



Kaiser Hospice Grief Support Tip Sheet:

COPING WITH THE HOLIDAYS

Tips for Handling Holidays and Other Special Days

When someone wishes you “*Happy Holidays!*” do you cringe? You mumble a reply in the endless chore of being polite. Privately, you are concerned that you will barely survive the holidays. You might even prefer to skip the whole thing. You are a grieving person. Following are some tips.

In weather cold, dark and wet, people are naturally inclined to slow down, to withdraw, and to hole up. Over long periods, like winter, a holiday or two has a proper place, if just to break the tedium. However, American culture starts with Halloween, then Thanksgiving, then Christmas or Hanukkah or Kwanzaa or other winter holidays, then New Year’s Eve, then the Super Bowl –a relentless parade of festivity which can leave grieving people feeling depleted, even exhausted. What to do?

Be ruthless about self care. The word “ruthless” is used intentionally. You have to be a warrior to stand up to the whole culture, let alone your family. This year do less yourself; let others do more. For example, instead of doing the Christmas tree, assign this task to someone else. Instead of buying each child a present, buy a group present. They will understand and appreciate your self care. Structure your holiday time. Be honest about your physical and psychological limits. Then honor your limits. Just Say “No” to unnecessary stress. Err on the side of doing too little. Rest, relax, and exercise more than usual.

Include Your Loss during the holidays.

Talk about your grief at appropriate times. This may mean you talk with some people and not with others. Know that many others just do not understand how mourning is for you. They are not really *unwilling* to understand; they are *unable* to understand because they do not have your actual experience. They may be people outside the family who have not experienced the loss of a loved one for a long time. They may even be other family members whose relationship with the one you lost differs from yours. Everyone grieves differently. Avoid people who drain you; seek supportive, comforting people. Finding someone who is willing to *listen* would be good; finding the person who can make you *feel heard* is even better. When talking with someone, invoke the Actual Name of the person you lost. Talking is a good start; making it personal and real is even better. Seek real connection. Many people find this in a grief support group.

How to Celebrate with Friends and Family. Holidays are about tradition. Traditions ground us and restore our spirit. However, for grieving people traditions may have changed, not completely, but significantly. Accept that “family” has now changed and be with *this* family. Especially, plan ahead for family gatherings. What would be best for you? If possible, select a friend or family member to be your confidant. Discussing your wishes with them ahead of time will help you establish realistic goals and expectations. Even try considering big changes for this year. Instead of chopping down a tree you might go to Las Vegas or Hawaii or Paris. Some people even

find skipping the holiday is the best choice. The point is to open your imagination to what you really want and need. Remember to be flexible. Nothing needs to be permanent. If you try a new tradition this year and it doesn't feel right, you can do it differently next year.

Use the holidays to renew your resources for living. Walk in the woods; watch the sunset. Take time to embrace your treasure of memories. If you are a person of faith, draw upon your tradition and express your faith. If you don't have such a community or don't have a local family, try volunteering to provide service to others. The gift of giving can create a temporary community and warm your heart.

The bottom line: make a plan. Of course a plan will not remove your grief. A plan may help forestall some difficult experiences and provide some comforting experiences. To help you get started, try completing the following exercise for the holidays. Pick situations that you are looking forward to or are concerned about, e.g., shopping for gifts, decorating for the holidays, a family dinner or dinner alone, New Year's Eve without your loved one. Use these principles and tips to imagine how you might approach these situations differently this year.

Situation #1

This year I will miss _____
This year I fear that _____
This year I wish that _____
So, I plan to _____

Repeat the exercise for several situations. Save this form and use it again next year. Perhaps the greatest value of a plan is to put you back in touch with your will, your sense of acting in and on the world, and creating your new life including your loss.

By Roy Gesley

Please remember that we are here to help if you have any questions or need additional information:

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FAMILY TRADITIONS

Traditions bind families and societies together, but changing our traditions to suit our current needs also makes sense. When a loved one has died, our family is forever changed.

Sometimes it helps to build on tradition, or if tradition is too painful, create a new one. Remember if you try something new and it doesn't work, you don't have to do it again.

Some ideas:

- ❖ Write a letter, grief journal or "unsent letter" expressing your feelings at this time. After you compose the letter, place it in a memory box, album or drawer. You may also leave it at the memorial site or burn it and let the ashes rise.
- ❖ Memory Tree- everyone in the family can make an ornament in your loved one's memory
- ❖ Make their favorite foods
- ❖ Moment of Silence
- ❖ "The chair where my grandfather sat is always given to the youngest child to designate the continuity of the generations"
- ❖ Special prayer or toast
- ❖ Visit/decorate the grave site
- ❖ Diagram the family tree
- ❖ Make or review a scrapbook with drawings or pictures
- ❖ Set a special place at dinner. Have everyone write a letter and place it on the loved one's plate
- ❖ Or place a flower on that person's plate
- ❖ Hang a stocking for your loved one and have everyone place a favorite memory in it
- ❖ Make a donation or do volunteer work in memory of your loved one
- ❖ Light a candle

By Stephanie Eckhaus