

Grieving and the Holidays

The holidays can be difficult if one is grieving. This time of year is filled with messages and wishes that can sharply contrast how one is feeling. The television and media portray happy families celebrating with smiles, laughter, and joy. The discrepancy between what is shown and how the grieving person feels can enhance a sense of loss and loneliness.

Listening to oneself and remembering to consider where one may have a choice is very important. Some people find comfort in following long-held traditions, and other people may have little to no desire to celebrate or even acknowledge the holidays. Breaking away from doing what is expected from others is often not easy. A young parent, who has lost their spouse, may feel obligated to provide some “normalcy” for their children. An older person, who has hosted a holiday meal for many years, may feel more loss at the prospect of not continuing that tradition. Once again, there is no right or wrong in how one proceeds, and it is essential to listen to oneself.

If part of a family where others are also grieving, it is vital to communicate with the other family members. Perhaps one member of the family feels strongly about wanting the usual decorations put up around the house, and another family member may resist this idea. Maybe they can reach a compromise of doing some but less than usual. Listening with openness and compassion will contribute to the healing process.

Grief ebbs and flows, and it comes with unpredictability. It is usual for someone not to know how they might feel approaching a family event or tradition, which can be part of the conversation when discussing plans. Having the choice to change one's mind can be important when so much else has been out of the person's control. With good intentions, family and friends may encourage participation in the usual celebrations and gatherings. Listen to yourself and make decisions based on your energy and desires. Grief changes with time, and what feels unbearable this year may feel possible next year.

I have had the honor of co-creating and co-facilitating seasonal grief sessions at Beaver Brook in Hollis, NH. The one held recently was on a chilly November morning. The staff at Beaver Brook has been so kind in supporting our grief sessions. They worked hard on a breezy morning to make a fire for our grief community. Circling the fire, participants openly shared their thoughts and feelings as they anticipate the holiday season. There were both tears and laughter as people shared memories. I found myself, once again, filled with awe and gratitude to bear witness to the resilience of the human spirit. People came bundled up, eager to connect, and grateful for the group and the exquisite venue. They were good-humored about the chill in the air and the wafting smoke from the fire.

I was particularly touched by the generosity of one of our participants, who lost his wife last winter. He gave each participant a gift bag with a wood carving that said: "Forever in our Hearts." I know that this took a lot of time and effort, but he was delighted in the response from others. He spoke about how this project allowed him to reconnect with a hobby he had avoided since his wife died. Even in the face of grieving, contributing to others can bring comfort.

In the end, despite the chill in the air, it was an extremely warm event. I hope that everyone can find peace and warm moments in the weeks ahead.

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