

Hope For The Holidays

by Patricia Andrus

It's about this time of the year that holiday decorations appear on the store shelves, radios play seasonal songs and people make plans to be together for those special days. But for many of us, these supposedly happy events bring on intense feelings of loneliness, emptiness, despair and fear. Being unsure how to cope with our changed lives during the holidays ahead can be frightening.

Holiday depression is common among grieving persons, making the "Bah-Humbug" syndrome awesome in nature. In our darkness, we may be unable to tell the difference between the normal "let-down" feelings brought on by cold, rainy weather and the depression often encountered following the death of a loved one.

We try different approaches in facing the holidays. Some attempt to ignore the sadness they feel, masking their pain in smiles and suffering silently. Others eliminate the holiday celebrations altogether, thinking this will eliminate their overall feelings of loneliness.

Whether we want the holidays to arrive or not, they do return every year. Perhaps it would be healthier to begin preparing emotionally, physically and spiritually to meet the holidays this year and in future years.

Emotionally we can assure ourselves that there is untapped strength within us. Allowing ourselves to fully experience and express the painful feelings brought on by memories and thoughts is healing. We can schedule special times to cry, scream and express our anger about our situation. Attending support group meetings, keeping a journal, talking with friends and relatives and even offering our help to others in need can be beneficial to our holiday health.

Feelings are neither right nor wrong, good nor bad, and they come and go. Trusting this gives depth to our self-assurance that we have untapped strength. Taking time to think about our loss and what it means to us this holiday season, remembering both good and bad holiday experiences in the past, and acknowledging our wishes and dreams for the holiday ahead are useful tools.

Even though we know all our dreams won't magically come true, we can indulge in moments of child-like

things to be. We can then constructively act to make our reality more pleasant for us.

Deciding which traditions from the past will work well this year, letting go of those that don't fit our present situation, and selecting a few new ones to try out can make this season more positive. It is sometimes necessary to remember that what makes something a tradition is the repetition of it over time. We need only choose to continue those customs that are comfortable for our present lives. If we never had been forced to alter the customs of our ancestors, we might find ourselves sitting on the ground eating our holiday meal with our fingers.

Grieving is a stress-filled time for our bodies. Physically, we need to eat well-balanced meals and drink plenty of water. Avoiding alcohol and drugs that tend to mask our true grief and avoiding excessive cigarettes, tea and coffee will decrease our stress. Taking leisurely strolls – even up and down the driveway – helps cleanse our bodies as well and clear our minds.

Accepting our physical limitations means tailoring our energy use to the amount we now have available. Getting some exercise is better than getting none. Catalog shopping instead of fighting the traffic and store crowds, ordering "goodies" from food catalogs instead of standing on our feet many hours baking, and letting a little dust settle in the corners can relieve our minds and hearts of a heavy burden.

Examining what we expect of ourselves can tell us about why we think we must do things in certain ways.

Being kind and gentle is not just a holiday treat to be bestowed on others. Treating ourselves just as we would care for our best friend in a time of need is a gift we all deserve.

Planning ahead to do a few things with friends and family can be tempered with being flexible and open to new ideas. Leaving some time to be alone must balance our time spent with others, as both are important to healing. We are the best authority on what is necessary for our own health, both physically and emotionally.

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Taking time to listen to our inner self can be the best medicine.

Our inner wisdom may be indicating the need to seek advice from our family, friends or doctor, and this can be a good time to start listening to a real authority.

Reducing our preparations for the holidays, decorating less and shopping earlier, can also relieve pressure.

When going out, it may be helpful to leave lights on and a radio playing. The low background music of the radio and the warmth of welcoming light can be comforting when returning home alone on a dark evening.

Requesting the help of others in the tasks of holiday planning and preparation can give family and friends an opportunity to be useful in concrete ways.

Spiritually, we may choose to memorialize our loved one with a special ornament for the tree or by hanging a special stocking alongside the family's. Setting their place at the table, decorating their gravesite, and cooking their favorite dish for all to enjoy have helped others treasure the memory of a loved one. Allowing their spirit to be present during the holidays is comforting for the living.

We can use this holiday season as a time to make long-considered changes in our lives, allowing ourselves "to be" instead of feeling pressured "to do."

We can meditate and trust our inner self to be wise and gentle with our frail human body. We are the best authority on how much we need to do to help see this season through. Many ideas are available to help us in this process. Let us focus on the peace of the season and on our growth to keep pace with store ads and sales expectations.

For the first time in our lives, we can allow others to help us accomplish the chores of the season while knowing that we are not weak, just grieving and mourning. Treating ourselves to some special time, loving ourselves in spite of our less-than-perfect natures and knowing that this year's holiday season will pass just as holidays have passed in previous years, can give us a firm foundation for the weeks ahead.

Making plans for the days after the holidays gives us reason to make it through this physically and emotionally draining season.

Transferring to ourselves the hope we experienced with our loved one is challenging. Experiencing the hope for our healing is also daring. But deep inside us is unbelievable strength and wisdom, enough to get us through this holiday season and many more.

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