

Dealing with Grief during the Holidays

By Astrid Raffinpeyloz and Priya Jayadev

The holidays are traditionally a time of gatherings, rejoicing with family and friends, and celebrating love and friendship. When a loved one is no longer alive, however, the holidays also can be a difficult time.

Feelings of grief that diminished since your loved one's death often reawaken during the holidays. Feelings of aloneness and sadness seem amplified in contrast to media messages of good cheer, sharing, and togetherness. You might find yourself becoming angry as friends and family members expect you to be joyful. You might even feel anxious at the thought of how the upcoming days might unfold.

The holiday season can be an emotional rollercoaster whether this is the first holiday without your loved one or years have passed since your loved one died. As Megan Devine writes in her book, It's OK That You Are Not OK, these feelings are normal. Thinking ahead and planning, however, can help you assess and manage these feelings.

A variety of strategies have helped others cope with grief during the holidays. Some of these strategies might work for you; some might not. Your grief journey is as unique as you are. Imagine what these strategies might look like for you before embracing them.

You might want to keep family traditions – such as holiday meals and gatherings – alive.

Consider setting a place at the dinner table to honor the loved one who has died or preparing their favorite dish for all to share. You might light a candle next to your loved one's photo or play music that they loved. These rituals can be a way of showing gratitude for what you had, honoring the person who died, and reminiscing.

You might want to do something that you have never done before such as travel to a new vacation spot or volunteer to help neighbors and/or the community. At this time of year, churches, food banks, senior centers, and social service organizations are grateful for and dependent on volunteers. The key is finding an activity that will be rewarding and suited to your desires. The Sequim Visitor Information Center, United Way, or Olympic Community Action Programs (OlyCAP) can help you find volunteer opportunities that are right for you.

You might want to socialize with friends or coworkers. If you accept an invitation, let your host know that you are grieving, without dwelling on your situation. Grief can be unpredictable and allow emotions to surface that impact your behavior. Warn your host that you might need to leave early if you become overwhelmed. Consider driving yourself so that you can leave when you need to or make plans with an understanding friend to drive you home on short notice.

If you decide to host a party, keep it simple. Allow yourself time to rest during the preparations and to enjoy your guests. Enlist the help of a friend or family member so you don't have to do all the work or be alone during the preparations or cleanup.

You might decide to spend the holidays alone, giving yourself time to reflect and reminisce.

Journaling, putting written words on a page, can help you express your sense of loss and associated feelings. Writing can also help you see the duality of pain and joy associated with living while your loved one is gone.

If you choose to be alone, let at least one other person know of your plans and allow them to check in on you. Although solitude is welcome at times, isolation can sometimes work against

you. Intermittent contact with a trusted family member or friend can help alleviate feelings of loneliness and depression.

Whichever path you choose, have an alternate plan – a plan B. Check in with your feelings on a frequent basis. Let family and friends know that you might change your mind and accept an invitation at the last minute or miss an engagement that you had previously agreed to.

Also, allow yourself to ask for help. You may think you are doing okay, only to suddenly realize that you are in fact fragile. A little help from others can go a long way.

There is no one way to grieve during the holidays. Follow your intuition; what feels right is probably what is best for you and remember even in the midst of grief, love and joy can be found in the company of others, in the memories of that special person, and in your heart.

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