

Holiday Survival Checklist

The holidays can feel impossible when you are grieving.

Sometimes we manage to do the stuff. Sometimes we cannot - there is no pretending, no smoothing it over, and no way we can match the energy of people who still get to live in their old life.

This checklist offers a few simple choices that can make the days feel a little more manageable.

Take what feels ok, ignore the rest, and let yourself move through this season in the way that feels the least painful for you.



1. Give Yourself Permission to Change Everything

You are allowed to do this season differently.

You do not have to protect anyone else's comfort.

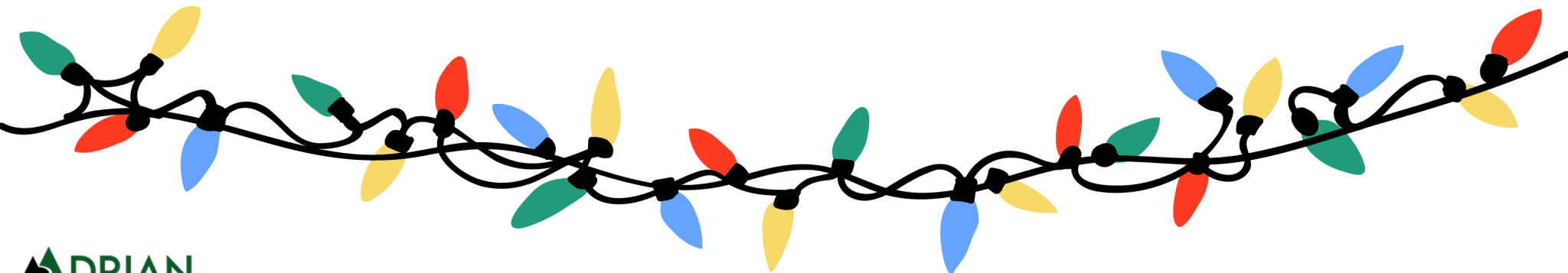
You do not have to keep traditions that break your heart.

You do not have to show up with a smile you do not feel.

You get to decide what you can handle this year.

Small. Quiet. Different. Nothing at all.

Whatever feels the least painful is the right choice for you.



2. Expect the Emotional Whiplash and the Landmines

The holidays can hit you without warning.

One moment you might feel almost steady, and the next you can be pulled under by a memory, a smell, a song, a photo, or something small that catches you by surprise.

It works both ways. Big things can go by without much reaction, and then something tiny can take your breath for a minute.

This is normal in grief. Nothing is wrong with you for responding in ways you cannot predict. Tears are normal. Needing a minute is normal. Feeling the day turn suddenly is normal. Holidays stir up things you wish would stay quiet, and it can feel like you are being knocked off balance over and over. When it happens, let the moment be what it is. This is love reacting to a season that asks too much from a grieving heart.

This is not you getting worse.



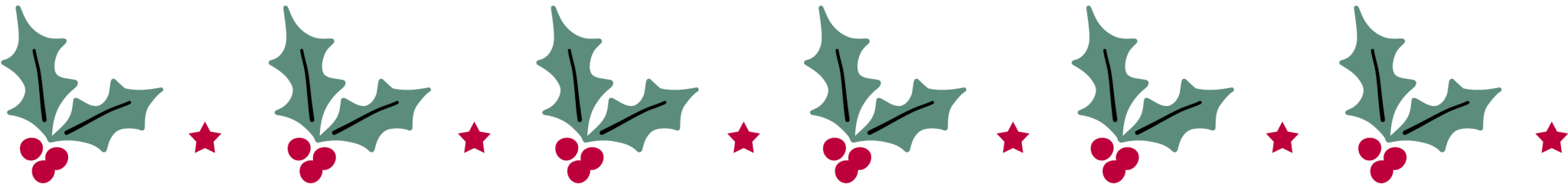
3. Make a Bare-Minimum Plan

Give yourself one simple plan that you know you can manage. Think in the smallest terms possible. What is the *least* you can do and still feel ok? That might mean choosing one short visit instead of a full day, keeping one meal simple, or deciding to stay home altogether. It might mean doing nothing at all because your heart is already carrying too much.

A bare-minimum plan gives you a starting point that does not overwhelm you, and it keeps you from getting pulled into expectations that you cannot meet right now.

