

Grief and the “holidays” Checklist

How can there be “happy holidays” when one has experienced the loss of a loved one? The idealized image of family togetherness over the holiday season is more than unrealistic for a grieving family. The emptiness and dread of the winter holidays are additionally foreboding. The lights, ornaments, our own and other’s expectations and critical voices in our head that tell us we should be doing always it seems, more than can be accomplished. These aspects add clutter and pressure to the confused mass of decisions, memories, guilt and anger associated with grief. The darkness of shorter days and the inclement weather of this season in the Northern Hemisphere contribute to the problem for many people.

Recognition of the fact that holidays are approaching, may allow a person or family to move through these special occasions a bit more easily. It is especially important to anticipate the season with some forethought especially in families that do not have strong, cultural traditions. I have found attending a “getting through the holidays event” offered by the local hospice or other groups very helpful in keeping holiday plans realistic,

Thanksgiving	Recent death makes it hard to feel thankful about anything.
Chanukah	The focus on light increases awareness of the darkness felt in grief.
Christmas	At a time when families are traditionally together, the feeling of loss and loneliness can be overwhelming.
Kwanzaa	This ten-day African-roots-based harvest and year termination festival uses light and the “unity cup” to acknowledge the death of loved ones during the year.

The clustering and progressiveness of the winter holidays make them particularly difficult. Most other holidays – Father’s Day, Mother’s Day, Valentine’s Day – are perhaps easier to handle because they are scattered throughout the year, unless they fall near the birthday or death anniversary. Remember any holiday may catch you off-guard when you don’t make plans to take care of yourself.

All of these celebrations can be pleasant and growing experiences. Discuss your plans and feelings about the holiday with other family members. This will help keep clearer boundaries on expectations. Remember that grief is a tough climb and a draining experience. Remind yourself that “I have to say in low gear to make it. Let’s keep things simple.” Rather than saying, “I should be. . .”, stop and enjoy a sunset, take a walk, visit with a friend or take a nap.

Consider changing the focus of your holiday celebrations. Adding or deleting traditions or rituals can make this a less painful part of the year.

GENERAL POINTS TO REMEMBER:

1. Plan to be with people you enjoy; avoid difficult people and situations.
2. Choose to do a few things rather than many. Do one at a time.

3. An easy way to simplify the holiday is to ask each person what one aspect or tradition makes each holiday special for him, such as:

- ◆creamed onions for Thanksgiving dinner
- ◆sending Christmas, Chanukah or Kwanzaa cards
- ◆lighting Chanukah, Kwanzaa or Christmas lights
- ◆singing traditional songs or carols
- ◆squash pie for Christmas or Kwanzaa dinner
- ◆chocolate chip cookies for New Year's Day

Build your holiday plans to include these "special" request; keep the rest simple! Spread the word you are spreading out the work! The person who wants cookies can bake them. Help each other. It will likely feel good to do projects together.

5. Keep the holidays focused on those who are living and what is meaningful to them. Decide which traditions and rituals are most important. Keep those if they are in line with your energy level. If not, there is another year. I like to recall: "If it isn't fun or I can't seem to make it fun, I probably don't need to do it."

6. Choose to do activities that bring peace and joy, not pain and chaos. Sit where you can escape gracefully and easily, if you suddenly fell a need to leave.

7. Consider incorporating some simple, new or abandoned traditions from the religious or cultural roots from which your holidays evolved. This can be done even if you are the only participant.

8. Remember that holidays are really found in your heart, joy often comes in reaching out to touch other' lives. Watch for those tiny, happy memories in your thoughts and let them lead you in what you need to do. Try looking to find and cherish the happy moments of each day.

9. Accepting who and where you are is the most loving holiday gift you can give yourself.

10. Other ideas to consider:

- ◆ Write out your feelings about the holidays.
 - What may be the most difficult part of the season for me?*
 - Who are the people who are supportive and "can hear" my grief?*
 - Who and what situations do I need to choose to avoid?*
 - What may likely "push my grief buttons?"*

- ◆Write a holiday letter to the person you miss so much.
- ◆Provide a quiet sharing time for immediate family.
- ◆Have a memory candle burning during meals over the holiday.
- ◆Make a memorial contribution to your favorite charity.

