



Getting Through the Holidays When You've Lost a Loved One

by Darcie D. Sims

The holidays are coming and I'm not sure I'm ready. I'm not sure I'll ever be ready again. It's winter and I feel as frozen inside as the landscape is outside. I tried making out my gift list today, but the tears kept getting in the way. It is so hard to think about gifts and fun and the holidays when a loved one has died.

CareNotes[™]

Take One—and take heart.

Give One—and give hope.

As I get out the dishes and count the silverware, I am acutely aware of the empty place at the family table. I'm trying to find the holiday spirit, but when the family circle has been broken by death, the only things that sparkle this season are my tears.

Working your way through

When you've lost a loved one, the holiday season can be a painful reminder of the terrible loss you are feeling—instead of bringing warmth, love, and excitement. The first few years are perhaps the most difficult, but even years later, the holidays may lack the joy they once had for you.

There are steps you can take, however, to help give the holidays a new meaning. The holidays can become a time of peace and reflection, a time to cherish the gift your loved one has been—and continues to be—in the life of your family. Here are a few ideas that may help you begin the journey.

■ **Be patient and realistic.** Sometimes our own high expectations of the holidays make the pain and frustration more acute. We have a mental picture of how things ought to be. Often, however, those expectations are based more on fantasy than reality. Remember that you are grieving. Be kind and gentle with yourself, and realistic about what you expect. Leave the word *ought* out of the holiday season this year.

It is difficult to be realistic while you are grieving, but it is also an important strategy for health and well-being. Plan

ahead so that you are not overwhelmed by responsibilities at the last moment. When you are grieving, it is difficult to concentrate, so make lists. Prioritize things. Decide what is important to you this holiday season, and scratch the rest off the list this year. You can always add things back in years to come.

■ **Listen to your heart and acknowledge your limits.** Spend some quiet time before the rush of the holidays listening to your heart. Become aware of your needs and express them to family members and friends with whom you plan to spend the holidays.

Encourage others to share their feelings, too, so that everyone affected by the death of your loved one has an opportunity to express his or her wishes about holiday plans. Remember that it is O.K. to say

Teri always loved Thanksgiving weekend because that meant going over to Mom's, pulling the Christmas tree and the ornaments out of storage, and decorating the tree together with the first carols of the season playing in the background. When Teri's mom died close to the holidays, it was too painful for Teri to put up any tree that year.

The next year, Teri and her husband put their tree up in the living room, but something felt incomplete. So Teri decided to put up her mother's tree—with all its special ornaments—in the den. It was her way of cherishing the memory of those many years they had decorated the tree together.

The third Christmas, Teri and her husband blended Teri's mother's ornaments in with their own. Now they have a way of holding the past and the present together in one glorious tree.

no. You do not have to accept every invitation or fulfill every responsibility that comes your way this holiday season. Accept invitations and take on obligations only as you have the energy and the desire to do so. Make all your “yeses” tentative this year.

Do what you can this holiday season, and let that be sufficient. If you can't decorate the yard, decorate the house. If the house seems too big to tackle, decorate a room, a corner, or a table. There is nothing wrong with simplicity.

Meanwhile, take care of yourself physically. Grieving is hard on the body and is a great source of stress. Eat well and wisely. Avoid the temptation to numb your pain through overindulgence in the season's many culinary delights. You will only feel worse later.

“Our loved ones are still and always will be a part of us. They are threads in our fabric and we cannot lose their love.”

—Darcie D. Sims, *TouchStones*

At the same time, do not deny yourself the pleasures of good food and companionship out of a sense of obligation to the deceased. Remember that your loved one would want to see you smiling, happy, surrounded by those whom you hold dear.

Exercise is an important stress reliever and a healthy mood

elevator. Make time for exercise and rest so that your grief is not compounded by exhaustion or overwork. If you listen well to what your heart and your body are telling you, the holidays will pass more peacefully.

■ **Adapt cherished traditions.** When loss and grief overwhelm us at the holidays, we are sometimes tempted to scrap the whole thing, to do absolutely nothing. But you can keep traditions alive in ways that make sense given the new reality of your life.

For instance, if the fact that you won't be buying a gift for your departed loved one this year saddens you, buy a simple gift that you know he or she would have liked and give it to someone who otherwise would not have a gift. Many charities are eager to accept such gifts at this time of year, and some will even arrange for you to present the gift in person if you wish. Remember that it is the exchange of love—the giving—that matters most.

Hang the stockings by the fireplace if you wish; place a wreath on the grave if that seems appropriate. Do whatever feels right for you and your family. Try a new twist on old traditions—have Christmas dinner on Christmas Eve, open presents on New Year's Day or on the sixth of January, as is done in some traditions.

If you are alone this year as a result of your loss, find a

Keep your loved one's finest qualities alive. This can be your ongoing gift to the one you love, and his or her ongoing gift to the world.

—Linus Mundy,
*Cherishing Your Memories
of a Loved One*

way to share a part of the holidays with others. Visit a soup kitchen or stop by a nursing home. You may find yourself forging new bonds out of shared losses.

■ ***Allow the tears to come, but look for joy amidst the pain.*** As you unpack and sift through holiday decorations, understand that along with the warm, loving memories, you will be unpacking some heartaches as well. Don't deny yourself the gift of healing tears. Lay in a supply of tissues and don't be surprised if you find tears coming when you least expect them.

Sometimes all we can remember are the painful details surrounding our loved one's death. This holiday season, try also to remember all the wonderful moments of your loved one's life. Think of all the gifts your loved one has given to you—joy, laughter, affection, companionship.

Write these gifts on strips of paper. Put them in a gift box or place them in a stocking. Decorate the tree with them or keep them in a memory book or a private drawer. Whatever choice you make, you will be celebrating the joy your loved one has brought into your life.

■ ***Focus on the spiritual dimension of the holidays.*** When you are ready, and it feels right, one way to refashion the holidays is to focus on the underlying religious meaning. In the Christian tradition, Advent can be a time of quiet reflection and spiritual preparation. Let this season of hopeful anticipation touch the yearning within your heart

for a final reunion with your loved one in the life to come.

In this season of light, remember the light your loved one has brought to your life. Light a special candle—not in memory of a death, but in celebration of a life and a love shared. Spend a moment in a quiet prayer of thanksgiving for having loved and been loved by this person.

Holidays of other faith traditions are also steeped in religious significance. However you observe the season, let your grief lead you to a deeper appreciation for the time-honored traditions of the holiday season, traditions that bring home the meaning of God's promise of everlasting love and life.

Take heart

Right now, you may feel like the scattered pieces of a broken puzzle. Honor that feeling, but also take comfort in knowing that the pieces of the puzzle can be reshuffled, rearranged, and pieced together to form a new picture. As you learn to create a new reality for yourself, temper your expectations with compassion and gentleness. You will heal, but only as you allow yourself to experience the full range of emotion on your journey through grief.

I know the pain of moving through the holidays after the death of a loved one. But slowly, gently, I have begun to focus on my loved one's life—not the death—and that has made all the difference.

May love be what you, too, remember the most. ■