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Coping with Holidays and Family Celebrations

When a loved one has died, holidays, anniversaries, and birthdays inevitably bring fresh memories and 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 totally 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

Anniversaries or Birthdays

For wedding anniversaries or your loved one's birthday:

- Can you still celebrate it? Of course, if you want to.
- What can you do? Cake, balloons, party, dinner, or a gift to a special person (if it is OK with the rest of the family). But be careful if young children are involved. There is "magic" in birthdays and they may fantasize that their loved one would surely come back for his or her birthday.
- For the first anniversary of your loved one's death, let people know that the day is coming up; don't assume it will be remembered, or you could be bitterly disappointed.
- Plan what you want to do on that day: visit the cemetery, take a trip out of town, visit your place of worship, or spend a quiet evening with close friends.

Special Family Occasions

Family celebrations, such as annual reunions and vacations, family weddings and funerals, christenings and graduations, and a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, can be difficult for a number of reasons:

- Pictures are brought out and shared. If you want to, bring out your own if it feels right.
- Hushed conversations-you may walk into a room that suddenly gets quiet. You suspect that others have been talking about you. This may not be true; we are very sensitive when we are grieving, and it is easy to come to the wrong conclusion. However, you can bring up the name of your loved one to let others know it is okay to talk about him or her.
- It may be painful to attend a particular function, such as a wedding when your spouse has just died. If you find it too difficult to attend, say so and send your regrets. If you feel you must go, explain that you will be there but are not sure you will be able to stay. Make sure you have a friend who can leave with you. If possible, sit on the fringe of the function so you can slip out easily.

The following activities will help you keep your loved one part of a special occasion:

- Allow some time to feel sad. Have a good cry if you need to.
- Be careful with excessive use of alcohol or medications.
- Try to keep on a routine. Eat as well as you can, get rest, and keep up with your exercise program.
- If you need some quiet time, take it.
- Some people feel that a change of pace is more helpful than old familiar traditions. Do you want to do something entirely different, such as spend the holiday at the beach or in the mountains where you won't be so acutely reminded of your loved one's absence? Sometimes new traditions may develop.
- Set priorities! Grief is exhausting; know that you may tire quickly and save your energy for the most important things.
- If you aren't up to a large family affair, have a scaled-down event with a few close family members or friends.
- Delegate! Let others share the workload by helping with decorations and preparing food.
- Be prepared to receive correspondence from friends who have not heard of the death and may inquire about your loved one's health or activities.
- If you are by yourself, volunteer to work that day, giving your co-workers the day off to be with their families.
- Light a special candle to honor your loved one.
- Special prayers can be said in memory of your loved one.
- Look for a lecture or workshop on how to get through the holidays.

- Again, know that the anticipation of a holiday or family event often may be more difficult than the actual day.
- Give yourself something to look forward to after the holiday.
- At a family gathering, place a decorated box or a basket near the door. As people arrive, ask them to write a memory of your loved one on a piece of paper and leave it there. At some point during the day, read these memories. It can comfort you and encourage others to share their memories.
- Invite people to write messages on biodegradable helium balloons, then take the balloons outside and invite people to share what they have written. You might sing a song or play meaningful music, then let the balloons go.
- At dinner, make a toast to the person who has died and invite others to do the same.
- During a quiet time, get out old magazines, paper, scissors, and glue, and invite people to make a collage by cutting out pictures and words that remind them of the person who has died. Even though people may hesitate to do this project, it is always a favorite.
- Get out the box of old pictures and start looking at them. People will not be able to resist making comments and sharing stories.
- This might be the time to share some personal belongings of your loved one with family and friends. Make sure people know you are going to do this ahead of time so there won't be an awkward silence. You might consider having a basket of gifts waiting for your family or friends—gifts from your loved one to each person.
- A special table may be set and guests invited to bring in pictures or keepsakes. It will encourage people to talk and to share memories.

Holidays and family occasions are high stressors under any situation. If you are feeling overwhelmed, find a professional you can talk to, or have a family meeting to alter plans. You may be pleasantly surprised that the holidays and other occasions turn out to be very special in spite of your concerns.

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