

Hope for the Holidays: How to Cope When You're Grieving

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The holiday season is portrayed in the media as the most joyous time of the year. However, holidays are anything but joyous for those grieving the death of a loved one.

Holidays magnify the void left by those who have died. Nothing seems normal. Family traditions evolve. People assume new roles. New traditions emerge. Those who mourn struggle to find solid footing amidst the holiday hubbub. The contrast between society's expectations of happiness and the sorrow that the bereaved feels intensifies the person's pain. Is it any wonder that those who mourn dread the holiday season—wishing merely to survive the festivities?

Simple is the best way through: Have realistic expectations

For those who mourn, there is hope for the holidays. It may sound overly simplistic, but simple is often the best approach. Throughout the holiday season, have realistic expectations of the holidays, yourself, and others. Remember that:

- **The holidays will be different this year because your loved one is absent.** Sights, sounds, places, ornaments, rituals, food, and so much more will elicit memories of holidays past, intensifying your grief. Gradually, you will be able to savor your precious memories and learn to embrace the holiday season. This is an evolutionary process; your integration of this significant change in your life requires time, attention, and courage.

Take one step at a time this holiday season and realize you are breaking new ground. As with any exploratory venture, you will experience a wide range of emotions: fear, anxiety, excitement, anticipation, hope, expectation, sorrow, disappointment, grief, and joy. Next year, the holiday season may not seem quite as daunting because of the steps you take this year in confronting the changes and losses in your life. With each step, you will gain confidence that you are capable of moving through your suffering and beyond. Trust the process. Trust yourself.

- **The holidays will be different because you are different.** When someone you love dies, you are forever changed. The nature of the relationship with the deceased and the circumstances surrounding the death will influence your grieving process. What roles did the deceased serve in your family? Parent? Child? Sibling? Communicator? Decision-maker? Mediator? Caregiver? Matriarch? In the person's absence, what roles will you assume? At the holidays, these questions become particularly important for the continuity of family traditions.

Quite often, the new roles you assume (either by necessity or by choice) project a different persona. People see you differently as you serve in different ways. You also perceive yourself differently. For example, who will host the family gathering at the holidays following the death of your mother? Is that your role as the eldest daughter? Are you ready to assume the role of matriarch,

even though your heart longs to feel like a daughter again?

Remember, every family tradition embodies and conveys tremendous meaning. Consider the transitioning of roles carefully. The family member who assumes the role of carving the turkey or offering a prayer of thanksgiving establishes a new family tradition. Be thoughtful and considerate when making those transitions.

- **The holidays will be different because people will treat you differently.** As you struggle to deal with the holiday season, your family and friends will be struggling to determine how to help you. Those who know and love you realize how hard the holidays will be for you. However, they may not know what you need or want. Some people will treat you with kid gloves, thinking you are fragile. Others will stay away, assuming you need time and space. A few people will have the courage to witness your pain without attempting to “fix” the situation.

Ultimately, the ability to honestly express your emotions and needs will facilitate your grieving process. So the simplest approach is the best. Tell your family and friends what will be most helpful during the holiday season. Do you want to continue family traditions, or is this the year for something new? Perhaps a family vacation to the beach? Would you prefer to be alone or surrounded by others? Is it comforting to talk about your loved one—remembering favorite stories and talking about past holidays? These are the types of questions that prompt meaningful conversations with family and friends.

Be thankful for those people who willingly companion you through an incredibly painful time in life. Honor them by sharing how you feel, what you need, and what you want. Supportive friends and family are the greatest gift of the holiday season.

» Hope for the Holidays

- Be gentle with yourself. Have realistic expectations of the holiday season.
- Realize the holidays will be painful. Recognize the possibility for joy.
- Honor physical and emotional fatigue. Rest well.
- Release the need for perfection. Do what you can when you can.
- Feel what you feel when you feel it. Allow your emotions to flow.
- Transform traditions as needed. Be creative.
- Be open to new ideas. Initiate innovative holiday traditions.
- Move beyond your pain. Seek to serve others.
- Discover a healthy balance. Enjoy solitude and community.
- Talk about the deceased. Share stories, remember, and honor your loved one.
- Understand that the anticipation of the holidays is often worse than the reality. Trust that you will survive.



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challenges posed by aging, serious illness, and disability. Previously, she served as director of education for a palliative care educational institute. She has also served as a hospice chaplain and bereavement facilitator in hospice and palliative care.

» Additional Resources, Strategies,
and Tips

Smith, Harold Ivan. 1999. *A Decembered Grief: Living with Loss While Others Are Celebrating*. Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press.

[Coping with Grief During the Holidays](#)

[How to Help Ourselves Through the Holidays](#)

[Surviving the Holidays: Thoughts on Coping](#)

[Tips for Handling the Holidays](#)