

# Managing the Holiday Season Support for Grievers



Bereavement Support Group  
Sea to Sky Hospice Society  
[www.seatoskyhospicesociety.ca](http://www.seatoskyhospicesociety.ca)



## GETTING THROUGH THE HOLIDAYS

When our loved one dies, we grieve not only for that individual but also for the life we used to have, the love that special someone gave us, and all the memorable times we spent together. Perhaps there is no time of the year when we are more aware of the empty space our dear one has left behind than during the holiday season.

Holidays can create feelings of dread and anxiety in those who are bereaved. The clichéd images of family togetherness and the often-unrealistic expectations of a season filled with picture-perfect, joyful gatherings can cause tremendous stress for those who are *not* grieving, let alone for those in the midst of the painful, isolating experience of loss.

Holidays by nature are filled with nostalgia and tradition, but in grief, even the happiest memories can hurt. When we are in the midst of pain, and the rest of the world wants to give thanks and celebrate, we need to find ways to manage our pain and get through the season with a minimum of stress.

### **Here are some useful suggestions for coping with the holidays:**

**Have a family meeting.** List all the things you ordinarily do for the holidays (sending greeting cards, decorating the house, stringing outdoor lights, putting up a tree, holiday baking, entertaining business associates, buying something special to wear, going to parties, visiting friends, exchanging gifts, preparing a big meal, etc.) Decide together what's important to each of you, what you want to do this year, what you can let go of, and what you can do differently. For each task on the list, ask yourself these questions: *Would the holidays be the holidays without doing this? Is this something I really want to do? Do I do it freely, or out of habit or tradition? Is it a one-person job, or can it be a group effort? Who is responsible for getting it done? Do I really like doing it?*



**Do some things differently this year.** Trying to recreate the past may remind you all the more that your loved one is missing. This year, try celebrating the holidays in a totally different way. Nothing is the same as it used to be anyway. Go to a restaurant. Visit relatives or friends. Travel somewhere you've never gone before. If you decide to put up a tree, put it in a different location, and make or buy different decorations. Hang a stocking in your loved one's memory, and ask each family member to express their thoughts and feelings by writing a note to, from, or about your loved one, and place the messages in that special stocking for everyone to read. Buy a poinsettia for your home as a living memorial to your loved one for the holiday season.

**\*\*We realize this particular year some of these options are not available to us due to COVID 19; however, the idea is still available. Perhaps this year you take a walk on Christmas Eve or Christmas morning, take time for a special remembering ritual – candle lighting or stones in the river, maybe jammies all day, and watch your favourite movies!**

**Do other things more simply.** You do not have to discard all your old traditions forever, but you can choose to observe the holidays on a smaller scale this year.

**Take good care of yourself.** Build time in your day to relax, even if you are having trouble sleeping. Eat nourishing, healthy meals, and if you have lost your appetite, eat smaller portions more frequently throughout the day. (Sweet, sugary foods are everywhere, but be aware that too much sugar will deplete what little energy you have.) Get some daily exercise, even if it is just a walk around the block. Avoid drinking alcohol, which intensifies depression and disrupts normal sleep.

**Just do it.** We all know that we ought to think positively, eat right, exercise more, and get enough rest — but grief by its very nature robs us of the energy we need to do all



those good and healthy things. Accept that in spite of what we know, it is often very hard to do what is good for us—then do it anyway. Do not wait until you feel like doing it.

**Pay attention to yourself.** Notice what you are feeling and what it is you need. Feelings demand expression, and when we acknowledge them and let them out, they go away. Feelings that are "stuffed" do not go anywhere; they may fester and get worse. If you need help from others, do not expect them to read your mind. It is okay to ask for what you need. Besides, doing a favor for you during the holidays may make them feel better, too. Be patient and gentle with yourself and with others as well.

**Expect to feel some pain.** Plan on feeling sad at certain moments throughout the season, and let the feelings come. Experience the pain and tears, deal with them, and then let them go. Have faith that you will get through this and that you will survive.

**Seek support from others.** Grieving is hard work, and should not be done alone. You need to share your experience with someone who understands the pain of your loss.

**Give something of yourself to others.** As alone as you may feel in your grief, one of the most healing things you can do for yourself is to be with other people, especially during the holidays. Caring for and giving to others will nourish and sustain you and help you feel better about yourself. If you can bring yourself to do so, visit someone in a nursing home, or volunteer your time at your church, synagogue, or animal shelter. Do whatever you can, and let it be enough.

## **GRIEF DURING THE HOLIDAYS**

The pain we experience when we lose someone we love is more intense during special days. The expectation of relaxation, happiness and celebration makes a sharp contrast to the pain of loss. Nothing can change our reality but there are some things to do to manage grief and help us to cope.

### **1. Plan ahead –**

Decide in advance how the special day or days will be spent. However, be flexible if you find things are not working out as expected. The plan was made to help, not to cause more distress. So, be realistic.

