

Grieving through the Holidays: Managing Loss in the Season of Cheer


November kicks the holiday season into full gear. The songs, the signs, family, friends, coworkers, and strangers all remind us 'tis the season to be jolly. But grief knows no season, and when you are grieving it can be impossible to be jolly, feel happy, or have any sense that joy might ever return.

If you have lost a marriage, or a job, or loved one, or the end of life as you know it because of some other crisis, how do you cope through this time? If only it were as simple as asking Santa Claus to bring some peace, some happiness, some joy back into your life. But it is not.

Grief is a natural response to loss and it occurs after a variety of events though the most recognized is grief following the death of a loved one. There is no right or wrong way to grieve, just the necessity that it be done.

Generally, the closer the relationship that was lost, the deeper our experience of grief will be. And the more unexpected the event, the more unprepared we are for the depth of emotions that follow it.

Western culture is not comfortable with grief. We tend to want instant answers and the instant relief we see on television or in the



“The friend who can be silent
with us in a moment of
despair or confusion, who
can stay with us in an hour of
grief and bereavement, who
can tolerate not knowing...
not healing, not curing...
that is a friend who cares.”

~ Henri Nouwen



movies. But in real life there is no pill, program, elixir or magic potion that will make this holiday season of grief a time devoid of sadness.

So, how do you cope? According to Eileen Lyons, Bereavement Counselor for Hospice of Spokane, there are as many ways to cope as there are grieving people. But experience shows that for most people some of the things that work include: **have a plan, enlist the support of others, get plenty of rest, and be gentle with yourself.**

Have a plan. There are so many “shoulds” for the holidays but when grief is raw, you may not be up to everyone’s expectations (including your own). So think ahead and create a plan that will help you decide in advance what you can and cannot do and then

inform those closest to you of your decisions. If you can't bear the thought of sending out cards, then don't. If you don't want to buy a tree and decorate it, then don't. Send money instead of gifts, or even skip the whole gift thing if it is too difficult.

Do whatever it is that you need to do to feel OK. That might (or might not) include some way to memorialize your loss; lighting candles, setting a place at the table for the person no longer there. Have realistic expectations of what you can manage and limit yourself to what you can or want to do instead of what you should do.

Enlist the support of others. Choose a support person you can call on for times of absolute desolation when you don't know how you will make it through the next moment or day. This support person is someone who will unflinchingly listen to your pain or keep you company when you just can't be alone.

Other friends and relatives can also help with tasks such as shopping, cooking, cleaning, and decorating if you *do* want to participate in the holidays, but just can't manage all the tasks that need to be done. Enlisting support is especially important in grieving families with children. The support person can help with

keeping life as "normal" as possible for the children while you are fully grieving

Get plenty of rest. Grief, no matter its cause, is an exhausting process. Many difficult physical and emotional responses accompany grief. They are normal. Physical symptoms may include: headaches, chest pains, difficulty breathing, lack of energy or manic behaviors, rashes, stomach and bowel problems, dizziness, nervousness, loss of appetite or overeating.

Emotional symptoms may include: inability to concentrate, anger, guilt, fear, shock, hopelessness, sadness, and moments of despair. Dealing with these things requires a great deal of energy so proper rest is essential to handle the extra burdens on your body's systems. Nap in the afternoon if you can't sleep through the night, "veg-out" with a movie or favorite television program after a long crying jag. And, if possible, avoid people who are too much work, those who drain you physically or emotionally.

Be gentle with yourself. The grieving process is an extremely painful way to be reminded of our humanity, our interconnectedness, our powerlessness in the face of circumstances. Honoring your humanity requires gentleness.

Being gentle with yourself means meeting your own needs as you see fit, taking the time to cry when you feel sad, allowing yourself a good laugh without feeling guilty when you feel joy, being realistic in your expectations of yourself and others, setting limits that are comfortable, remembering the good times, joining a support group, and directly asking others for help or seeking counseling when necessary.

The anticipation for the holiday season is often worse than actually living through it. And once you traverse it the first time, you will have the triumph of one difficult season under your belt and some strategies to handle the ones yet to come until you can truly enjoy the holidays again.

Grieving confers membership in a group no one wants to join. But on the other side of loss and grief is life. A different life to be sure, but a life that often develops a greater depth and strength because of the grief experience.

WHAT FRIENDS CAN DO

When you have a friend who is grieving, it can be very hard to know what to do or what say. Here are some of the things I learned:

Be present. There isn't anything you can do or say to take away the pain or to make it go away faster. However, you can ensure that those you love do not grieve alone. Your unhurried, sincere presence will allow the grieving person to speak when they need to, or have company to endure the painful silence.

Stay present even when you are uncomfortable. Don't change the subject when they begin to talk about their loss; don't turn the conversation to a loss that you've had and please don't say anything dumb or hurtful (if you're unsure whether it is dumb or hurtful, simply don't say it).

Offer help. Be specific and sincere. Don't say, "call if you need anything" but think of something useful and offer it. Offer to do shopping or chores for them, fix a nutritious meal, or babysit. Invite the grieving person out for coffee. Invite them to join you for the holidays. Be sensitive. If coming to dinner is too much, ask if they could come just for dessert, or if you could bring something to them.

Keep reaching out. If all of your offers are rejected, gently continue to reach out. Don't be a pest, but don't be put off by the rejection. Grieving takes a very long time and most friends will go on with their own lives after only a few days or weeks. Remember how hard it is still.

The grieving person may need a great deal of time alone, but watch for signs of deep depression or desolation that may come from too much aloneness. The key is being observant, gentle, sensitive, sincere and consistent with your interest and desire for connection.