

Coping With Grief During the Holidays

Prayer (read slowly, take slow steady breaths between each line)

Take a deep breath and imagine you are breathing in God's love;

- Breathe in God's love and breathe out tension and anxiety
- Breathe in God's love and breathe out fear
- Breathe in God's love and breathe out negativity
- Breathe in God's love and breathe out anger or resentment
- Breathe in God's love and breathe out worry
- Breathe in God's love and breathe out useless guilt
- Breathe in God's love and breathe out questions or doubts
- Breathe in God's love and breathe out hatred or prejudice
- Breathe in God's love and breathe out judgmental attitudes
- Breathe in God's love and breathe out anything in you that is not of God

Now breathe quietly for a few moments and imagine God's love flowing through every part of you. Ask God for comfort, for healing and for hope, in Jesus' name, Amen.

What is Grief

When we lose a loved one, someone we have cared for deeply, we are left with a grief that can paralyze us emotionally for a long time. People we love are a part of us. Our thinking, feeling and acting are codetermined by them; our fathers, our mothers, our husbands, our wives, our children, our friends....they are all living in our hearts. When they die a part of us has to die, too. That is what grief is. It is the slow and painful departure of someone who has become an intimate part of us. When Christmas, a new year, a birthday or an anniversary comes, we feel deeply the absence of our loved ones. Sometimes it takes a full year of these "firsts" to occur before our hearts begin to heal and the pain of our grief recedes. But even as we move forward and begin to live again, they will remain part of us forever.

Grief...

- is a natural and normal reaction to loss.
- produces physical and emotional responses.
- is the most universal of all human experiences and also the most painful.

No two people will experience a loss in exactly the same way. Your grief will be as individual as your fingerprint. No one can tell you how to grieve. There is no formula for how much a loss will hurt or how long grief will last, so do not compare yourself to others in similar situations.

As time goes on and you allow yourself to feel the pain of loss, your grief will diminish. You will not always feel the way you do now. This does not mean you will forget your loved one; it means you accept their death and are coping with life without them. Even though your relationship with your loved one has changed forever, its existence and your feelings live on forever.

When your loved one dies, you grieve not only for that person, but also for the life you used to have, the love the person gave you and all the special times you spent together. Perhaps there is no time of the year when you're more aware of the empty space your dear one has left behind than during the winter holiday season. But other days can be difficult as well, depending on the memories you've attached to them: Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, Father's Day, Memorial Day, Labor Day, the Fourth of July, a birthday, or any other day that was particularly special to you and your beloved. On such days it may seem to you as if there is no room for celebration; there is only grief.

Holidays and other celebration days can create feelings of dread and anxiety in those who are grieving. The clichéd images of family togetherness and the often unrealistic expectations of a day or 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 you're in the midst of pain, and the rest of the world wants to gather, give thanks and celebrate, you need to find ways to manage your pain and get through the day or the season with a minimum of stress. If you decide to do so, you can choose to embrace a holiday as a special day on which to commemorate your loved one and to celebrate your love for that person. Death ends a life, but it does not end the relationship you have with the one who has died. The bonds of love are never severed by death, and the love you shared will never die either. On any special day, you can find a way to commemorate and honor your loved one, to show that your love is eternal, even if you decide to do so in a very private and personal way.

Coping Ideas:

Do what feels right. It's up to you to decide which activities, traditions or events you can handle. Don't feel obligated to participate in anything that doesn't feel doable. Grieving takes time. You are very vulnerable right now, so all you need to do is get through the day or week or season in a healthy way. Try not to think much beyond that.

Accept your feelings, whatever they might be. Everyone takes his or her own path in grief and mourning. Some may try to avoid sad feelings; others will be bathed in tears. Some feel bad that they aren't up for enjoying a holiday; others feel guilt because they are feeling joy. However you feel, accept it. And accept the inevitable ups and downs. You may feel peaceful one moment and gut-wrenchingly sad the next. Try to stay in tune with how you are feeling and accept the feeling for whatever it is. This will help you get through the holiday without judging yourself or others.

