

Caring for Yourself During the Holidays

1. Be honest - tell family and friends how you really feel about the holidays.

Family and friends are often unable to understand how painful the holidays can be for someone who is grieving the loss of a loved one. We can help them to learn by telling them that loss becomes more obvious when we think of happy holiday memories, when we realize what should have been and could have been has been permanently changed, we watch others who are excited and joyful, and when we remember those special family gatherings and traditions. Don't try to hide hurt, loneliness, or longing. When you express yourself, you will feel better. If you try to suppress your feelings, you and others will experience more discomfort.

2. Be kind and gentle to yourself emotionally.

It is O.K. to feel happy about things and to be heartbroken even within the same hour. The holiday ride can be an emotional roller coaster. Accepting this rather than fighting it lessens physical and emotional stress and helps you to be more honest with yourself and those around you.

3. Take care of yourself physically.

Get adequate sleep, be moderate in food and drink, and get some daily exercise whether you want to or not.

4. Don't isolate yourself.

It is natural to think you may be a burden to others because you are in pain. Isolating yourself only increases your loneliness and despair. Create a support network of friends and family by giving them some specific suggestions about what they can do to help.

5. THERE IS NOT A RIGHT OR WRONG WAY. You have a choice to: spend the holidays as you have in the past, avoid the holiday, or do something brand new - spend it in a different place or designate it as a different day.

Recognize that the holidays will be hard no matter what you do or where you are.

Choice #1:

Be aware that keeping the same holiday traditions may increase your awareness of the place your loved one held in helping to create past memories. Try not to ignore or suppress any feelings that you have. If you can honor traditions this way, you may feel better about your ability to manage other events.

Choice #2:

It is not at all unusual to wish to avoid the holiday completely. Consider taking a trip to get away from the painful surroundings. Designate a day other than the traditional one to celebrate your holiday.

Choice #3:

Maintaining some holiday traditions can be comforting to other family members and stabilizing for children who are grieving. Try simplifying the usual traditions. For instance, go to the home of another family member or friend, dine out, buy prepared foods instead of doing it all yourself. Trying to do it all will deplete your energy level and emotional strength when it is already low; it may also increase your sense of loss.

6. Help someone else in need.

The act of helping is healing for your emotional wounds. When you help to meet someone else's needs, you feel good about yourself. Many community agencies have families or individuals who need attention. Contact hospitals, nursing homes, orphanages, shelters, soup kitchens, and charities for suggestions of how you might help.

7. Take encouragement from the fact that you will survive this painful time.

You will survive this time, even though you may feel as if it will never get better. You will find comfort and strength in your ability to survive the pain and manage successfully. It is OK to have a good time; enjoying the holiday does not mean that you forget your loved one or miss him or her any less. How much you grieve is not a measure of how much you love. Don't try to hide or disguise your true feelings whatever they are.

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8. Make a list of names of close friends and family who can and will help you through this time; some people cannot provide what you need.

This helps you, compliments the people who want to help, and gives them some direction in knowing what they can do.

9. Make a written list of what you need from other family members, and share the list with that person.

For example: hugs, time to talk about the person who has died, daily walks together, sharing photos, time to cry together.

10. Write a letter to your loved one and say all the things you are feeling. Write a letter to yourself including things your loved one would say to you with knowledge of the pain you are feeling.

11. Make a list called: "Close Friendship Needs for Tough Times." It would include things you would like for others to do for you. Here are some suggestions, add your own:

Please DO:

1. Call me - not ask me to call you.
2. Come to visit.
3. Be available to listen to how I am really feeling - not how everyone thinks I should feel.
4. Talk with me about my loved one; I need to know someone still remembers.
5. Be available to just hold me while I cry, no need to try to make it better.
6. Invite me to go to church, on a memorial walk, or to the cemetery.
7. Invite me for coffee, a visit, or a meal.

INCLUDE ANYTHING THAT WOULD BE MEANINGFUL TO YOU, NO MATTER HOW SMALL.

12. Make a list of things that you are not able to do at this time. For example:

1. Call you if I need anything, I'm just not able to do that right now.
2. Be grateful and happy; right now I just hurt.
3. Believe time will heal; that time is not now.

13. Give these lists to the people who want to help you. Remember that it helps others feel important when they can truly be helpful. Without specific ideas about what is meaningful to you, people don't know what to do.

Fear of doing or saying the wrong thing most often keeps people from doing anything.

14. BE KIND TO YOURSELF. Having a difficult time during the holidays does not mean there is anything wrong with you.

Dealing with the death of someone we love is the most painful human experience. It does not mean you are weak, unable to get better, or have emotional limitations. It simply means that there is an enormous "hole" in your heart and life, and it cannot be filled by anyone else or anything else. Treat yourself as kindly and gently as you would treat someone else who is going through this kind of pain. Healing will come.