

## Coping Through the Holidays After Losing a Loved One

Halloween barely passes before stores stock their shelves with holiday decorations. Christmas carols echo through shopping malls, and the first of the holiday commercials hits the airwaves. If you've lost a loved one, these can be stark reminders that the holidays won't be the same.

Whether your loved one died recently or decades ago, the holidays bring forth powerful memories that may trigger your grief. If the person died on or near a holiday, the two events are forever linked and may be particularly painful, especially if you have unresolved feelings about the lost relationship.

When trying to cope with grief, it's important to understand that grief is cumulative. We don't experience a loss, move through predetermined emotional stages, then emerge on the other side.

This holiday season, if the first Christmas card you open or the first "Happy Hanukkah!" you hear starts to bring on sadness, use that opportunity to work through your feelings. Don't just ignore those feelings. Here are some tips to help you cope.

### **DO:**

- Expect to have some pain. When the feelings come, let them.
- Accept a few invitations to be with close family or friends. Choose the ones that sound most appealing at the time and avoid the ones that feel more like obligation.
- Talk about your feelings. Let people know if you're having a tough day.
- Incorporate your loved one into the holidays:
- Share your favorite stories over dinner.
- Make a toast or light a candle in remembrance.
- Make a donation in his or her name.
- Help others:
  - Take a meal to a homebound couple.
  - Volunteer in a shelter or soup kitchen.
  - "Adopt" a family to buy presents or food for.
- Modify or make new traditions if it feels right. Just remember to include others who are grieving, especially children, in the decision.
- If the idea of holiday shopping overwhelms you, buy gifts online or through catalogs.
- Replace negative thoughts with positive ones.

- Prepare yourself for January. Sometimes the aftermath of the holidays can bring more sadness than the holidays themselves.

### **DON'T:**

- Don't hide your feelings from children in an effort to be strong for them or protect them. You'll only be teaching them to deny their own feelings.
- Don't isolate yourself. Although you may not feel much like celebrating, accept a few invitations.
- Don't accept every invitation or throw yourself into work in an effort to keep busy. It may only add more stress.
- Don't expect to go through defined stages of grief. Every person is different and every relationship is unique.
- Don't act as if your loved one never lived.
- Don't be afraid to cry. Crying is like the valve on a pressure cooker. It lets the steam out.

### **If someone you know is grieving:**

- Encourage him or her to talk about their feelings. Listen to them. 98 percent of people who have recently lost someone want to talk about the person who died.
- Let them cry.
- Don't pretend their loved one didn't die - it's okay to say the deceased's name.
- Don't say things like:
  - "At least he's not suffering anymore"
  - "She's in a better place."
  - "I know you'll miss him."
  - "I know how you feel."