

# HOLIDAYS & GRIEF

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The Holidays are often a time of family traditions, memories of good times, and expectations of more. For those of us who have experienced a significant loss, this time of year may be dreaded. Significant losses such as the death of a loved one, divorce, separation, illness, geographic move, loss of job, death of a pet, family trauma, and many other events can make the holiday season a difficult time. It is common to find ourselves asking questions such as...

- How am I going to make it through the holidays?
- How will I feel without having my loved one present?
- Will I be envious of those who are together or have not had a significant loss?
- Will I feel anything besides hurt?
- Will others understand?

Grief may be defined as the natural, expected reaction to a loss. The work of grief, and it is work, is to adjust to the reality of the loss, move through the pain, build a new life, and live well in the present. This is an uneven, awkward, painful process.

A few practical tips:

- **GRACE** – Offer yourself and others grace. Losses require adjustments for all involved and we are awkward, unsure how to navigate this new reality following our loss. So are those around us.
- **ACCEPT** – It is what it is and we are learning how to adjust to the new reality.
- **REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS** – This holiday season will be different, unlike anything before or what will come. Release myself from expectations and discover what will be.
- **SOCIALIZE** – Be with others, even if for a short time. Avoid the temptation to isolate. It is ok to leave early if that is good for you.
- **KEEP ACTIVE** – Physical activity is good for us in many ways. It can help us increase our mood, energy, and sleep. When we are physically active we tend to feel better about our life. Walking is one of the best physical activities.
- **EAT WELL** – Maintain a healthy, balanced diet. Give your body the fuel and resources it needs to live well.
- **ALLOW YOURSELF SOME TREATS** – Cookies or other holiday foods may not initially seem interesting or appealing. Allow yourself to try some of your old favorites, as well as sample something new.
- **MINIMAL ALCOHOL** – Alcohol is a depressant and a dis-inhibitor. While alcohol use may contribute to a numbing of the pain in the moment, it contributes to more pain and depression overall, as well as impaired judgment.
- **SHOP** – Gift giving is such a part of the holiday season but being in crowded stores may be too stressful. Consider shopping on line or giving gift cards for this season. Some enjoy shopping with others rather than by themselves.

- **LET OTHERS KNOW YOUR WANTS AND NEEDS** – Almost always, others want to do what is good for you but are unsure how to act, what to say, or what to offer. Let others’ know what you want, need, what is good for you. In a real way, your sharing your wants and needs is a gift to others.
- **LIGHT** – The Holidays occur at the time of least sunlight in our northern hemisphere. For many of us, this is especially challenging as at the diminished light may contribute to dysphoria. Be intentional in being in the sunshine when it is available and in bright lights during the daytime hours.
- **MANAGE BOUNDARIES** – Say “yes” to what is good for you and “no” to what is not. Remember that love is different than pleasing, for love can be defined as seeking and doing good for the loved one. The loved one includes me.
- **DISCERN RESPONSIBILITY** – Embrace my responsibility: I am responsible for how I treat myself and others. Release others’ responsibility: I am not responsible for how other’s treat me, others treat others, or others treat themselves. Embracing my responsibility brings dignity and personal power. Releasing what I am not responsible for brings freedom and respect others’ dignity.
- **HAVE AN ESCAPE PLAN** – Allow yourself permission to exit any event at the time that is good for you.
- **BE PROACTIVE/REACH OUT** – Invite someone (or several others) to your house or to accompany you to an event.
- **VOLUNTEER TO HELP OTHERS** – We tend to feel better when we extend beyond ourselves and help others. Serve at a soup-kitchen, Salvation Army, mission, with a children’s/youth ministry, volunteer to read to children or elderly, ... There are many opportunities.
- **PLAN A TIME OF REMEMBRANCE** – Intentionally honor your lost loved one. This may take the form of a candle lighting ceremony with family and friends. As each person lights a candle they can share one memory, picture, item, or song that reminds them of the loved one. Or, make a scrap book, review old pictures and videos involving the loved one.
- **PRAY AS THE PSALMIST PRAYED** – Many of the Psalms begin with the writer crying out in their pain, dissatisfaction, and questions. Then, the writer recognizes God’s presence, love, and care. Sometimes, there is a time-gap between crying out in pain and recognizing God’s loving presence.
- **JOURNAL** – Write about your experiences. Writing helps us process and resolve our emotions and thoughts. Initially, writing may make the experiences seem more intense. Then, it is likely we will experience some relief and perspective.
- **GRATITUDE** – Find something for which I am thankful. We are complex and can feel pain and gratitude simultaneously. Look for what is good.
- **BEGIN NEW TRADITIONS** - Decorate differently, attend a program, serve others, serve a new menu for the holiday dinner, go out to eat, place a commemorative ornament on the Christmas tree, play new music, ... There are so many options.

There is no right or wrong way to grieve during the holidays. Do what is good and right for you. Share this with others. Next year will be different, as will the following year. We can live well.