

TIP SHEET: HANDLING LOSS DURING THE HOLIDAYS

The holiday season fosters expectations of celebration and joyful connection, with images of home, hearth, and unbounded happiness, but there's another side, too. This gleeful season can induce blue moods and depression, especially for those who are in the midst of grief or loss. If you have recently experienced the death of a loved one, job loss, a divorce, illness or accident, relocation, or other significant life change, here are ten ways you can prepare for, and get the most out of, your holidays in spite of it all.

- 1. Anticipate ups and downs.** For a start, the stirring, evocative Christmas music alone is enough to trigger feelings of sadness, guilt, reverie, or loneliness, even in good times! Such blatant sentimentality can really get to you when your heart is heavy with loss. Other kinds of music (or even silence) can offer welcome relief.
- 2. Outline a plan.** Structure helps during times of hardship, but this doesn't mean you must be rigid or over schedule yourself. Take one day at a time. Make plans to spend time with supportive loved ones. Create a positive, affirming phrase for yourself such as, "I can handle this." Make it your holiday mantra and repeat as needed.
- 3. Give yourself some time to be alone.** Too much merriment or mingling might not fit this year so don't force it. Set aside time for reflecting on happy memories and better times as an outlet for your feelings, but don't let the reverie become self-punishing.
- 4. Accept reality.** Remind yourself that things feel different because they are. You can't change reality so don't spend too much time wishing for what used to be. Instead of asking why, ask yourself how you can best adjust to your "new normal" with as little anger, self-sacrifice, or bitterness as possible. Granted, this can be difficult, depending on the circumstances of your loss. Be good to yourself and just do your best to accept.
- 5. Review all of the things you still feel grateful for, despite your loss.** There are still some things you feel grateful for, so write them down on a sheet of paper. Add to your list. Keep it handy; reread it, or even carry it with you as a positive reminder.
- 6. Volunteer.** Doing a good deed for someone who is needy, lonely, or ill can cleanse your spirit. Positive acts take you "outside of yourself" for a moment and can lend perspective, such as realizing there are others who are even worse off than you.
- 7. If you need to, set aside a "grieving time" but keep it healthy.** On the first two anniversaries of my son Robbie's accidental work-related death, I set aside the day for grieving, which included reading his autopsy report. Finally realizing what a torturous ritual this was, I chose to then honor the day he was born, not the day he died.
- 8. Commit to taking extra good care of yourself, mentally, physically, and spiritually.** Get adequate sleep and engage in moderate exercise when you can. Walk the dog. Add some healthy self-nurturing practices to your daily routine. Pray. Meditate. Avoid detrimental self-indulgences such as binge eating, drinking, or grudge shopping.

9. Don't keep your feelings bottled up. A “healing ritual” can help ease some of your loss or hurt. One family lit a candle every day for two weeks, before and after Christmas, after the death of their father to signify his presence in their hearts. Other families have bought or made a holiday symbol or ornament to commemorate their loved one in the military. If you're missing a loved one, write a letter to yourself, or to him or her. Or put down in words what your loved one might want to say to you. Keep or dispose of this document as you see fit.

10. Maintain your faith. It sounds like a cliché to say that time heals when you're in the throes of grief, but it is so true. We all need hope and optimism. Sometimes, focusing on the good in others helps heal some of our hurt. Remembering that many people, later on, define job loss or a health challenge as, “The best thing that ever happened to me!” may ease some of your anguish. Time is a powerful salve for hurt. Be kind to yourself and let time do its work.

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