

Grief During
THE HOLIDAYS

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Facing the holidays after the loss of a loved one can be very difficult. I wrote this booklet to provide you with comfort, hope, and specific strategies to prepare for the upcoming holiday season. I hope you find it helpful and that you are able to experience the joy of the holiday season.

Sincerely,
Jason Troyer PhD



The holidays are filled with events and memories that will often increase your feelings of grief. In this booklet, I review several topics that will help you survive the holiday season, including:

- ❖ Reviewing common myths about holiday grief
- ❖ Finding balance between grief & joy and the past & the present
- ❖ Specific ways to honor and remember your loved one
- ❖ Where you can find more help



Myths of Grief Related to the Holidays

After the death of a loved one, you may view the upcoming holidays with a sense of dread. There are so many reminders – songs, events, traditions – that it is impossible to not feel the absence of your loved one. In this section I review several myths about grief and the holidays to help you avoid unnecessary pain.

Myth: Talking about or thinking about your loved one means that you are “stuck” in your grief or that you haven’t achieved closure.

Reality: Talking, thinking, and even crying in regard to your loved one is normal — even if it has been several years since your loved one’s death. Specific songs, people, food, events, and traditions can all trigger “grief bursts”. Grief bursts are not a sign you are doing something wrong. They are simply a reminder that you continue to miss and care about your loved one.

Myth: Christmas and other winter holidays are happy occasions. Therefore, you should try to “put on a happy face” for the sake of others.

Reality: Be open to the joy of the season, but don’t try to fake happiness. Your family and friends will understand why this is a difficult time. A healthier response is to be genuine about your grief.

Myth: You can’t be happy during the holidays. Others will assume that you are not honoring the memory of your loved one properly if you are enjoying yourself during seasonal festivities.

Reality: Experiencing joy does not diminish the memory of your loved one. Laughing, socializing, feasting, and singing are an integral part of the season; you can simultaneously honor your loved one and enjoy the holiday festivities.



Finding Balance

Finding Balance: Remembering Your Loved One and Enjoying Family and Friends

Finding balance between remembering your loved one and staying involved with the living can help you feel more whole and genuine during the holiday season. Concentrating entirely on the deceased can intensify your grief while harming your relationships with those who are still alive. It is healthy and normal to distract yourself from your loss occasionally. Plan time to participate in an enjoyable activity with your family and friends – even if you aren’t sure it will be helpful. Sometimes you may be pleasantly surprised.

On the other hand, avoiding your grief during the holidays to “put on a happy face” may feel like “faking” your way through the season. Even worse, it can seem as though you are dishonoring your loved one. Because your grief may feel out of place in the midst of parties, elaborate dinners, and joyful celebrations, it can be helpful to plan some special, quiet time to focus on remembering your loved one.

Acknowledging your loss while staying connected to the important people around you is not an easy balance to achieve, but it is healthier than focusing entirely on the deceased or the living.

Maintaining Traditions and Starting New Ones

The holiday season, including Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukkah, and other winter festivities, are filled with traditions. When a loved one dies, these traditions may feel completely different. In some cases, it may be comforting to continue a tradition — even if it must be modified. For example, if you always hosted a large Thanksgiving dinner at your home with your spouse, it may be important to you to continue that tradition. In other cases, it may be useful to change long-standing traditions. Perhaps this year it is time for Thanksgiving to be at someone else's house. There is no magic formula for deciding to keep a specific custom. It can be helpful to keep some rituals, but also recognize that other traditions will have to be modified.



Honoring & Remembering During the Holidays

The holiday season provides many opportunities for special ways to pay tribute to your loved one. Below are some ideas to help you begin thinking creatively about ways to honor and remember your loved one.

1) Review pictures and videos of previous holidays

Looking at pictures and videos of holidays spent with your loved one can provide comfort. Creating or reviewing a photo album, scrapbook, or videos can be a wonderful way to remember your loved one. Some enjoy doing this alone while others want to share stories with friends and family.

2) Volunteer for or contribute to an organization whose mission you support

The holiday season provides many opportunities to volunteer and contribute to worthy causes. It can be especially helpful for those who want to do something active as part of their grief. Buying presents for disadvantaged children, contributing to food pantries, volunteering or donating money to an organization that was important to your loved one can all be meaningful ways to honor their legacy.

3) Keep a special reminder with you

You may feel especially lonely during the holiday season. It can help to carry something that reminds you of your loved one. For example, you might carry a picture, a significant piece of jewelry (e.g., wedding ring, a special watch, etc.), or a present you received from your loved one as a way to continue to feel close to them. Let me assure you that this is a healthy and normal response to a loss.

4) Maintaining old rituals and creating new ones

The holiday season is full of big and little rituals: elaborate dinners, worship services, special songs and food, significant symbols, and time with loved ones to name a few. It is important to maintain the long-standing rituals that continue to be helpful while also creating new, meaningful ones. This may be as simple as listening to your loved one's favorite Christmas song alone or as complex as holding a fundraiser for a relevant cause. Rituals and meaningful events can be powerful ways to feel connected to your loved one.

Other examples of rituals during the holidays can include attending a service of remembrance, lighting a candle, visiting your loved one's gravesite or other important location, or hanging a special ornament. Just as your relationship with your loved one was built upon many interactions, so too can your connection be maintained with significant moments of remembrance.

5) Say Your Loved Ones Name & Share Stories

You may feel uncomfortable talking about your loved one and sharing holiday memories about them, but it is normal and healthy to talk about them. Saying their name out loud may bring up tears, but it is helpful to share your thoughts and feelings.



Need More Help?

Visit www.GriefPlan.com for helpful videos and articles to help you heal, remember, and rebuild after loss. These resources cover topics such as:

- ❖ Helping children as they grieve
- ❖ Healing after the loss of a spouse, parent, child, and other loved ones
- ❖ Dealing with traumatic losses due to suicide, overdose, and accidents
- ❖ Recognizing signs that you may need professional help
- ❖ A step-by-step video program to help you through your grief

About the Author

Dr. Jason Troyer earned his master's degree in counseling and his doctorate in counseling psychology. He is a published author, grief researcher, and former college professor and therapist.

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