Focus on the kids. Many holidays place special attention on children, and it often helps to focus on their needs. Realize that your choices for getting through the holidays may affect the children in your family. If you withdraw, they may not understand why you don't want to join family festivities. Perhaps you can participate in the family rituals or gatherings that are most important to the kids, and excuse yourself when you reach your limit.

Plan ahead. Sometimes the anticipation is worse than the actual holiday. Create comforting activities in the days approaching a holiday so that you have something to look forward to rather than building up a dread of the pain the holiday could bring. New activities might be easier, but familiar traditions might be comforting as well. Do what feels best for you. Surrounding yourself with positivity can be very helpful.

Scale back. If the thought of many holiday activities feels painful, overwhelming or inappropriate this year, cutting back may help. For example, you might opt for minimal decorations at home and take a break from sending Christmas cards. You could limit parties to small gatherings with your closest friends and family. Do whatever feels safe and comfortable to you. Create realistic expectations for yourself and others, but above all be gentle with yourself.

Do something different. Acknowledge that things have changed; indeed, the holiday will not be the same as it was. Accepting this will help manage expectations. Plan new activities, especially if this is the first holiday after your loss. Go to a new location for family celebrations, change the menu or go out to eat, volunteer, invite friends over, create new memories.

Skip it. If you feel that it will be too much for you and you'd like to simply opt out of participation in a holiday, let family and friends know. But plan alternative comforting activities for yourself and let someone know what you will be doing. It's a good idea to make sure someone checks in with you on that day.

Be prepared for grief triggers. They are everywhere around the holidays, it is just a fact. Thinking about and anticipating triggers can actually make them easier to manage in the moment because you know they are coming and you aren't caught off guard. Look for tips and tools to cope and find balance this holiday. It may be helpful to process all the emotions by recognizing that what you are feeling is normal and expected.

Plan to get some space from the togetherness. Family members are great, friends are great, but it can all get to be a bit much when you are emotionally depleted and muddling through the holidays. It is important to remember that you need time and space to recharge your batteries. You may feel a lot of pressure to participate in holiday events, but try to be aware of your limits and needs. Thinking through your events and creating plans in advance to take breaks (or leave if you need to) can make a huge difference.

Create something that reminds you of your loved one. The benefits of this are two-fold. First, you get to use some creativity, which can help with reducing stress and coping with tough emotions. Second, it allows you to honor and remember your loved one.

Focus on deep breathing. Grief can cause you to feel overcome with mental or emotional stress. When this feeling hits you, take a moment to breathe and focus on the present. Try not to focus on what could have been or what should be. If it's too painful to think about what is good in your present life, just focus on the sound of the deep breaths you're taking. This will help slow down your breathing and feel your emotions without being overcome by them. It will also remind you that you're surviving the grief with each breath you take. That's a victory.

Surround yourself with supportive people. Make sure you have a group of supportive people you can stay connected with during the holiday season. Plan group dinners, movie nights and group activities to help you stay active and focused. Be honest about how you'd like to do things this year. If you want to talk about your loved one, do so and let others know it's okay if they do, too. Take a support person to events and create an "escape plan" together in case you need to bow out quickly.

Know When to Say "No". Anxiety over a time that should be filled with joy is no fun. Symptoms of anxiety can include excessive worry about an outcome, restlessness, and changes in your sleep pattern. Saying "no," decreases your chances of developing holiday related anxiety and increases the energy you'll have for the tasks that are most important to you. If you start to feel guilty about saying, "no," remind yourself that grieving is hard work. It's vital that you take care of yourself physically, mentally and spiritually.