●**WORLD NEIGHBORS** ●**COMPASSIONATE FRIENDS** ●**HOSPICE**

- ◆Menorah Kwanzaa or Christmas candle lighting can be a special time for remembrance of a loved one.
- ◆Make decorations using the name of your loved one as remembrance gifts to others for their own tree. Save one and hang it on your tree.
- ◆A loved keepsake of the deceased can be a precious gift.
- ◆Buy or make a holiday ornament in memory of your loved one.
- ◆Buy or make a gift or toy for someone needy, in a loved one's memory.

- ◆Buy or make a gift or toy for yourself that you can imagine your loved one giving you.
- ◆Buying or making a gift from you and the deceased can be also a touching gesture for others.
- ◆Make a memorial star or form a star in lights on your house to begin lighting the way in the New Year. (We put a ten-foot one on our windmill.)
- ◆Writing a letter or note of appreciation to living loved ones can be a precious gift (possibly the only gift, if you energy is very low.)

A CHECKLIST HELPS ME DECIDE

What and what not to do, who does what and when:

Holiday Dinners

- ◆Have a potluck with family and/or friends at you or someone else's home
- ◆Attend a potluck somewhere else
 - church
 - Compassionate Friends
 - Other support group
- ◆Have a small, simple dinner at home
- ◆Have a dessert potluck
- ◆Go to a restaurant
- ◆Prepare special traditional foods
- ◆Volunteer to help with holiday dinner
 - At church
 - at "people's kitchen"

Cards

- ◆send no holiday cards
 - ◆send a holiday letter
 - ◆send a few
- Note: " We found it easiest to send a duplicated letter or note explaining the death. Include a memorial card in the envelope. Sending them early allows people to resend appropriately without embarrassment of not being aware of the death. It creates less stress for us to prepare letters or notes and address envelopes early in November. Send them Thanksgiving weekend.*

Shopping (*make list of people and possible gifts as you think about shopping; this relieves stress*)

- ◆buy no gifts; instead, make donations to a charity (in the friend's or family member's name)
- ◆buy a few gifts
- ◆buy a gift for everyone in the family
- ◆buy something special to wear for the holidays
- ◆select gifts for co-workers and teachers
- ◆shop by mail do all shopping in one day, keeping it simple

Holiday baking (*not as much as usual but just a bit with a friend may be fun*)

- ◆cookies
- ◆homemade jams, jellies
- ◆fruitcake

Decorating the house

- ◆A little (*helpful in lifting everyone's holiday spirit*)
- ◆outside your home
- ◆with someone helping you
- ◆selected rooms

A tree

- ◆buy a living tree
- ◆buy one at a tree lot
- ◆cut your own
- ◆put a little one on your loved one's grave.

A holiday trip

- ◆With your family ◆with a friend ◆alone
- ◆go on a dream vacation ◆visit someone you seldom see
- ◆consider getting out in nature; it can generate feelings of renewal

“Going out” on holiday - “going out” on New Year’s Day

- ◆attending traditional; religious services ◆parties
- ◆attending special activities for children ◆dancing

Hang stocking

- ◆None ◆all of the stockings ◆all but one
- ◆Put small gifts for visitors in a special stocking.
- ◆Each person who wishes to can write a note or a favorite holiday memory on a piece of paper and place it in the deceased’s stocking – they can all be read a designated time, possibly after the gifts in the other stockings have been explored.

Doing something for others

- ◆Give a memorial gift to (World Neighbours) in you loved one’s name.
- ◆Give an appreciation gift to (World Neighbours) in the name of the recipient.
- ◆Five a Hospice Tree Light in memory of a deceased friend.
- ◆Give a “love gift” in memory of a child to Compassionate Friends.

Inviting others who might be lonely to share your celebration

- ◆Single persons ◆others who have had a loss and might be alone
- ◆Foreign students ◆out-of-state-students senior citizens