Let your energy decide, not guilt or pressure.

Whatever feels manageable is *enough*. ***It really is.***



4. Build an Exit Strategy

Having an exit plan helps you feel less trapped and gives you a way out when your heart has had enough. You do not have to stay longer than you can manage.

Drive: Take your own car so you have full control over when you arrive and when you leave. No explanations needed.

Tell: Let the host know ahead of time that you may need breaks or may leave early, so you do not feel pressure to stay longer than you can.

Limit: Decide your maximum time before you go, even if it is only a short visit. Knowing your limit helps you protect your energy.

Locate: Notice where the restroom or a quiet room is so you can step away and reset if things become overwhelming.

Signal: Choose one safe person and agree on a code word or simple gesture that means "I need a break." They can gently pull you away from whatever situation you are in with a simple, "I need you for a moment."



5. Script a Few Simple Responses

The holidays come with a lot of small talk, and most people will not know what to say to someone who is grieving. Having a few simple responses ready can take some of the pressure off.

"I'm getting through the day the best I can."

"I'm here, but it's still really hard."

"Thanks. I'm taking things one moment at a time."

"I can only handle a little bit today, but I'm glad to see you."

"I'm doing what I'm able to do today."

You might also hear things that feel awful, like "I'm so glad to see you doing better." Most people have no idea how hard that lands on the grieving heart.

You do not have to correct them or force a conversation that will drain you. You can use something simple, like, ***"It's been a hard year."*** Then move on. You can choose to keep things surface-level when you need to. Not every moment is meant for the whole truth.



6. Have a Backup Plan

Grief shifts by the hour, and what felt possible yesterday might feel impossible today.

Having a backup plan gives you room to change course without guilt. Plan A might be going to the gathering or doing the tradition you used to do. Plan B can be staying home, keeping things smaller, or doing only what your energy allows in the moment.

It also helps to have *backup people* - someone you can call, text, or be with if your plans fall through or you suddenly cannot handle what you thought you could.

Knowing you have options takes the pressure off and lets you respond to the day you are actually having.



7. Choose Moments for Your Person

You can choose moments this season that keep your person close in whatever way feels right for you. Some people lean toward something big and visible, and others prefer something quiet and private. Both are ok. These moments are yours, and they can look any way you need them to.

- Hang up their stocking
- Set a place for them at the table
- Create or buy an ornament in their honor
- Make a small spot in your home with a candle and a photo
- Cook or bake something they loved
- Play their favorite holiday song or playlist
- Watch a movie they always watched
- Write a note and place it in the tree
- Buy something they would have liked
- Donate to a charity they cared about
- Display a gift from a past year
- Wear something that reminds you of them
- Do a family activity they enjoyed
- Read an old card or message
- Light a candle each evening
- Carry one of their belongings



8. Keep One Thing Predictable

The chaos and clutter of the holiday season can feel extremely overwhelming when you are grieving.

Grief brain makes it hard to focus, your energy is already low, and you are moving through the world inside a grief bubble that most people cannot see.

Choosing one predictable thing gives you something that stays the same every day. It might be your morning drink, a short walk, a quiet moment before bed, or any small routine you keep unchanged.

One thing that is not different can make the rest of the season feel a little less crazy.



9. Prepare for the Aftermath

Sometimes the hardest part of the holiday is not the event itself. It is what happens after.

When you get home. When the noise stops. When the house goes quiet and your body finally lets down.

Everything you pressed down during the day can rush to the surface the moment you're alone.

This is normal. Plan for it if you can. Keep your evening simple. Have something easy to eat. Leave space for the tears or the exhaustion that shows up the moment you close the door. It is your whole self exhaling after pushing through something most people will never understand.



10. You Don't Have to Feel Grateful

This season is full of messages about joy and thankfulness. People talk about being blessed, being grateful for every moment, and “soaking up the magic” of the holidays.

You do not have to feel any of that. When you are grieving, gratitude can feel out of reach, and joy can feel like it belongs to another world entirely. Forcing those feelings only makes you feel more alone.

You are allowed to feel exactly what you feel... sad, heavy, tired, angry, numb, overwhelmed, or *nothing* at all. And hear this clearly: you are not doing this wrong. There is no right way to move through the holidays in grief, and there is no wrong way either. You do not have to match the tone of the season.

