

Surviving The Holidays When Someone You Love Has Died

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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.

SURVIVAL STRATEGIES FOR THE HOLIDAYS:

BE KIND TO YOURSELF

This is a time when it is important to take care of yourself. 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. Admin 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 walk with us through the painful time. When spouses or family members hurt as much as we 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.