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# Grieving During the Holidays

The holiday season can bring the loss of a loved one into sharper focus. Our traditions, rituals, and even our special holiday foods are constant reminders of our loss. Even with this pain, our holidays can still be a significant time for us. They will be different, and they may hurt, but they can still be meaningful. While nothing can replace our loved one, there are things we can do to make the holidays easier.

**Respect your limits.** Setting realistic limits is essential, because trying to do it all – cookies, presents, decorating, cards, meals, visits – may prove to be too much. The holidays can be draining during the best of times; when coupled with the mental and physical exhaustion of grief, they can feel overwhelming. Some things to keep in mind when planning your activities:

- Ask yourself what is essential for you and your family. What does each family member need to make it a special day? What can comfortably be put on hold for this year? Sometimes, we worry that if we change or drop a tradition, we will lose it forever. It might help to remember that we are just putting that particular piece of the holiday on hold until we feel able to resume it.
- If giving to others helps you feel better this holiday season, then do it. Many people find distraction from grief in spending time on others. However, if it feels like a burden, or if you just don't have the energy, it's okay to step back a bit this year.
- Consider sharing the responsibility for the holiday among several family members.
- While it's important to touch base with family members and special friends, limiting the time you spend at family and social gatherings can conserve precious energy.
- Gift certificates, catalog or internet shopping, and gifts of cash or checks can help you avoid distressing shopping trips.
- You might consider skipping cards or sending them more selectively the first year – your friends and family will understand.
- Recognize that your mood and energy level may change unexpectedly, and allow yourself the option of changing your mind about commitments, even at the last minute, or to leave an event early if you need to.

**Plan ahead, and consider changing your routines.** Families that sit down together and discuss the holiday ahead of time can avoid some of the fatigue and disappointment that can surface. After a loss, some people are more comforted by keeping things as close to normal as possible, while others prefer to do something completely different. Find the mixture and balance that's just right for you. Having a meal at a different location or different time of day can help; going out to eat may also ease some stress. You may choose to change how holiday decorations are done, or to open gifts at a different time or location. Involve children and teens in planning for the holiday, and make sure to prepare them for any changes in holiday routines.

**Celebrate the memory of your loved one.** Many families choose to set aside a special time or create a special way in which to honor the memory of those who are no longer with them. Everyone will be thinking of the person who is gone anyway, and having a constructive way to acknowledge the loss together is helpful. Some people make a gift or donation in their loved one's name. Others light a candle or put out a picture or photo album. A time to share favorite stories or memories can also be valuable. Each family member's presence becomes especially important after there has been a loss. You may not feel like the best of company, but your loved ones still need some time with you on special days.

**Take care of yourself.** Eat well, and try to get enough rest. Limit sugar and alcohol; they throw body chemistry off-balance, making emotions even more intense. Make time for activities that you find healing, such as listening to music, taking a walk, spending extra time in bed, or whatever else helps you to feel better.

**Let yourself feel.** Expect ups and downs, and be patient with yourself. Remember too that it's all right to have good times; some people feel guilty if they let themselves enjoy the holidays. Laughter and enjoyment are still important parts of living, and do not mean that you miss your loved one any less.

**Communicate your feelings and your needs.** Share your thoughts, feelings, and memories with those who are comfortable listening, and reach out for help when you need it. Let friends or family know if you need someone to talk to, a shoulder to cry on, or someone to help with something your loved one always did with you or for you during the holidays.

**Be gentle to yourself.** As you approach the holidays, don't expect them to be "perfect." Be accepting of the moods you find yourself experiencing; of projects or events you decide you do or don't want to do; of things that don't turn out the way you had hoped or planned. Be patient with yourself as you move through the changes grief brings. Remember: grief is both a necessity and a privilege. It comes as a result of giving and receiving love.