation, just say that you prefer a quiet, private time this year. If you accept an invitation, leave yourself room to be excused if you change your mind. If you miss hugs, give one to get one. If you would like to have someone to share a meal with, call someone and suggest going out for lunch. Or invite a busy neighbor for supper and help with the Christmas tree.

If attending Christmas Eve service is too emotional, go to the children's program. Or stay home and watch a service on TV so that you can cry by yourself and avoid the discomfort of a crowd.

If the mall with crowds, Santa, and carols is too overwhelming, shop by catalog. Ask someone to shop with you. Don't shop at all. If the idea of writing all those Christmas cards is a

problem, send a printed letter this year. Ask your family to address the envelopes. Or don't send any cards this year.

If the family wants you to have a tree, and the thought is too painful, let them set it up in a different place in the house. Hang a stocking for your loved one and suggest that family members leave notes in it. Donate a special gift to a favorite charity. Put a wreath on your loved one's grave and on an unremembered grave of someone unknown to you. Help with a meal at a community center or soup kitchen. Contribute a poinsettia to the church. Take a tabletop tree to the nursing home where your family member was residing. If they loved birds, put out a new bird feeder.

Set goals that are easy to attain, and congratulate yourself when you achieve one. Forget the should's. **Be gentle with yourself**. You may need more solitude than usual. Use it in ways that are relaxing for you. Savor a special treat. Try something new – maybe a massage or a manicure. Buy yourself a gift (something your loved one might have selected).

Remember to remember. Maybe you carry or wear an object that links you to your loved one. Maybe you will place something of significance on the mantel or the tree. Maybe you won't be up to it this year, but you will know when the time is right.

And then there is the New Year. It looks so different without the person you cared about. "How can I plan for a future when I'm not sure I can get through today?" Maybe it's a relief just to say good-bye to a year that has been filled with pain and sorrow. Maybe it's enough to affirm who you are and what you have been through. Maybe it's enough to admit that this event has changed you forever. Your life won't ever be the same again, but that doesn't have to mean that it won't be good. What have you learned that is of value? How can you use this experience to lessen someone else's burden? Acknowledge past joys, and open the door for hope for the future. You may not want to fling it open, but maybe you are ready to peek out of a crack.

*Have patience with all the world,
But first of all with yourself.
(Francis DeSales)*

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN GRIEF

My father died in November of 1994. My brother and I decided to design and construct the container for my father's cremains. During that week, the men who came to visit our family tended to be drawn to the workshop, while the women who visited were more likely to spend time inside, talking.

The tears flowed both inside the house and in the workshop. As we worked, we would share stories about my father. We men had found a safe place to act as a "container" for our emotions. The workshop functioned in this manner to connect our pain and tears with an activity. One of the reasons men tend to have an easier time in connecting grief with action is that men have more difficulty in connecting their emotions with words. Women, on the other hand, have great skill

in this arena and are usually more drawn to connecting their pain, tears, and grief on a verbal level with their most intimate friends and family.

This difference puts men in a precarious state in our culture because almost all of the “action” activities related to death have been sub-contracted. Activities such as building the coffin, directing the ritual, digging the grave, or the funeral itself have been turned over to the “death professionals”. This leaves men with nothing to do following a death, and negates strength of action for many men. It is a difficult task for men to stand in a funeral home with nothing to do.

Each person’s grief is unique and individual, however, and we are in somewhat dangerous territory by separating men and women. Both men and women in our culture are in a difficult place when it comes to grief. We have very few culturally endorsed “active” rituals that give us “hooks” into our grief. By becoming aware of the differences we have in our own chosen style of grief and healing, we are in a better position to find what works for us and honor those around us and ourselves.

*Excerpts from an article in “Bereavement”
By Tom Golden*

Other Resources You Might Find Helpful:

Not Just Another Day – Families, Grief and Special Days. Covers the more common holidays and gives good ideas for including children in celebrating birthdays and Christmas.

How Will I Get Through the Holidays? – By James Miller. This booklet gives many practical ideas for coping with the holidays after a loved one has died.

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