Acknowledge those who have passed on. When we are grieving a loss of someone very close to us, it can be helpful to participate in a related holiday ritual in his or her memory. Some ideas; lighting candles for them, talking about them, buying children's toys or books to donate in their name, dedicating a service to them, planting a tree, making a card or writing a letter, displaying their picture or placing an item of theirs among holiday decorations.

Practice Self-Care

One of the most important things you can give yourself as a gift is self-care. Especially if you suffer from holiday blues or depression, be sure to include time in your schedule to check in with yourself and how you're feeling. Self-care decreases your chance of feeling blue during the holiday season and it increases your ability to survive the holidays.

- **Listen to your body:** If you need to cry, then cry. If you need to sleep, then do so. If you need to talk to someone, seek out someone who will listen. If you need to reminisce, then take the time. It is important for the grieving process that you go with the flow.
- **Lower expectations for yourself:** You can't expect yourself to run at full capacity for some time. Give yourself time to recover. Grieving is hard, emotionally, spiritually and physically. Be gentle with yourself.
- **Let others know what you need from them:** Don't expect others to know what you need. Communicate to family and friends how they can support you. Reach out.

- **Talk to someone:** Get all the support you need. There are bereavement support groups as well as counselors or spiritual advisors who specialize in bereavement counseling.
- **Take the time to do the things you need to do for yourself:** When you feel up to it, engage in activities that are enjoyable. It could be visiting a place you haven't been to in a while, walks in nature, reading, etc.
- **Pamper yourself:** Treat yourself well. Without breaking your budget, do things for yourself that are helpful like walks, being with people who are nurturing to you and inexpensive activities.
- **Keep a journal:** Writing down your thoughts and feelings can help you to validate and work through your grief.
- **Get physical exercise:** If you exercised prior to your loss, try to maintain the same routine. If you did not exercise prior to your loss visit your doctor before embarking on a physical exercise routine. Physical exercise can improve the way you feel.
- **Obtain a proper diet and sleep:** Maintaining a healthy diet and getting proper sleep is essential for functioning as well as you can. If you are having difficulty with either, visit your doctor.
- **Be aware of others' reactions:** Many people do not know how to react appropriately to your grief. Some are more comfortable than others in responding to your situation. Be aware that people have different ideas not only about death, but also about how bereaved individuals should react. Be true to yourself and let others know if they say something inappropriate.

You will survive the holidays.

You may hurt, but you will survive. The holidays may be the worst of your grief time. Eventually, you will heal, and your memories will persist without pain. Meanwhile, it's ok not to have a good time. There may be no way you can make this holiday fun and nothing you want to do. Allow that you may not enjoy the parties, reunions and events of the season. If you are hurting and unable or unwilling to have your attention on anything else, let yourself be.

It is also OK to have a good time, even though you have experienced a loss. You do not have to deny pleasure to yourself or your family. While grieving we may feel guilty about having fun. We may feel that how much we grieve signifies how much we care about the one who died. Not true! Our love is not measured by the extent of our grief.

We are here to walk with you;

- We understand that you have experienced a great loss and we want to be there to help where we can. Everyone eventually experiences a loss and will need support. And we know that grief doesn't end with the funeral, it just begins.
- Healthy resolution of loss requires a person to grieve and mourn.
- Grief is a very real wound or pain. If you have a wound, you know that it takes medicine to help cure it. One form of medicine for grief is support from others.
- It also takes time, patience and work. It can be a lot of work. We call it, "Grief work".
- Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall find comfort". We encourage you to lean into your faith and the community of the church. This is where you will receive comfort.

Prayer

Creator,
if the world were perfect there would be no sorrow,
But it isn't, and sometimes we are sad.

If the world were perfect there would be no tears,
But it isn't, and sometimes we weep.

If the world were perfect there would be no loneliness,
But it isn't, and sometimes we are lonely.

If the world were perfect there would be no despair,
But it isn't, and sometimes we are undone.

If the world were perfect we might not believe in prayer,
But it isn't, and we pray...*Our Father*.....