

Managing the Holidays While Grieving

Holidays can be challenging when we are grieving. Our culture often sets up unrealistic expectations around the holidays that can almost never be met. Knowing, accepting and communicating our limitations to ourselves and to others during the holidays can be helpful - and liberating. Here are a few tips that may support you through the holiday season:

Remember that the anxiety approaching the holiday or holiday season can sometimes be more difficult to manage than the holiday itself. Self-care prior to the holiday season and sensitivity to your own needs and those of your children and family at this time may enable you to approach the season in a proactive – as opposed to reactive – manner.

Deep breathing, rest, and drinking plenty of water can help to sustain the body during times of stress. The stresses of the season can take a toll on our bodies, so conscientiousness around tending to our physical needs can be important.

Allow yourself to feel whatever you need to - sad, happy, angry, confused, joyful, ambivalent, lonely, guilty, relieved, uncertain, passionate, comforted, dissatisfied, grateful, grumpy, energized, etc. There is no right or wrong way to feel; and your feelings may change - sometimes quickly.

Remember that everyone grieves differently. Some members of your family may need to be active, open and vocal in their grief while others may need to be quieter, more solemn or less active.

Know that you have choices. Some families like to maintain long-held traditions as a source of comfort, security and predictability. Others prefer to change the routine and to create new traditions. Still others opt for preserving some traditions while modifying or dispensing with others. Remember that if you try something at the holidays this year and you are not satisfied with the results, you may try something different later on.

Clear, open and honest communication about feelings, needs and activities can alleviate confusion and can help to manage expectations. For example, there may be traditions that the deceased person carried out. You and your family may wish to discuss how this tradition will be handled now. Everyone may not agree, but an open, honest and heartfelt family discussion at least allows everyone to provide thoughts, opinions and feelings about this, and it makes room for potential compromise around other issues that may arise too.

Realize that you may need to have some time alone during the holiday season. It may be helpful to have a friend or family member who can care for your children for an hour or so while you take a walk, read, exercise, journal or otherwise care for yourself.

Again, you have choices! Sometimes getting input from your children - or extended family members - can help when deciding what to do on holidays. Sometimes, however, you may need to set clear boundaries with these same individuals. Simple, honest, and genuine communication around your needs and your family's needs may help in setting these boundaries. Clear and compassionate boundaries can help to navigate the pressures you may feel from others to do things simply because they want you to.

Set small and manageable goals for yourself, especially regarding things like shopping, wrapping, decorating, cooking, cleaning and entertaining. You may wish to ask others for assistance and clearly divide up tasks among family members and friends who are reliable and who want to lend a hand. This can both help you and can allow others to feel useful and supportive.

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Rituals may be comforting during the holiday season. This can be as simple as lighting a candle in remembrance of the person or placing a picture of the person out where you (and possibly others) can see it. Some find consolation in visiting the deceased person's gravesite or place of repose. As well, some families create a "memory box" by decorating it with seasonal wrapping paper. The box has a slit in the top and individuals can write down memories of the deceased person and place them in the box. There may be a time set aside to pull out the memories and to read and talk about them. As well, playing music that the deceased person enjoyed and/or making/eating foods that they liked are also rituals that can provide a source of connection and comfort.

Having a time to share about the deceased person may also be comforting. Sharing thoughts, loving memories and/or stories can provide a sense that the person is still involved in the holiday or holiday season.

Know that some people may do or say things that are not helpful to your grieving process during the holidays. Usually there is no malicious intent involved here, and often these individuals are simply not sure what to say, what to do, or how to provide support. Nevertheless, it may happen. Having a supportive person (or persons) available to whom you can express your feelings around this could be helpful. Journaling and/or any other form of creative expression also can allow feelings to be expressed in a constructive way.

If it suits you, do something in memory of the person who died. Volunteering to help others, delivering food, visiting the homebound, donating money to a worthy charity (or one to which the deceased person had a special affiliation), etc. are all worthwhile activities that can be done with the memory of the person in mind.

Plan ahead when possible and to the extent that you realistically can. While planning may be challenging, it can be helpful to know ahead of time what your plans are going to be. Inform whomever you will be with that you may need to "take a breather" - or time for yourself - or that you may need to tend to the needs of your children during this time.

Remember that your children may need the same level of flexibility that you do. Allowing children some "down time," quiet time, or alone time may be helpful during the busy holiday season. Allowing age-appropriate choices enables children and teens to feel that they have some say over what is happening during what can often be a hectic and emotionally-charged time.

Realize that experiencing happiness and/or joy does not mean that you are not grieving or that you no longer love or respect the deceased individual. You may have several different feelings happening at the same time, and moments of happiness and joy may accompany sadness, anger, confusion or any other feeling.

Remember that the holidays are finite. They do come to an end. Self-care, genuine support from others, clear and loving communication, setting boundaries, and keeping reasonable expectations of ourselves and of others can facilitate a safe and healthy grieving process during the holidays.