

Coping with Christmas
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Grief is like periodontitis: it gets right down to the root of your nerves. And once they are exposed, well, then even the tiniest spoon of ice cream or a mere sip of hot coffee makes you flinch with pain. Should this condition coincide with the holiday season, with its additional socio-culinary emphasis on hot and cold, sweet and more sweet, you have all the ingredients for abject misery: you may feel reluctant to participate in anticipation of the pain you have learned to expect, and you may also feel lonely and isolated as people around you fail to understand the extent of your—invisible—anguish.

It is helpful to understand why Christmas is so tough on the bereaved. Several factors converge here. Ever since the loss of our loved ones, numerous Sundays and Thursdays, first and last days of the week, new months have come and gone. We have developed a certain routine in coping with “normal” dated. Not so with Christmas. It poses a new situation.

Not only that, but the holidays are intimately associated with family. To those of us who have lost a close relative, Christmas seems to serve only as an especially painful reminder of how our lives have changed.

For many of us, the already highly emotionally-charged event of the death of our dear ones occurred around that time. We struggle to juggle anniversary time with celebrations, memories of Christmas past with Christmas present. At the same time, we might still need to function, do the Christmas thing, for other members of the family, regardless of the sap to our own energy in this dark time of the year.

And there is another thing. All of this goes on forever. The build up to Christmas, the day itself, the aftermath, New Year. It is all pervading. Everywhere we go, festive lights, abseiling Santas, strains of “Dreaming of a White Christmas” and constant rejoinders to have “a really merry Christmas” produce that familiar dull ache. Christmas is a real pain.

So what can we do? After experimenting through five Christmas seasons and conferring with assorted bereaved friends, I have come up with the following strategies, suggestions or adjustments.

- Remind yourself—frequently—that the holidays constitute an exceptional situation which, however, is restricted to a foreseeable period of time. They will pass.
- Put the holidays in their place. By that I mean, cut them (and the potential agony) down to December 24 and/or 25. You can achieve that by reducing preparations to a minimum and simply keeping those additional festivities, such as over-cheerful office parities, at bay. Conserve your energy.

- If your family situation allows, you might consider eliminating Christmas from your calendar altogether. Going away on vacation would be the ideal solution—if it brings relief, why not? It doesn't have to become a fixed routine.
- You can still involve your loved ones in Christmas: e.g. each December, my son receives a new present (a new dried flower arrangement, picture frame, plants for the grave, etc.) from me. Any Christmas cards that turn up, we display them in his corner of the living room. In my head—and sometimes out of it—I have long chats with him about what we are doing. It helps to imagine that he somehow got the picture and so remains an integral part of our family Christmas.
- If Christmas day gets you down, pour your thoughts out onto paper. Memories of shared holidays, how you feel today, anything you like. Dedicate them to your loved one, seal them in an envelope and keep it near you until the holidays are over. They are your “lifelines.”

Above all, remember this, if the going gets tough: toothache is inevitable at its excruciating worst as soon as the dental office has just closed for the weekend. Come Monday morning, it has often miraculously disappeared.