



Family Hospice
& Palliative Care

Part of UPMC HNA

HOLIDAY BEREAVEMENT

Resource Guide



Family Hospice & Palliative Care

201 Chestnut Avenue, P.O. Box 352, Altoona, PA 16603-0352

1.800.445.6262 | www.homenursingagency.com

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>

BE PREPARED BY THE POWER OF 3

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1. Take Care of Yourself

- Be sure to eat nutritious meals, drink water, exercise, and rest.
- Have an outfit (including accessories and shoes) planned for holiday events.

2. Lower Your Expectations of Yourself

- Because you are grieving, you may have less energy. Break down large tasks into smaller (and more manageable) tasks.
- Pace yourself. Decide what you can handle this year.
- Grief can be unpredictable. Create a Plan B, and allow yourself to be flexible.
- Avoid isolating yourself. Spend time with supportive family members and friends.

3. Give Yourself Permission to Grieve

- Grief is a normal response to a loss; it is not a sign of weakness.
- Express your emotions in appropriate ways, such as by crying, talking with a family member or friend, or writing in a journal. Avoid suppressing emotions.
- Keep a packet of tissues with you.

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/>

HAVE A PLAN FOR THE HOLIDAY SEASON

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During the holiday season, you may feel out of place and overwhelmed. It may not be a “good time” for you, and you may not feel like celebrating. It may even be painful to listen to cheerful Christmas music and to see bright colorful lights. You may begin to fear the holiday and what it will bring.

Creating a plan for the holiday season can provide direction and meaning. Before completing the Planning for the Holidays Worksheet on the next page, consider the following:

Talk About Your Loved One

- Talking about your loved one lets other people know that you are comfortable sharing memories of your loved one. It also reminds other people that your loved one is an important part of your life.
- When talking about your loved one, allow yourself to express your emotions – to cry and to laugh. This is part of healing.

Create a Plan

- It is useful to create a plan for the holiday season. Anticipation of a holiday is often worse than the actual holiday, and a plan can provide direction and meaning.
- Remember there is no right way to celebrate the holiday.
- Do not be afraid to politely decline invitations. When declining an invitation, be sure to communicate your feelings so the rejection is not taken personally. You may wish to say: “Thank you for thinking of me this year, but I plan to...”

Traditions

- As you create a plan for the holiday season, think about what is important to you – and what would have been meaningful to your loved one.
- You can change or begin new traditions. You can also keep old traditions.

PLANNING FOR THE HOLIDAYS WORKSHEET

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Use the following worksheet to create a plan for the holiday season. Share your plan with your family members and friends and discuss how you can support each other.

What is most important to me this holiday season is (for example, being with family or focusing on the true meaning of the season):

Some activities or traditions that I would like to maintain this year are:

I can make these activities or traditions more manageable by:

Some activities or traditions that I would like to avoid or eliminate this year are:

Looking ahead, I expect the most difficult time to be:

I can help myself get through that time by:

HEALING GRIEF RITUALS: A SPECIAL WAY TO REMEMBER A LOVED ONE

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Grief rituals can help you to remember your loved one in a healing and loving way and with a sense of peace. Listed below are several examples of rituals, which can be performed alone or with your family. Think about what will feel comfortable for you, as well as what will provide meaning and significance.

- Light a special candle on special occasions, such as on your loved one's birthday, on Mother's or Father's Day, on a holiday, etc.
- Donate flowers to your place of worship in honor of your loved one.
- Create a scrapbook of letters, photographs, and other special reminders. Create smaller versions of the books to give to children and other family members. Or invite children to participate by drawing pictures and writing poems.
- Visit the cemetery.
- If ashes have been scattered or if the cemetery is far from where you live, visit a special place where you feel close to your loved one.
- Begin holiday meals by lighting a candle in your loved one's memory and/or include your loved one in the blessing or prayer.
- When entertaining during the holiday season, set up a special area with a candle, photographs of your loved one, and a blank journal. Encourage guests to write their favorite memories of your loved one in the journal. Or set aside time for each person to share special memories of your loved one.
- Hang a stocking for your loved one. Ask those who will be celebrating with you to bring notes with their favorite memories to put in the stocking.
- Gift a favorite picture or keepsake of your loved one to a family member.
- Make copies of your loved one's favorite recipes and create a cookbook that can be handed down through the generations.
- Purchase a special ornament each year to remember your loved one.
- Purchase a gift for your loved one and donate it to a charity, church, nursing home, or library in his or her name.
- Donate your time to an animal shelter, nursing home, soup kitchen, or other organization.
- Help children bake cookies or other treats. Donate the cookies to a group or organization that had meaning to your loved one.
- Write special notes, insert them in helium balloons, and release the balloons at the ceremony or other special place.
- This space is reserved for you to create your own special grief ritual:

CHILDREN AND THE HOLIDAYS

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It is important for families who are grieving the death of a loved one to remember children grieve, too. While most adults are familiar with the grieving process, adults may not realize children experience similar feelings of grief. Like adults, children can experience strong feelings of grief during the holidays, as well as at other special occasions.

Children can react to these feelings in a variety of ways and need the support and understanding of adults – especially during the holiday season. On one hand, children are sad and miss their loved one; on the other hand, children want to celebrate the holiday as usual.

You can help grieving children by:

- **Being honest.** Children learn by watching adults. Children need to know this will not be a “normal” holiday but one filled with sadness because of the absence of your loved one. Encourage children to share their feelings – and share your feelings, too.
- **Encouraging stories about the deceased.** Even if talking about your loved one brings tears, it is healthy for children to see that crying is a natural and acceptable expression of grief. Your tears give permission for their tears.
- **Developing new rituals.** Changing or creating new rituals can acknowledge that life is different and can lessen the pain of memories triggered by old traditions. Discuss with the children how to incorporate new rituals with old rituals.
- **Reassuring children that they are loved and cared for.** Following the death of a loved one, children can experience fear of further abandonment. Depending on age, children can also experience fear about his or her own mortality. Provide children with extra love and reassurance to offset these normal, yet often unexpressed, fears.