### **2. Talk about your Grief –**

Friends and family do not always understand that your loved one is never out of your mind. Try to give your sorrow words, or write them in a journal. It is healthy to share your memories both happy and sad with people who care.

### **3. We have tears for a purpose –**

Scientists speculate that tears contain a component that has the effect of improving our emotional state. However it works, experience tells us that crying is healing. If you do not feel comfortable crying in the presence of others, allow time to cry alone. It will relieve the pressure and help you to control your grief in social settings. Holidays are arbitrary but your grief has a life of its own and will not always allow you to put it on hold.

### **4. Re-evaluate family traditions –**

This may help to blunt the sharp sad memories of how things used to be. Consider altering the way things have always been done. Design new rituals and traditions, or do something symbolic to memorialize your loved one.

**5. You are the best authority on your Grief –**

During the holidays, well meaning friends may try to help by keeping you busy or making sure you are never alone. It is important for you to determine for yourself what is best. Discuss your wishes with someone you trust. It will help clarify your needs and make it easier to explain what your limits are.

**6. Spend time with people you trust –**

Try not to isolate yourself with your feelings. Friends who do not judge your behaviour, who allow you to talk about your grief and accept your feelings are invaluable. Ask them to help you guard against wearing them out! You will need to save their valuable help for the days ahead.

**7. Recognize your physical and psychological limitations –**

Most people experience fatigue during grief. Do not hesitate to excuse yourself from commitments you feel too tired or sad to attend. Keeping busy has its uses but also risks delaying or avoiding sadness that must be experienced to heal. Avoid places, situations and people you believe may cause you stress or anxiety. Instead, allow time for simple activities that sooth, relax, and provide creative outlets of your own choosing. Allow yourself to just “be”.

**8. Use all resources that are available to you –**

If you have a faith or religion that gives you comfort, this is a time to depend on it. A vacation in a new environment is not necessarily avoidance of a grief and can help you feel alive again and somewhat involved with life. Sharing feelings with others, even strangers, who have had similar experience can give perspective and assure you that you will survive. Grief counseling in groups or individually can assist you in understanding your grief, and help you to cope with its manifestations. Above all, be kind to yourself and know that your pain is entirely appropriate, considering your loss.

*Grief comes as a result of love & is a tribute to your relationships*

Rituals help you throughout your life to deal with feelings aroused by a loss. They are specific behaviours or activities that give symbolic expression to certain feeling and thoughts.

Rituals can provide a structured way to recall the lost relationship and to make some statements about your feelings. They have therapeutic properties that help you in your grief work by changing your perception of the reality of the loss. All rituals have a preparatory phase, an experiencing phase and an ending phase. Each phase has symbols and meanings that are relevant to each phase, to the subsequent phases, and to the outcome.

### **How to Create Your Own Ritual**

Decide the format of the ritual: they can be informal or formal, frequent or infrequent, done once or repeated, done alone or in groups, in imagination or actuality, simple or elaborate.

1. Decide what you want to express and the behaviour that would best do this.
2. It should be tailored to your individual needs and be meaningful to you.
3. Prepare yourself inwardly, e.g., meditation, fasting, etc.
4. Do the ritual without judgment or evaluation of it or yourself.
5. Close by reflecting on what you have done; become aware of your body sensations. Do you have a sense of completion?
6. Ask yourself if you need to repeat this one or design a new ritual to facilitate your healing process.

*“My grief says that I dared to love, that I allowed another to enter the very core of my being and find a home in my heart. Grief is akin to praise; it is how the soul recounts the depth to which someone has touched our lives. To love is to accept the rites of grief.”*  
— Francis Weller, *The Wild Edge of Sorrow: Rituals of Renewal and the Sacred Work of Grief*

**Some Examples of Rituals Are:**

- visualization/meditation
- dream work
- prayer
- journaling/poetry
- letter writing/writing fairy tales
- art work/storytelling (keeping history alive)
- chanting/singing/listening to music
- to allow the child to review his life
- reading other people's stories of loss
- role playing
- using incense and burning herbs
- reviewing photographs and old letters
- bodywork for emotional release
- lighting candles
- creating a memory book
- creating a collage of your life
- mementos – giving some away or choosing some for yourself
- planting a tree or bush
- donating a park bench with memorial plaque on it
- get involved in a cause (e.g. help to change law, etc.)
- moving wedding rings to other hand or redesigning them
- redecorating your bedroom
- creating a scholarship or bursary in the loved one's name
- create a quilt or pillow out of treasured fabric, etc.
- collecting stories about the loved one from friends
- burying or burning letters
- sweat lodges or saunas
- using balloons
- funerals
- memorial services
- spreading ashes
- wearing black
- religious ceremonies
- non-religious gatherings, attending a wake
- donation of body parts
- sending card and letters to bereaved persons
- sending flowers, donations
- putting hair of the loved one in a mourning brooch
- wearing clothes or jewelry of loved one
- visiting the cemetery or a place to go and remember loved one
- creating a death mask
- sharing stories with friends about your anniversary dates

Shared by the Living Through Loss Counselling Society of B.C.