



Holiday Bereavement Resource Guide

Family Hospice & Palliative Care
Bereavement Department
50 Moffett Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15243
412-572-8829

Helping Yourself Heal During the Holiday Season

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 OK 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.

Wolfelt, A. D. (2013). *Helping yourself heal during the holiday season*. Retrieved from http://griefwords.com/index.cgi?action=page&page=articles/helping6.html&site_id=376

The Three C's of Coping with the Holidays

Kenneth J. Doka

The holidays are a tough time to grieve. Knowing that does not make them any easier, but at least it may help us understand and accept our reactions and tap into the things we can do to help ourselves cope with the holidays.

Choose: During the holidays, it is easy to drift into activities that increase our pain. But we do have choices. We can decide what activities we wish to participate in, who we want to be with, and what we want to do. One of the choices we may want to consider is how to mark the loss during the holidays. During the holidays we feel the presence of that person's absence. Finding ways to recognize and acknowledge that individual can bring positive focus to our grief. This may be done in a number of ways, such as lighting a candle, creating a ritual, or a moment of silence.

Communicate: It is important that we discuss our choices with others, especially those who are affected by them. Remember, they have needs as well. Their ways of dealing with grief may be different, so communication is very important for all concerned. For example, have a family discussion about whether or not a tree is wanted.

Compromise: Each of us deals with loss in our own particular way. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. When we communicate, we may find out that our feelings and needs – the very ways that we cope – will differ. We need to find space to compromise and deal with our loss in our own way.

Nothing changes the fact that the holidays can be especially difficult while grieving. But as we choose our actions, communicate our choices and find suitable compromises, we may find that they are bearable. And that gives us renewed strength and hope.

Doka, K. J. (2015). The three C's of coping with the holidays. In *For those who grieve: A holiday survival kit*. Retrieved from <http://www.hospicecalgary.com/sites/default/files/pdf/For%20those%20who%20grieve%20a%20holiday%20survival%20kit.pdf>

Coping with Holidays and Family Celebrations

Helen Fitzgerald

When a loved one has died, holidays, anniversaries, and birthdays inevitably bring fresh memories and a re-experience of the pain of grief. The void appears again. If the death is recent, you might feel numb much of this holiday season, but next year's holidays may send a new wave of grief your way.

It may help you to keep the following in mind:

- Don't be surprised at the intensity of your grief. Feelings of anger, panic, depression, despair, guilt or regrets, fearfulness, and loneliness, as well as physical symptoms, feel stronger during this time. This is normal. It is not a setback; it is how grief is.
- Help yourself by gaining an understanding of the grieving process. Read a book on grief, attend a lecture, or attend a support group.
- Remember what has helped you earlier in your grieving. These techniques will help you again.
- Tell important people in your life that this is a difficult season and let them know what they can do to help. Don't expect people to remember or to know what to do.
- Don't be surprised if others struggle, too, or if you see others hesitate to speak of the person who died. They are probably afraid they will make you feel sad, and are unsure whether you want to talk about it.

As unpredictable as grief is, one can expect that the holidays, and other family celebrations such as birthdays and anniversaries, will cause a huge wave of emotion. These events, once anticipated with joyous pleasure, are now often painful reminders that your loved one is not here to celebrate with you. The good news is that you can help yourself.

Holidays

Something to keep in mind as the holiday season approaches: for many, the anticipation of a holiday is worse than the actual day. Make a plan for the holiday that is approaching. If it is difficult to decide what you want to do, think about what you don't want to do. Discuss your plan with your family. Don't fool yourself into thinking you can ignore the holiday in hopes it will go away. Everywhere you look, you will probably be reminded that this is a holiday season. Stores will be decorated and there will be holiday ads in the newspaper and on TV. People will greet you with a "happy" or a "merry" something or other. And it is not a happy or merry time for you.

Holidays are different for each person. One particular holiday may be very difficult for you but a breeze for others. Halloween may not have much meaning for some, but if your family always hosted a huge neighborhood costume party, you will really feel your loss on that day. The following checklist can start you and your family on making the decisions about an upcoming holiday. Ask each family member to fill out a separate checklist, and then sit down and compare notes.

Coping With the Holidays Checklist

Place a check mark by what you want to do this year. Share this with your family or have them do one of their own and compare notes.

