

How to Help Ourselves Through the Holidays

In our lives there are many holidays or special days, such as birthdays, anniversaries, graduations, weddings, and Easter, to name a few. These are all difficult days for the bereaved, but for many, the most difficult holiday of the year is Christmas. This day more than any other means family together. They are synonymous and it is at this time we are so acutely aware of the void in our lives. For many the wish is to go from Dec. 24 to Dec. 26. We continually hear Christmas Carols, people wishing everyone, "Merry Christmas"; see the perfect gift for our dead child, spouse, or relative and suddenly realize they will not be here. Listed below are some ideas and suggestions that others have found helpful in coping with the Holiday Season. Choose the ones that will help you.

1. Family get-togethers may be extremely difficult. Be honest with each other about your feelings. Sit down with your family and decide what you want to do for the holiday season. Don't set expectations too high for yourself or the day. If you wish things to be the same, you are going to be disappointed. Do things a little differently. Undertake only what each family member can handle comfortably.
2. There is no right or wrong way to handle the day. Some may wish to follow family traditions, while others may choose to change.
3. Keep in mind the feelings of your children or family members. Try to make the holiday season as joyous as possible for them.
4. Be careful of "shoulds." It is better to do what is most helpful for you and your family. If a situation looks especially difficult over the holidays, don't get involved if possible.
5. Set limitations. Realize that it isn't going to be easy. Do the things that are very special and/or important to you. Do the best that you can.
6. Once you have made the decision on the role you and your family will play during the holidays, let relatives and friends know.
7. Baking and cleaning the house can get out of proportion. If these chores are enjoyable, go ahead, but not to the point that it is tiring. Either buy baked goods or go without this year.
8. If you used to cut your own tree, consider buying it already cut this year. Let your children, other family members, neighboring teens, friends, or people from your church help with the decorating of the tree and house. If you choose not to have a tree this year, get a ceramic tree or a small table top tree.
9. Emotionally, physically, and psychologically it is draining. You need every bit of strength. Try to get enough rest.
10. What you choose to do the first year you don't have to do the next.
11. One possibility for the first year may be to visit relatives, friends, or even go away on a vacation. Planning, packing, etc., keeps your mind somewhat off the holiday and you share the time in a different and hopefully less painful setting.
12. How do we answer, "Happy Holidays?" You may say, "I'll try" or "Best wishes to you." You think of many answers that you don't say.
13. If shopping seems to be too much, have your relative or close friend help you. Consider shopping through a catalogue.

14. If you are accustomed to having Christmas dinner at your home, change and go to relatives, or change the time (instead of 2 p.m., make it 4 p.m.). Some find it helpful to be involved in the activity of preparing a large meal. Serving buffet style and/or eating in a different room may help.
15. Try attending religious services at a different time or church or synagogue.
16. Some people fear crying in public, especially at religious services. It is usually better not to push the tears down any time. You should be gentle with yourself and not expect too much of yourself. Worrying about crying is an additional burden. If you let go and cry, you probably will feel better. It should not ruin the day for other family members, but will provide them with the same freedom.
17. Cut back on your card sending. It is not necessary to send cards, especially to those people we will see over the holidays.
18. Do something for someone else, such as volunteer work at soup kitchens or visit the lonely and shut-ins. Ask someone who is alone to share the day with your family. Provide help for a needy family.
19. Donate a gift or money in your loved one's name.
20. Share your concerns, feelings, apprehensions, etc. with a relative or friend as the holiday approaches. Tell them that this is a difficult time for you. Accept their help. You will appreciate their love and support at this time.
21. Holidays often magnify feelings of loss of a loved one. It is important and natural to experience the sadness that comes. To block such feelings is unhealthy. Keep the positive memory of the loved one alive.
22. Often after the first year the people in your life may expect you to be over it. We are never over it but the experience of many bereaved is that eventually they enjoy the holidays again. Hold on to **HOPE**.
23. Don't forget, anticipation of any holiday is so much worse than the actual holiday.

—from *Hope for the Bereaved* (now out of print)