

Helping Grieving Families Through the Holidays



Handling Holidays and Special Events with Intentionality

The holidays, anniversary of the death of a loved one, family birthdays, or other special family events are often days filled with memories and emotions. People perform all kinds of “rituals” for remembering. Some are simple and some are more elaborate. The important thing in approaching these difficult days is intentionality. When a family plans for a special day, talks about it ahead of time, and gives everyone an opportunity to give input, two important things happen:

- The day becomes manageable. If it’s mentionable, then it’s manageable.
- The emotions and energy surrounding the day are dispersed over a period of time rather than concentrated on one day.

So how can a family be intentional?

- Include everyone, even the youngest, in the discussion and planning.
- Begin the conversation enough in advance of the day to give time for everyone to think, process, and be in touch with personal feelings. The planning will probably NOT be a one-time conversation; rather, it will likely entail multiple discussions of varying length. Be sure everyone is given permission to ask questions, think out loud, and talk with the whole family.
- Discuss how you have celebrated these special days in the past. What traditions does the family want to continue? What new or different things would be helpful or fun in a new way?
- Consider what activities you all enjoyed with your loved one. How can these be incorporated? Do you want to acknowledge the memory of your loved one as part of the event? (For some ideas, see the list at the end).
- Make a specific plan. Assign responsibilities; one person does not have to do it alone. This helps everyone to have ownership of the plan and to participate in a meaningful way.
- Remember that each family member will likely be at a different place in their grieving and will express themselves according to their personalities and comfort levels. Be respectful of everyone’s needs and space. Someone may not want to participate, so perhaps he/she could be present, but not expected to say or do anything.

What Creates a Memory?

- A meaningful occasion
- Relationships and closeness
- Repetition
- Sensory experiences (smell, touch, taste, sound, sight)
- Emotions associated with the event

Why Is a “Happy Holiday” Often a Myth?

Whatever emotional patterns of relating or problems that are present in the family will be amplified by expectations for a particular event. The family environment does not magically change just because there is a holiday.





- A happy holiday is not automatic.
- The stereotype of what is “supposed to be” is just that, a stereotype.
- There really is no one perfect holiday event. Avoid the pressure to make it happen at any cost.

Grief is a Natural Response to Loss

The impact of grief is felt by families and therefore also affects family events such as holidays. The greatest fear is losing the memory of the person who died.

There has been a family loss; therefore it needs to be a family decision on how to adjust to that loss.

It is appropriate to ask as a family, “How can we manage grief during the holidays?” and “How do I want to spend my holiday this year?” Gather as a family and discuss the topic. Invite everyone to contribute to the conversation. Let each person have a special role in the process. Keep in mind that holidays often take on a special importance to children, so they should be included in the planning process. Children often feel alone when they are grieving. Not celebrating the holidays as usual can increase their feeling of being different from their peers.

Understanding the Issue at Stake:

- The person has died, not your love for him/her. How is he/she a part of your life at this time? How can he/she be acknowledged during this holiday?
- How do you have fun when your loved one is gone? There might be feelings of guilt for smiling or laughing, or enjoying life. Those feelings may feel disloyal to the deceased.
- Some people may emphasize getting “back to normal;” but normal is not the same now and denies the loss of the loved one.
- Grief can use all of one’s energy, and can initiate a survival mode. There may be no energy left to do a holiday in the usual way.

Ideas for Being Intentional in Acknowledging a Holiday or Special Event:

- Visit the cemetery.
- Look through photo albums and scrapbooks or home videos.
- Have a day of quiet reflection.
- Revisit favorite places.
- Visit relatives and share family stories/memories.
- Get together with other families who have been your friends for a long time and remember your loved one.
- Light a special candle in your loved one’s honor.
- Write letters, poems, songs or draw a picture for your loved one and take it to the cemetery, or place it in a special container or a memory box.
- Have a special mass or worship service in honor of your loved one.
- Make a quilt of memories, symbols, or pictures.
- Purchase or make an ornament or home decoration that symbolizes your relationship or their life, or your loved one’s hobby.





- Start a scholarship in their name, or make a donation to an organization that was important to them in their honor.
- Plant a tree or plant in your loved one's honor.
- Do a community service project in honor of your loved one, or volunteer in some way.
- Take a trip.
- Designate a special container (such as a memory box, Christmas stocking, or holiday basket) for family members to put notes or memories in.
- Ask family members and friends to send you a story of their favorite memory of your loved one, and compile them all into a book to be read or given to others at the event.

Take Care of Yourself:

- Give yourself permission to grieve... that means no "shoulds."
- Recognize there will be challenges and changes in your faith structure.
- Spend your time with safe, loving, and supportive (listening) people.
- Let friends help. Let all family members contribute. Ask for help if needed.

Summary:

- Acknowledge that the holidays will be different this year.
- Be intentional: determine what each family member needs and wants. How can this be accomplished? Does extra support need to be called upon? Make a plan and adjust the plan as needed.
- Give each family member permission to feel and do what they need to do.
- Develop expectations that relate to intentional plans and that are within your ability to manage.
- Remember: Grief is a process. It takes time to heal. Be gentle with yourself.

Holiday Questions to Consider:

1. What are some favorite traditions that your loved one had about holidays?
2. How will you honor your loved one during the holidays?
3. What is your favorite memory of your loved one during the holidays?
4. What is the meaning of the holidays for you?
5. What makes the holiday time special for you?
6. Would you like to have the same holiday traditions that you had before your loved one died?
7. What is your expectation of this holiday? What happens if the holiday doesn't meet your expectations?
8. Do you feel like you do not even want to have the holidays?
9. Would you like to change your holiday traditions?
10. Are there people that you can turn to for support during the holiday?
11. If your loved one were here, what gift would you like to give him or her?
12. If you could receive one gift from a loved one, what would you like it to be?