Holiday Cards

- Mail as usual
- Shorten your list
- Include a "Holiday Letter"
- Elect to skip this year

Decorations

- Decorate as usual
- Modify your decorations
- Ask for help
- Let others do it
- Make changes, such as an artificial tree instead of a real one
- Have a special decoration for your loved one
- Choose not to put up decorations

Shopping

- Shop as usual
- Give cash
- Shop through catalogs or the Internet
- 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 later
- Make a list of gifts to buy before you go out

Holiday Music

- Enjoy as usual
- Avoid turning the radio on
- Shop early before stores play holiday music
- 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 usually do
- Attend a religious service
- Do not attend a religious service
- Attend a different place of worship
- Spend quiet time alone
- Visit the cemetery
- Open gifts on the usual day
- Open gifts at another time

Holiday Dinner

- 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

Post-Holiday & New Year's Day

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

Fitzgerald, H. (2005). *Coping with holidays and family celebrations*. Retrieved from <https://americanhospice.org/working-through-grief/coping-with-holidays-and-family-celebrations/>

Ideas for Embracing Memories

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- **Create a memory tree:** Everyone can bring an ornament made or purchased in your loved one's memory to decorate the tree.
- **Share stories of your loved one:** Get family and friends together to share their memories.
- **Create a memory book over the holidays:** This can be done on your own or with family members and friends. Creating a memory book is a wonderful keepsake about your loved one.
- **Put together a collage:** Through collage, rubber stamping, gathering of pictures and paper decorations, we can create a beautiful remembrance.
- **Play music:** Play music that is meaningful to you or your loved one.
- **Talk about your loved one and your grief:** Find supportive and comforting people to share memories.

Ideas for Creating New Memories

Hospice Calgary

- **Hang stockings:** Some families place small notes inside the stocking and read them whenever they wish. Sometimes it's easier to hang the "special" stocking in a place apart from the others. Do what feels right for you and your family.
- **Candles:** Light a special candle in celebration of the memory of a life and the love shared.
- **Dinner:** Set a special place at the dinner table and have everyone write a letter or note and place it on the person's plate. Or volunteer to serve a Christmas meal in memory of your loved one.
- **Gifts:** Buy a gift for your absent loved one and give it to someone in need. Consider adopting a family for Christmas. Or give to a charity in your family member's name.
- **Reach out to others:** A donation of food, clothing, goods or your time to a person or cause could be done in the memory of your loved one. Giving and caring for others can ease your pain and help the healing process.

- **Decorate the memorial site with a holiday theme:** Place a small tree or wreath at the graveside. Decorating could also include flowers, garlands, bows, pinecones, or packages – whatever is meaningful for you.
- **Choose a holiday story:** Find a story that you can read together as a family. Consider donating money to the public library to buy the book and have it dedicated to your loved one’s memory.

Hospice Calgary. (2015). Ideas for creating new memories. In *Preparing yourself and your family for the holiday season*. Retrieved from <http://www.hospicecalgary.com/sites/default/files/pdf/Preparing%20Yourself%20and%20Your%20Family%202012.pdf>

Hospice Calgary. (2015). Ideas for embracing memories. In *Preparing yourself and your family for the holiday season*. Retrieved from <http://www.hospicecalgary.com/sites/default/files/pdf/Preparing%20Yourself%20and%20Your%20Family%202012.pdf>

Children, Grief, and the Holidays: How You Can Help

Pamela Gabbay, MA, FT

The holiday season is painful for adults after the death of a loved one, but it can be even more isolating and distressing for children if they are not given ample guidance from the adults in their lives. Here are some suggestions for how to help your children during the holidays:

