

Practical Ideas for Dealing with Holiday Grief

Holidays are often naturally difficult for anyone following the death of someone they love. While there are no simple guidelines that will take away the pain of loss, there are some practical suggestions that might help you navigate this challenging time.

1. **Be compassionate with yourself.** Remember that the word ‘bereavement’ literally means that you have been torn apart, that you have special needs that deserve attention. Feelings of loss generally leave us feeling fatigued. It’s so common that it’s called the lethargy of grief. Your low energy will naturally slow you down. Respect what your body, mind and spirit are telling you.
2. **Allow grief to become mourning.** Grief is our internal response to loss – what we feel inside. Mourning is the shared social response, or grief gone public. During the holiday season, don’t be afraid to express your feeling of grief – from the inside to the outside. Ignoring your grief won’t make the pain go away. Mourning is what allows us to integrate the loss into our lives, while still acknowledging that we have been changed forever by that loss.
3. **Plan ahead.** Anxiety and anticipation leading up to the season can be more intense than the actual holidays. Planning ahead can help lower anxiety, especially for children. Decide which family traditions you can continue and which you may want to change. Structure your holiday time. This will help you anticipate rather than just reacting to whatever comes up. Once you’ve decided what you can and can’t do, share your decisions with friends and family.
4. **Don’t let other people decide what you “should” do.** Keep in mind that well-meaning family and friends may try to prescribe what is good for you during the holidays. Instead of going along with their plans, focus on what *you* want to do. Remember this is your grieving process, you deserve to put yourself first and monitor your comfort level.
5. **Accept limitations.** Eliminate any unnecessary stresses that you possibly can. This is not a time to overextend yourself in anyway. Avoid isolating yourself while also considering that you need some time just for you. Also avoid thinking that you should keep busy and in anyway distract yourself from your grief. Keeping too busy will actually increase your stress and postpone how your grief needs to become mourning.
6. **Expect grief bursts.** These are the overwhelming, sudden feelings of loss and sadness, often tied to sight, sounds, or smells that reminds you of your loved one. The holidays especially can bring forth these memories of the person who has died. Allow yourself to experience these grief bursts without any sense of shame or self judgement.
7. **Remember and honor the person who died.** You might write memories on strips of paper and use them to create a paper chain to put on a Christmas tree. Or if your family hangs stockings, hang one in memory of the person and ask family members to place written memories inside. Create a memorabilia table or corner where you can put photos, stuffed animals, cards, or other mementos that remind you of your loved one. Share one of the person’s favorite food or meals. Food can be a great spark for sharing memories.

As you approach the holidays, remember that grief comes as a result of giving and receiving love. Don’t let anyone take your grief away. Love yourself. Be patient with yourself. And allow yourself to be surrounded by loving, caring people.

These suggestions have been compiled from the Center for Loss and Life Transition and The Dougy Center: The National Center for Grieving Children and Families.