

Light of Day



Caring Through the Grief Journey

FALL 2009

Coping through the holidays after loss

When your family has experienced loss, familiar phrases like "Merry Christmas" or "Happy New Year" may not seem to ring true. As others enjoy the season, you may feel sad, lonely and empty as you grieve the loss of a loved one, as well as the life you shared.

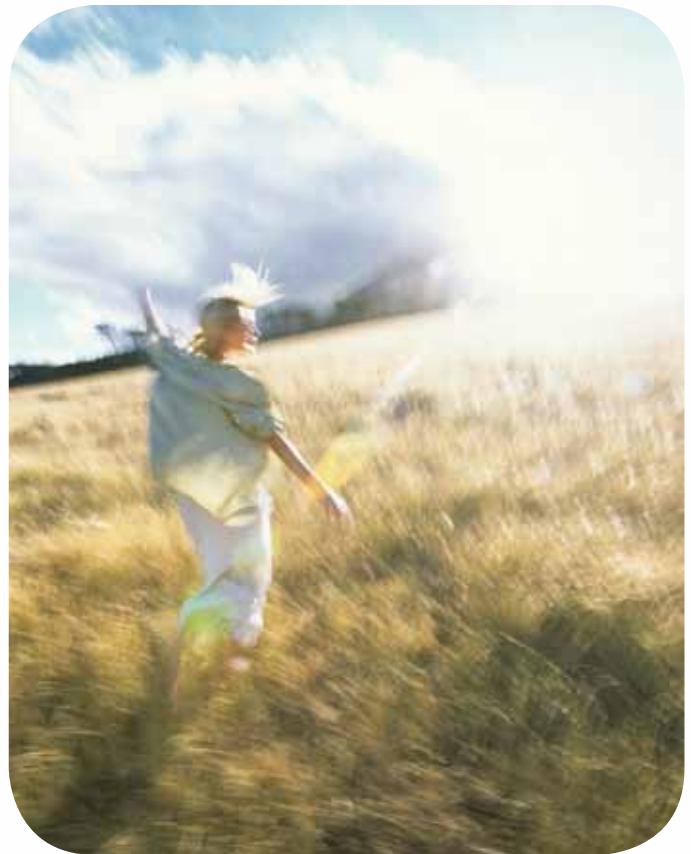
"At the holidays, we often experience emotions on a deeper level, whether that's happiness and joy, or sadness and grief," said Lynne Hunter, social worker at the Avera Cancer Institute.

It's common for people who are grieving to experience dread or anxiety as a holiday nears. "We each have a set of expectations of what the holidays should be like, based on our memories of holidays past," Hunter said. But after a significant loss, one's sense of normal is never the same. "It's not going to be the same, but that's OK – it doesn't have to be," Hunter said.

There's no "right" or "wrong" way to approach the holidays at a time of loss and grief. Families may find comfort in continuing their long-held traditions. Or, it may be less painful to celebrate in new ways. The holidays may provide opportunities to renew connections with friends and family, or make new ones. "It's good to be together with friends and family, even if that time together brings moments of tears and sadness," Hunter said.

While the holidays may be difficult, there's also a letdown that occurs after the New Year. Friends and family members can help by making additional plans for the later winter months, so there's something to look forward to.

Don't be ashamed or embarrassed if the tears flow as you experience the holidays without your loved one. "Expressing your grief is an important part of the healing process," Hunter said.



A common question is, how long does it take to "get over" loss and grief. "While the emotional intensity will ease, grief over a significant loss never goes away. Rather, the grieving person finds ways of coping with the new life that they now have," Hunter said.

However, feelings of sadness and loneliness do not have to become a way of life. "Healing takes time," Hunter said. "It's possible to once again experience happiness, joy and meaning during the holidays and throughout the year."

Holiday “do’s and don’ts” when you’re grieving

DO:

- Decide what you can comfortably handle during the holidays, and make it known to your family.
 - Is it best to talk about the loved one, or not?
 - What responsibilities should someone else take over?
- Make changes if it helps ease the pain:
 - Open presents or have dinner at a different time
 - Put the tree in a different location or use different decorations
 - Travel to a totally different environment
 - Go to a restaurant rather than having Christmas dinner at home
- Celebrate more simply. Observe your holiday traditions on a smaller scale.
- Place a special “memorial” of your loved one in your home, whether it’s a poinsettia, candle or stocking. Or, read a poem in your loved one’s honor.
- Look for moments that give you a sense of joy or comfort, whether it’s the smile on a face of a child, the taste of a special food or the sound of favorite music
- Give of yourself:
 - Donate the money you would have spent on your loved one to a charity
 - Adopt a needy family for the holidays
 - Invite a guest who would otherwise be alone on the holiday
 - Visit someone in a nursing home
- Observe expressions of your faith, if this gives you hope and meaning

- Make out your Christmas shopping list ahead of time, and go when one of your “good days” comes around. Or, shop through catalogues or on-line if it’s easier than going out.
- Ask if you need help. Unless you tell them, other people don’t know what you need, or what you’re feeling.
- Take good care of yourself. Rest, eat healthy foods and exercise.
- Remember, the actual holiday will probably be better than you anticipate it to be.

DON’T

- Be afraid to express your feelings. Sharing your emotions with others who are also grieving brings strength to all.
- Feel obligated to carry out any particular holiday tradition, whether it’s sending holiday cards, holiday baking, putting up Christmas lights or cooking a big family dinner. Ask yourself: Do I like doing this? Is this a job that can be shared by others?
- Isolate yourself. Being with those you love can aid in the healing process.
- Expect too much of yourself. Recognize that people experiencing grief have limitations and do not function at their normal capacity.
- Feel guilty about how you feel. Grief is a time of mixed emotions – happy moments as well as sad are OK.
- Get caught up in “shoulds.” Do what feels best for yourself and your family.
- Overindulge. Eating and drinking too much are a way to mask your emotions rather than dealing with them.

How to Help a Grieving Person through the Holidays

- Listen – Don’t change the subject. Allow true expression of grief. Talk about favorite memories (especially holiday memories). Follow the grieving person’s lead in the conversation.
- Provide comfort – Don’t say “I know how you feel”; say, “When I experienced a loss, this is what helped me...”
- Be a trusted confidant – Assure, and keep, confidentiality.
- Be available – Don’t be afraid to approach the grieving. Be open to talking about photos, reviewing albums, talking about favorite memories or visiting a favorite place. Offer an open-ended invitation for a lunch meeting, holiday concert or brief cup of coffee regardless of the mourner’s emotional state. Offer to attend a holiday get together as a supportive friend.
- Encourage and support self care – Encourage nutrition, rest and exercise to bolster their health. A simple phone call or invitation for a stroll can provide a physical nudge as well as provide simple emotional support.

10 ways to reduce seasonal stress

1. Take one day at a time
2. Keep a journal
3. Watch a movie – and eat popcorn
4. Listen to music you’ve never heard before
5. Take a long shower or a bubble bath
6. Eat a meal by candlelight
7. Look to simplify rather than overwhelm yourself
8. Read a story, curled up in bed
9. Try breathing exercises to relax
10. Get enough sleep

