

When the Holidays Hurt

From "10 ways to cope with loss during a season of celebration"

By Victor M. Parachin

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I had no idea that grieving involved so many "firsts." There was my first night alone; the first meal alone; the first time I attended church alone; my first anniversary alone. And just when I didn't think things could get worse, I find myself facing the holidays alone—without my beloved husband, Gerry. This year, I would give anything if I could boycott the holidays.
— Barbara, widowed eight months earlier

For many people, the holidays are a traditional time of happiness and festivity. However, for those who are grieving the loss of a loved one, the holidays are a time of mixed emotions. There can be pleasure, but there is also much pain, because the season magnifies the sense of loss.

There are no quick fixes to getting rid of the hurt. Thankfully, there is the loving support of our friends and family and the passage of time to heal our broken hearts. But here are ways to manage in the meantime.

Plan ahead. Remind yourself, there is no right or wrong way to spend the holiday. Have a family meeting to discuss the best way to deal with the holiday. Some people opt to completely alter the way they celebrate. One woman says: "As my children were grown and living in different parts of the country, I made plans to do something completely different by booking a cruise vacation over Thanksgiving. I know you can't run away from grief and it was hard for me, but not nearly as difficult as it would have been to remain home alone without my husband."

Other families choose to maintain holiday traditions. "Even though we had an empty chair after Dad died, we all wanted to do the same things in the same way we had always done," recalls Jonathan, a 19-year-old whose father died from cancer four months before the holiday. "Our family sat down one evening and discussed how we would do Christmas. It was unanimous that the familiar would be the most comfortable. So, with both tears and smiles, we put up the tree, decorated the house inside and out, attended church on Christmas Eve and, on Christmas Day, had our traditional holiday family meal."

Keep expectations reasonable. Marta Felber offers that advice in her book *Finding Your Way After Your Spouse Dies* (Ave Maria Press). "My loved one died on January 25. Almost immediately, I began to dread the next Christmas without him, exactly 11 months away!" she recalls. Her way of reducing that anxiety was to plan carefully and keep expectations realistic. "Try to have reasonable expectations," she says. "There are important ways in which celebrations will not, and cannot, ever be the same again. So it is okay to plan for them to be different. Be realistic about what you can handle, both physically and emotionally. Be kind to yourself and nurturing."

Network with other grievers. According to Harold Ivan Smith, a minister and author of *A Decembered Grief: Living With Loss While Others are Celebrating* (Beacon Hill Press), becoming involved with others in a grief support group can help you discover that you are not alone, that mourning is not an illness or self-indulgence, and that there are people to whom you can open your heart.

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Remember the loved one who died. The worst thing a family can do is to try to ignore the reality of a loss. It is simply impossible to hide the fact that a loved one has died and is painfully absent during the holiday. Rather than try to minimize the absence, remember the loved one who died by offering a moment of silence at a meal, lighting a candle in his or her memory, placing his or her favorite ornament on the tree, tucking a memorial card into your holiday cards to distant friends, decorating the grave, etc. One 12-year-old, whose older sister died two months before Christmas, made an ornament at school with her name carefully printed on it along with her year of birth and death.

Also, when friends are around, be certain to talk about the deceased loved one. Your willingness to do so will signal to friends that it is okay to speak about that person and share memories.

Expand your "family" at holiday time. Rather than be demoralized by an empty chair during the holiday, consider expanding your "family" during this time. "I remember the first Christmas after our son Timothy was killed in an auto accident," recalls one father. "We obsessed about getting through Christmas dinner facing his empty chair. We came up with the idea of filling his chair with several other people. That Christmas we invited a distant relative to spend the week with us. We also invited two recently widowed men from our church to share Christmas dinner. As we sat together all of us were thankful for the love around the table and the memories we shared."

Don't feel you have to do it all. It's perfectly fine to let family and friends assist you with shopping, cleaning, cooking, wrapping gifts, delivering, and many other details connected with holidays. If being in crowded malls with festive shoppers and holiday music playing promises to be upsetting, then don't go. Some families do all their shopping via catalogs and the Internet. Try to remind yourself, as well, that the holidays will still take place even if you don't get everything done as you did in previous years.

Take care of yourself physically. "Holidays can be physically draining, especially if this is your first experience with a holiday since the death of your loved one. Respect your mind and your body," write Susan J. Zonnebelt-Smeenge and Robert C. DeVries, in their book, *The Empty Chair: Handling Grief on Holidays and Special Occasions* (Baker Books). "The acronym DEER (drink, eat, exercise, rest) may help you stay focused on taking care of yourself. Holidays take enough energy by themselves without the additional gut-wrenching pain of a death.

Protect your boundaries. No one knows your grief better than you do. During the holidays, when people extend invitations or ask you to take on tasks, give yourself permission to say "no thank you" or "I'll pass on it for now." Another way of protecting personal boundaries is to accept an invitation but with some limits. This kind of statement is a perfectly appropriate response to an invitation: "Yes, I will be happy to join you, but please know that I may have to excuse myself a little earlier than others."

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