

# Grief and Resilience During the Holiday Season



"The grief in the human heart needs to be attended to by rituals and practices that when practiced, will lessen anger and allow creativity to flow anew." *Matthew Fox*

For many bereaved individuals, the holiday season is a time of sadness because their loved ones aren't present in physical form. We all respond to that sadness in different ways, and methods of coping can span a vast spectrum. Some choose to skip the holidays altogether, abandoning traditional family customs that are painful reminders of holidays past. Others continue -- and enhance -- those traditions by including departed loved ones in new rituals specifically designed to bring their presence into the festivities.

You may (or may not) be surprised to learn that there is very little research on *resilience* in the grief process for modern Western society. This is partly because much of the research is based on reports from people who sought counseling because grief had become unmanageable for them. Another reason is that our culture is more focused on individualism and emotion than many other cultures, and we put more emphasis on feelings than on rituals and behaviors.<sup>1</sup> But there have recently been studies<sup>2</sup> showing that, for example, the majority of bereaved parents develop deeper spirituality and a sense of being better persons as the result of their losses, and they experienced a change in values toward helping others more than material concerns. Some families established new bonds and developed a renewed sense of closeness.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bonanno, G. A. (2009). *The other side of sadness: What the new science of bereavement tells us about life after loss*. New York: Basic Books. P. 48

<sup>2</sup> Balk, D. E., Wogrin, C., Thornton, G., & Meagher, D. K. (Eds.). (2013). *Handbook of thanatology: The essential body of knowledge for the study of death, dying, and bereavement*. Northbrook, IL: Association for Death Education and Counseling, The Thanatology Association. P. 177

In other words, loss and bereavement does not have to devastate us, and we may be more resilient than we think.

You may also be surprised to learn that the term “grief work” was coined by Sigmund Freud in his 1913 essay, *Mourning and Melancholia*. He proposed that the mourning process should result in detachment from the memories and emotions that linked us to the departed. The process of gradual detachment is extremely painful, but without breaking that bond (said Freud), we are not able to heal.

Freud was not a big fan of mysticism and spirituality, and what he didn't realize was that those bonds CANNOT be broken. If he'd followed the lead of mourning practices in other cultures, he might have learned that *maintaining* those bonds produces much healthier outcomes. Fortunately, today's grief theorists know this, and we now understand grief as a series of phases or tasks that include what researcher William Worden calls “relocating the deceased” in one's life.

Think about how powerful that word is... *relocating*. It has both a physical and a non-physical application. In the three-dimensional world where we gather with family during the holidays, decorate a tree and sit down to a big dinner, the departed is no longer present -- physically -- in that location. But from a metaphysical perspective, most of us sense or understand that the person has merely moved to a different location in time/space. And knowing this can help us create meaningful rituals to make the holidays a little less heartbreaking.

So this year, instead of focusing on the absence of your departed loved ones, consider focusing on their *presence* by inviting them to the festivities. Create symbolic representations in the same way Christians use bread and wine to represent the body of Jesus, or Jews set a place for at the Passover table for the prophet Elijah. At your holiday dinner, set a place for your loved one with a lit candle on the plate, or several candles to represent all those who could not be physically present. Serve their favorite foods, and have everybody at the table share a special memory of the person during dinner. My son loved our Winter Solstice celebrations, and every year since his death I have purchased a new ornament for our Solstice tree in his honor. His favorite color was gold, so my tree is decorated with gold ornaments that have his name written on them. I feel his presence more at this time of year than any other, and even though there will always be some sadness, I primarily feel the energy flowing between us through unbreakable, eternal fibers of love.

Sad memories and feelings are more easily healed and balanced when we invite them in rather than push them away. Our loved ones are still very much a part of us, and they want us to share the light with them. There is no better time of year than the winter holidays, when the light is exactly what we're celebrating!

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