

Coping with Grief at the Holidays & Other Special Occasions



After someone important dies, holidays throughout the year - and special occasions of all kinds - can be particularly difficult.

The feelings of grief often seem to be intensified during these times. Holidays from Thanksgiving to Memorial Day, from Valentine's Day to Halloween to Mother's or Father's Day, can be traditional times when family or friends get together. Birthdays, anniversaries, and any significant once-in-a-lifetime event are just as special as holidays.

During these times, the togetherness we experience with those around us highlights the absence of the missing one. Memories of past seasons of celebration and fun, of sharing and togetherness, contrast with present feelings of sadness, emptiness, and dread.

For those traditions which have been observed year after year, having the day come around this year without our special person there to help us to celebrate it can feel profoundly incomplete - whether it's the first time without them, or we've already gone through this in previous years.

The fact that these days are special seems to make it worse. Sometimes it is their very specialness itself that hurts. When our person is missing, their absence is all the more noticeable on days like these.

And it's also easy to feel even more set apart- different- during these times. Children and adults can feel alone, outside the circle of fun, laughter, and togetherness. We hope this information offers insight, ideas, and inspiration for grieving families this holiday season, and throughout the year.

"The presence of that absence is everywhere."

-Edna St. Vincent Millay

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Holidays, special days, and the days of anticipation leading up to these days, can bring up their own set of questions, such as:

- What do I do now?
- How will I get through these days without my person?
- Should I act like everything is normal?
- Do I continue with the old traditions?
- Should I do something new?
- Should I celebrate the holiday or special day at all this year?



The following thoughts have been gathered as grieving families have shared their experiences of holidays and other special days.

Be aware that the anticipation of the holiday or other special occasion is often as difficult- or even more difficult- than the day itself.

Embrace your memories. Memories are one of the best legacies that exist after someone dies. Sharing and hearing your memories and your children's memories, crying and laughing together, keeps the person who died a part of these special days.

Take time beforehand to plan out your activities. Focus on your needs, and the needs of your children. Decide with your family what traditions you would like to continue, and traditions you're going to need to let go of this year. Allow your children to be a part of this process. Having a plan can help you from being caught off-guard, but you can also allow flexibility in the plan for the unexpected drop in energy or change of heart. It will take time to discover new meaning for these days.

Talk about your grief, and about the person who has died. Share your feelings and your memories with people you trust. Say the person's name and invite others to do the same.

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Remember your limits. Grieving takes energy. You may find that you have even less energy now than at other times of the year. Be gentle with yourself and your children and allow yourself to take whatever time for yourself you need.

Seek out supportive people. Find those people who accept your feelings, who understand that a holiday or other special day can be more difficult and who allow you to express your feelings. Ask for support.

Don't get caught in unreasonable expectations. Losses and separations of all kinds make holidays difficult in lots of ways. For many of us, special days produce more stress and pain than joy. Considering this, be gentle with yourself. There is no perfect way—only the best way that you can manage at this time.

**“Have patience with all the world,
but first of all with yourself.”**

-Francis de Sales

Remember that everyone grieves differently - even within the same family. Allow everyone in the family to express their desires for the special day. If some family members can't bear to even see decorations and other members would like to make things as much like the 'old days' as possible, try to see how much each person's wishes can be accommodated. In many cases, the choices do not have to be all or nothing. Be respectful of each other's grief and hopes.

Allow children and adolescents space to grieve in their own way. Be prepared for any type of reaction from children. Be patient with anger or meanness, but also be careful of a child trying to “be strong” for you. They need to grieve as well. Give kids space when they need it, alone or with the support and security of friends.

Remember that your grief is important and unique. Be patient with yourself, and don't let anyone take your grief away. And, know that there are times, despite your best efforts, that nothing will seem to work. Be gentle with yourself, and with your children.

Activities & Conversations for the Holiday Season & Special Occasions

The season from Thanksgiving through New Year often emphasizes family - regardless of which holidays, faith, or culture you honor - and creates a heightened awareness of who is missing at the table. It is important to recognize and honor our traditions and family while remembering the relationship and memories of those who have died.

We encourage you to share conversations and incorporate activities about your person during the holiday season and throughout the year for any special occasion.



Memory Candle. Decorate a large cylinder candle with various materials such as self-adhesive foam letters, shapes, or jewels. Consider including photos of your person and family, written words or phrases, or other images. Create a ritual when lighting this candle to remember your person.

Collage Book. Staple blank pages together to make a booklet. Have each member create their own book. Consider including things like what the last holiday spent with the person who died looked like, what you imagine this holiday looking like, gifts your person gave you, and what you picture the future to be.

Remember when... Place several photos of your person in a basket. Gather family and take turns sharing photos, and telling stories about the person who died.

Incorporating. Ask family members how they would like to include the person who has died. You could add a portrait or person item to the decorations, position an empty chair at the table, cook their favorite meal, or display any meaningful item. Look for ways to honor and remembers you person as you go throughout the holiday season.

Table Talk. Gathered around the table may be the time when it is most obvious your person is missing. It may also be a great setting for meaningful conversation. Clip out the questions on the next page to use as conversation starters during the holiday season or any special occasion.



Adapted from Highmark Caring Place and the National Alliance of Children's Grief.

Conversation Starters

(adapted from the National Alliance of Children's Grief)

About Your Person

What is your favorite memory of ____?

What was their favorite holiday food?

What was something they added to the holiday?

What could they do better than anyone else?

If you could say something to them now, what would you say?

What will you always remember about them?

What was their favorite holiday or holiday tradition?

What do you wish they knew about you today?

What trips, travel, or vacations with them do you remember?

What was the best time you ever had with them?

About You

What is your favorite part of the holiday season?

What do you like least about the holiday season?

What are you looking forward to this holiday season?

What will be the most difficult thing about the holidays without your person?

What can you do to feel close to your person this holiday season?

Are there any traditions you want to change this year?

Are there any traditions you want to keep the same?