

Getting Past Christmas

*Practical Tips For Surviving December
After The Death of a Loved One*

--Carlene Veso Enroth

It had always been easy to name Christmas my favourite holiday of the year. Easy, that is, until 1982. That year my husband, Greg, died of a sudden heart attack while water skiing. He was only 31 years old.

In that one August moment, my world basically quit. Walking out of the emergency room into the still-brilliant sunshine of that hot August day, I was amazed to hear cars roaring by on the freeway; kids laughing at Wild Waters across the street. Naively, I assumed that because my whole life had come to a screeching halt, the sun would refuse to shine and silence would reign. That didn't happen! Somehow, I struggled through those first horrendous weeks and months and then endured by first Christmas. That is the only appropriate description.

But, as time went by and I was in contact with others who hurt as I did, their one consistent question was: "How will I get through Christmas?" Not having any good tips to give out, I sought help at the library. Looking through books and magazines, I came up with nothing. Finally, as I met others who had walked (and often crawled) along that survival road, they began sharing an idea here and there that helped them over this huge *Holiday Hurdle*. We share some of them here for you.

Buy a beautiful Christmas candle and light it each day through December. One mother remembered, *Every time that candle was lit, the whole house seemed warmer. It was my daily, silent reminder of him and it made me feel so much better!*

Plan your shopping trips ahead of time or try creative alternatives.

Try shopping at a different mall or set of stores. Yes, the gifts are about the same but there aren't memories of shopping there with that special someone. Go early in the day, before bumping into all those merry shoppers. Make a specific shopping list and determine to stay within your budget. In lieu of the malls, consider giving some of your loved one's treasured possessions as gifts: favourite books, cassettes, photography, art, tools. Enclose a card explaining why this gift was chosen and maybe some of the background. Shopping by mail is also an option. Specialty catalogues are available for everything from sports equipment and clothes to calendars and household items. Perhaps you'd be most comfortable making out a cheque for each one on your list. Exchanges are not required with a cheque. It's always the right size and colour!

Enlist the help of others in wrapping your gifts.

Many friends are only too happy to help, but need to be asked. You supply the paper, ribbon and tags. You don't have wrapping paper or can't bear to look over what you do have? Collect the colored comic pages from Sunday newspapers and use them as wrap, attaching a pretty bow when you're done. Don't worry: this is the one year you can do a lot of *strange* things (like this) and people will accept it!

Consider changing your traditional family Christmas note.

Often, just putting your thoughts on paper takes more energy than you have. Other family members might add their thoughts this year. You may feel good getting to talk about your family tragedy. Feel free to include a picture of your loved one and a copy of the obituary. I did this, secretly hoping people would respond by return mail and comment on Greg's picture.

Give yourself permission to change family traditions.

Have you always hosted Christmas dinner? Are presents traditionally opened on Christmas Eve or on Christmas morning? Talk over possible changes with your family, asking for a new host/hostess this year. Switch time for presents. This may provide a few less painful memories. We often assume that Christmas means a big turkey dinner, yet many say their hardest holiday job is fixing that bird. Why? Someone special who used to help with that job or just "dug in" at mealtime, is now missing. If you do the cooking, switch your main meal to ham, roast or chicken. I know one family who now serves prime rib for the holidays. It's also difficult to sit down at a decorated food-laden feast, only to have your eye fall on the empty place now at your table. Instead of having this do you in for the day, turn your table into a buffet line. Set up TV trays for guests, in the living room. Neighbors or friends would be delighted to loan you their trays if you don't have enough. Another option is making reservations out for dinner. Let someone else be the chef this year.

Try a new idea when you are getting ready to hang up Christmas stockings.

You want to hang them all up but feel a little strange about it. Tell your family that through December they each will have a note card and can use it to write a note to the person who is gone. These could be a few phrases or a whole paragraph; relating something funny that has happened, some accomplishment or how much that person is missed. Put each note in the stocking, deciding to either read these cards together on a special evening or just letting family take them out to read whenever they wish. The best plan is to make this a new family tradition by keeping the cards in the stocking from year to year...it becomes a mini-family diary!

Determine to do one special thing for someone else in December.

Decide who that will be and put the name on your calendar so you won't forget. Maybe you know someone who is hurting like you or a lonely neighbor who could use a short visit. Perhaps you could make cookies to give away (or buy them, when cooking is too much work), pick out a special card to send or take a plant to someone. One grieving family adopted a needy neighbor and spent three weeks

gathering gifts and goodies to leave at her door on Christmas Eve. The season is a little easier when our eyes are focused, even for a brief time, on someone else.

Contribute to your favourite charity in your loved one's name.

You could choose the Christmas Club that helps the less fortunate through your local newspaper or youth organization or a church in your area. When writing the cheque, take time to jot down a note that introduces the one in whose memory the gift is given. Oh, it feels good to share about this to special family members! One widow came up with a fantastic idea that combines the best of these plans. She went out and bought an entire outfit that would have fit her husband. She found classy jeans, a cowboy shirt, belt, socks and even underwear. Then she went home, baked his favourite cookies and put them in a small package, around which she packed the entire outfit. Wrapping it up, she left a note on it at her local homeless mission, which said, *Please give to a man size 33.*

Pamper yourself this month.

Determine to buy yourself a present. It might be something you need or just an item you've always wanted. Stay within your budget as you shop. Have the store gift wrap it or enlist a friend's help to wrap it and surprise you with pretty paper and ribbon. Don't wait until the 25th to open it but pick a particularly tough day and let the present be your reward for getting through it. This worked well for me. I had spotted a peach ski jacket while window shopping but couldn't think of a justified reason to buy it. However, working on Christmas Eve in a store with lots of happy last-minute shoppers exclaiming *Merry Christmas was harder than I'd figured.* Remembering the jacket, I thought, *Maybe I should treat myself today!* So I did. It felt so good to put it on, thinking *it's my surprise gift from Greg.* Although I don't wear it much now, it still hangs in my closet as a silent reminder that I did make it through that first holiday.

Plan on taking time to cry.

It is normal to have to cry during the holidays. So many sights, places, aromas and sounds are instant memory-grabbers. Because it isn't healthy to hold back emotions, schedule *tear times* into your day. Pick a certain length of time to cry, ten minutes, maybe, or even an hour, whatever makes you comfortable. Play some old Christmas music that easily starts those tears (*I'll Be Home For Christmas* is guaranteed to do the job for me!). Set a clock or kitchen timer for your pre-determined minutes and then cry your heart out. You'll find it easier to face whatever else is coming up in December when you've had your daily time for tears.

We hope some of these tips can make this hard holiday just a bit easier. Christmas depression is common even when you aren't grieving. This year you can realistically expect it to be worse.