1. Suppress the urge to ignore the holidays because they seem too painful to endure. It's important that children are given the opportunity to celebrate the holidays without feeling bad or feeling guilty. After all, they still have a need to "just be a kid," especially during the holidays.
2. Discuss the painful feelings that might arise during the holiday season. Children are flooded with memories from the past and they want everything to go back to the way it was before. Help normalize these feelings for your children by allowing them to openly talk about their feelings. As a parent, you might explain that you've been feeling that way, too.
3. Together, as a family, create new holiday traditions. When creating these new rituals, ask your children what they want. Their input is extremely important. If you have more than one child, get all of their opinions. Then, as a group, decide the best way to spend the holidays.
4. Include the memory of your loved one in your celebration. Encourage your children to make something meaningful, such as a holiday card or special gift, specifically for your loved one. Decide as a family where these items should be placed during the holidays. Your children might want to place them under the tree, on the fireplace mantle, or in their room. Some children might want to take these items to the cemetery.
5. Spend time together reflecting back on special holiday memories from the past. Have your children draw a picture of their favorite holiday memory. Give them the opportunity to talk about their drawing, if they choose to.
6. Light a candle in memory of your loved one. If you have more than one child, allow each child to have his or her own special candle. Consider creating a place of honor for the candles in your home.
7. Together, make a holiday ornament in memory of the person who died. Or, consider an ongoing ritual of purchasing an ornament each year in their memory. This ornament could represent anything your loved one held dear.
8. If the person who died had any favorite holiday songs, play these songs with your children and reflect back on meaningful times that you had together while listening to these songs.

9. Plan a special remembrance meal together. Help your children bake a favorite holiday dish or dessert of the person who died. If you have more than one child, offer each child the opportunity to make a favorite dish.
10. As a family, consider volunteering your time to a charity in need during the holidays. Often, giving back to others who are also hurting can be very beneficial to grieving children.
11. Donate toys to a charity that helps children. Have your children help you choose and purchase the toys and then wrap them together. Include your children in the delivery of the toys.
12. Attend a holiday memorial celebration as a family. Many communities hold candle lighting events during the holidays. This provides an opportunity for you and your children to honor the memory of your loved one in a community setting. Check with your local hospice to see if they have an upcoming event this holiday season.

Gabbay, P. (2013). *Children, grief, and the holidays: How you can help*. Retrieved from: <https://childrengrieve.org/children-grief-and-holidays-how-you-can-help>

Resources

Bereavement Support Groups

Pre-registration is required. Please call 412-572-8829 to register.

South Support Groups

Family Hospice & Palliative Care – Mt. Lebanon
50 Moffett Street, Pittsburgh, PA 15243
Third Monday of each month from 7:00 to 8:30 p.m.

Southminster House
801 Washington Road, Pittsburgh, PA 15228
Second Tuesday of each month from 1:00 to 2:30 p.m.

Baldwin Community United Methodist Church
5001 Baptist Road, Pittsburgh, PA 15236
First Thursday of each month from 7:00 to 8:30 p.m.

North Support Groups

Lighthouse Pointe Village at Chapel Harbor
500 Chapel Harbor Drive, Pittsburgh, PA 15238
First Tuesday of each month from 10:00 to 11:30 a.m.

Grove City Medical Center (Cafeteria Meeting Room)
631 North Broad Street Extension, Grove City, PA 16127
Third Tuesday of each month from 6:00 to 7:30 p.m.

Whispering Oaks Senior Apartments (3rd Floor Chapel Area)
260 South Buhl Farm Drive, Hermitage, PA 16148
Second Wednesday of each month from 2:00 to 3:30 p.m.

Presbyterian SeniorCare Shenango (Craft Room, Shenango on the Green)
238 South Market Street, New Wilmington, PA 16142
Fourth Wednesday of each month from 3:00 to 4:30 p.m.

Other Bereavement Resources

Family Hospice & Palliative Care Grief Works Library..... 412-572-8829
Visit <http://www.familyhospicepa.org/> and, under *Patients and Caregivers*, select *Bereavement and Support Groups*.

The Good Grief Center..... 412-224-4000
Contact the Good Grief Center for referrals to area bereavement support groups, organizations, and grief therapists. Visit <http://ursulinesupportservices.org/services/good-grief-center/>.

Compassionate Friends 877-969-0010
Compassionate Friends offers comfort, hope, and support to families who have experienced the death of a child at any age. Visit <https://www.compassionatefriends.org/>.

re:solve Crisis Network.....1-888-7-YOU CAN (or 1-888-796-8226)
re:solve Crisis Network provides 24/7 mental health crisis intervention and stabilization services. Visit <http://www.upmc.com/Services/behavioral-health/Pages/resolve-crisis-network.aspx>.

For additional resources, please contact the Family Hospice & Palliative Care Bereavement Department at 412-572-8829.