

Coping with the Holidays After the Death of a Loved One

By Janice Harris Lord

When Grief Comes Home for the Holidays

Many among us have struggled with the cloud of sadness that hangs over the holidays after a loved one has died. If the person was killed, the onslaught of holiday cheer may seem too much to bear. Holidays can give rise to new or returning bouts of depression, panic attacks, and other forms of anxiety for those whose lives have been affected.

Family members, friends, and work colleagues often re-experience life-changing trauma through flashbacks, nightmares, and overwhelming sadness. Some have trouble sleeping, while others don't want to get out of bed. Tears come easily, often when least expected. Old ailments, including headaches, gastro-intestinal problems, and aches and pain may return.

Families who have made this difficult journey offer the following suggestions to help those who may be just starting down this path. Many were surprised to discover that the anticipation of a holiday without a friend or family member can be harder than the actual holiday itself. Holidays can be *manageable if you take charge of the season, rather than letting it take charge of you.*

Change Traditions

Trying to make this holiday seem like holidays of the past will only intensify the difference. Gather the family together early and decide which traditions you want to keep and which ones you want to let go. Change holiday plans to accommodate the needs and wishes of those who are hurting the most.

Create a Special Tribute

Some families light a special candle and place it on a holiday table to honor the memory of a loved one. Others keep a chair empty and place a flower or another memorial on the seat. Some write treasured remembrances and place them on a special plate or in a bowl for those who wish to read them.

Plan Where to Spend the Holidays

Many people think going away will make the holidays easier. This may be helpful if you are traveling to a place where you will feel loved and nurtured. However, if travel is arranged as a means of trying to *avoid* the holiday atmosphere, remember that American holidays are celebrated throughout this country and in many parts of the world. It is impossible to escape holiday reminders.

Balance Solitude with Sociability

Rest and solitude can help renew strength. Friends and family, however, can be a wonderful source of support, especially if they accept you as you are and do not tell you how they think you should feel, or that they “understand” how you feel. If you are invited to holiday outings, try to go. Attend musical or other cultural events that lift your spirits. You may surprise yourself by enjoying special outings, even if you feel like crying later.

Relive Fond Memories

It is a heavy and unrealistic burden to go through the holidays pretending that nothing has happened. Think about holiday seasons you have enjoyed in the past and identify memories you want to hold in your heart forever. No one can take those away from you. Celebrate them and be grateful. If feelings of sadness pop up at inappropriate times, such as at work or in a public gathering, try thinking about what you *have* rather than what you no longer have. Focus on the blessing of the memories in your heart.

Set Aside Some “Letting Go” Time

Schedule time to be alone and release sad and lonely pent-up feelings. You may want to cry or write about your thoughts and feelings. You may choose to write a letter to say “goodbye,” “I love you,” or “I’m sorry.” Even though it may feel strange, allow your loved one to write back to you through your pen. You may be surprised at what you write. By setting aside special times to allow painful feelings to surface, it becomes easier to postpone expressing them in public.

Counter the Conspiracy of Silence

Family members may consciously or unconsciously conspire to avoid mentioning the death. This is usually a well-intentioned but misguided attempt to protect your feelings. If this seems to be happening, take the initiative and talk to your family about the importance of talking openly about what has happened. Encourage them to tell stories about your loved one and to look for opportunities to refer to him or her by name.

Notice the Positive

Some people conclude that facing the holidays is simply “awful.” By deciding prematurely that “everything about life is awful,” you are generalizing irrationally from your personal tragedy. Although you may have difficult times during the holidays, you also may experience joy. Accept the love and care of others. Reach out to someone else who is suffering or hurting. Give yourself permission to feel sad *and* to experience joy.

Find a Creative Outlet

If you have difficulty talking about your feelings, look for a creative way to express yourself. Write a memorial poem or story that you can share with others. Buy watercolors or oils and put your feelings on paper or canvas, even if it’s only splashes of color. Contribute to a favorite charity or organization in your loved one’s memory, either financially or by volunteering to help. Buy gifts to take to less fortunate children, a hospital, or a nursing home.

Remember the Children

Listen to them. Celebrate them. Cherish them.

Children may have deep feelings that can be overlooked if you spend all your time focusing on yourself. Putting up holiday decorations can be a draining emotional experience, but recognize the significance of these symbols to children. A friend or relative likely will be happy to help you decorate or purchase and wrap gifts. Also, consider shopping on-line as an alternative to the frenzy of mall shopping, but don't try to "buy" your way out of sad feelings.

Protect Your Health

Physical and emotional stress changes the chemical balance in your system and can make you ill. Eat healthy food and avoid over-indulging in sweets. Drink plenty of water, even if you don't feel thirsty. Avoid alcohol, which can be a depressant. Take a good multi-vitamin. Get seven to eight hours of sleep each night. Talk with your doctor about an antidepressant or anti-anxiety medication if you think it will help. If you are unsure about how the medication will affect you, talk to your doctor about your concerns.

Utilize Available Resources

People of faith are encouraged to observe services and rituals offered by their church, synagogue or temple, mosque, or other faith community. Many "veterans of faith" can offer you serenity, a quiet presence, and healing wisdom. You may want to look for a support group of persons who have suffered similar experiences. The Mental Health Association in most communities has a list of these groups. If one oriented toward traumatic death is not available in your area, establish your own short-term group and focus on getting through the holidays. The most valuable helper is usually someone who shares a common experience or understands something about what you're going through. Spend as much time as possible with the people you love the most.

Most important, remember that *you can't change the past, but you can take charge of the present, and shape the future*. Total recovery may not be possible, but what you make of your trauma can be largely up to you.

*Written by Janice Harris Lord, who is a licensed clinical social worker (LCSW-ACSW) and professional counselor (LPC) in Texas. She is the author of **Goodbyes: The Many Faces of Grief Following A Traumatic Death**.*

.