

Getting through the holiday season is tough for many of us, but those living with the loss of a loved one have the hardest time. The gap left by a loss is felt most poignantly during this traditional time of celebration, family reunion and family closeness. Holidays, like anniversaries, are by nature nostalgic, and even the happiest of memories are painful, not joyous, when we are grieving. We may need extra help for surviving the holiday season if we are in the midst of grief. Following are a number of survival strategies. Using these suggestions won't necessarily take your grief away, but they can help you manage your grief at a time of the year when the world is supposed to be joyous.

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## Surviving the Holidays When Someone You Love Has Died

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### *Survival Strategies for the Holidays:*

#### ***Be kind to yourself***

This is a time when it is important to take good care of you. Nothing you do will make a bigger difference than respecting yourself, your needs and your feelings. Handling your emotions may be the only job you can manage right now. Because no one knows your needs as well as you do, you need to notice them and honor them. Don't overwhelm yourself just because it is the holiday season. Instead, do only as much as you can comfortably manage. Get the rest and nourishment and affection you need. Choose what's best for you--to be with people or to spend time alone, to be immersed in the holiday spirit or not.

#### ***Express your feelings***

The surest road through grief is to feel it, not deny it. If you are hurting, the best advice is to allow your feelings. Cry if you need to cry, rage if you need to rage. Admit the longings, the loneliness or whatever you are feeling. Don't suppress yourself. Feelings expressed ultimately disappear, but when you suppress yourself, nothing changes.

#### ***Ask for what you need***

Other people do not know how you feel unless you tell them. Don't just go along with people or plans that are not for you. Tell people what would help you most. Speak up!

Friends and relatives may think you will feel better if you do not talk about your loss, or they may be afraid to upset you by mentioning the missing person. If you want to talk about the person who is gone, say so.

If you want your privacy respected, if you need companionship or if you want a shoulder to cry on, say so. People outside your grief may feel awkward and not know what to do. As much as they want to help, they need you to direct them.

Don't be afraid to ask for help with planning, shopping, entertaining or just getting through today. As hard as it may be to ask, force yourself. Ultimately, asking will make your life a little easier. If you cannot shop or decorate this year, ask a friend, relative, hospice or other social agency volunteer to help. What looks arduous to you may be a lot of fun for someone else. As hard as it may be to imagine, remember that serving you can be very satisfying and rewarding for the other person.

#### ***Create support for yourself***

Sharing your pain eases it. Be sure you have people with whom you can talk. Most of us can cope best with tough times if we have a loving presence--a relative or friend to talk with us through this painful time. When spouses or family members hurt as much as you do and cannot be a support, find an alternative. Look for a short-term support partner,

perhaps a friend, another person in grief, a relative, a counselor. Or, create a small group of people who have similar concerns with whom you can stay in touch daily or frequently through the holidays or beyond. Support people and support groups really help.

#### ***Help another person in need***

Contributing to someone else gets your attention off yourself. Helping another can be a very effective way of healing after a loss, because when you are immersed in someone else's needs, you can be free of your own distress and pain. If you have the energy, there are many people who need you. Some possibilities are to volunteer to be with older folks or children, to help in a hospital or a soup kitchen, or to help a friend in need over the holidays.

#### ***Appreciate your loved ones***

Enjoy the people you love. It is natural to feel alone in your grief and to want to isolate yourself, yet that closes off all chances for closeness and nourishment from other people. Don't deprive your children, spouse, other loved ones or yourself. As hard as it may be to get your attention off your loss, they need your love too. And in return, their love can nourish you and help you begin to heal.

### ***Don't compare your life with other people's lives***

Feeling jealous of intact families and feeling deprived are natural reactions after a loss--as if other families are happier than yours, as if other people have what you do not. We have a lot of illusions about how other people live. Actually, for many intact families, reunions can be stressful and upsetting. Contrary to our illusions, holiday times are often not ideal times for families, intact or not. Don't try to compare lives, it only adds to your misery. Embracing what you have gives you much more power than regretting what is missing.

### ***Resolving how or where to spend the holidays***

Choosing how or where to spend the holidays may be your biggest dilemma. There is no perfect solution. Holiday time may be hard no matter what you do or where you are. In fact, it may seem as if you are trying to pick the best from some rotten alternatives. The choices: celebrate as usual, avoid the holiday's altogether, or do something brand new.

### ***Celebrating as usual***

Many people wish to keep their holiday traditions intact, to celebrate as usual. This way is bound to be painful, accentuating the gap left by the loss. It is fine to follow family traditions as long as you know they cannot be the same as before your loved one died. Pretending you can recreate the past will only cause you more grief. Just remember to allow any feelings as they occur. If you have the energy to do so, following old traditions may enhance your self-esteem and may help you manage the holidays successfully.

### ***Avoiding the holidays***

It is not wrong to want to avoid the holidays entirely. If celebrating seems too difficult to bear, you can choose not to observe them and go somewhere else--skiing, a cruise, a resort, a different city. If you cannot afford to travel, go to the zoo or the movies or some other distracting place. There is no guarantee that this will erase your pain, but it may lessen it some.

### ***Doing something new and different***

If NOT celebrating would deeply disappoint or deprive children or other family members, you probably cannot run away from Thanksgiving, Hanukkah or Christmas. Yet, you can avoid repeating your traditional ways and perhaps observe your holidays more simply than before. People often work too hard cooking, decorating, planning, shopping and entertaining at holiday times, so you can at least ease up.

Often, the more we try to recreate the past, the more obvious is our loss, so changing traditions can be a freeing and satisfying way to spend the season. You can celebrate Thanksgiving, Hanukkah or Christmas in a brand new way by going to the home of a different relative or friend, having a family reunion away from home, or eating in a restaurant. You can do anything that will make your holiday experience new rather than a memory with someone in it missing.

If it is too hard for you, personally, to think up a new way to do the holidays, give the job of planning to a creative friend or relative. Again, most important in taking care of yourself is not to feel you have to do it all--whatever the circumstances.

### ***You will survive the holidays***

You may hurt, but you will survive. The holidays may be the worst of your grief time. Eventually, you will heal, and your memories will persist without pain. Meanwhile, it's OK not to have a good time. There may be no way you can make this holiday fun and nothing you want to do. Allow that you may not enjoy the parties, reunions and events of the season. If you are hurting and unable or unwilling to have your attention on anything else, let yourself be.

It is also OK to have a good time, even though you have experienced a loss. You do not have to deny pleasure to yourself or your family. While grieving, we often feel guilty about having fun, as if we should be miserable all twenty-four hours of a day. That is not necessary. Often, we think it is how much we grieve that signifies how much we care about the one whom died. Not True! Our love is not measured by the extent of our grief. We can love forever without having grief as our testimonial to that love. Remember that few of us would want others to mourn forever because we were gone.

Perhaps the best testimonial we can give to our missing loved ones is how we live our lives. Don't deny yourself life because someone has died. If you can do so, enjoy the holidays and every day; for death teaches us, more than anything, that every day of life is precious and worth living to the fullest. The best gift we can give others and ourselves for the holidays and every day is to live our lives wholeheartedly.

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