

## **Holiday Depression—Grief Revisited**

**Jon E. Williams, Ph.D**

Most of what we call “holiday depression” seems to be an anniversary reaction which reactivated grief over losses we have suffered in the past. This returning to grieve again tends to affect us all but especially those who lost close family members in childhood and also those who are suffering from major addiction or physical or mental illness.

In addition to grief revisited, there are also the neurotic depressions which contribute to holiday blues. These often result from the unwanted pressures and obligation to buy and give gifts that are frequently not well received, from the inevitable disappointment of having expectations which are too high to be realized, and from re-experiencing “never having, doing or being enough” to satisfy the American Dream of “onward, upward, bigger, better.”

The theme of loss runs through all of the holiday blues, even the neurotic depression created by the craziness of our culture. Significant losses in childhood are particularly hard to grieve at the time the loss occurred. Holidays often become the anniversary triggers for revisiting the original loss, a time to grieve a little more. For some persons a particular holiday or birthday is difficult; for others any holiday or a whole season may trigger a recurrence of yearning, sadness and other signs of grief.

In children who were very small at the time of the death of a family member, the holiday blues may be triggered by the shortening of the day as the season changes. The anniversary reaction is especially evident when the loss is associated with a change from daylight-savings time. Like other living creatures, children seem to keep track of the seasons with these light changes, and their grief may recycle in accordance with them.

The first holiday following the death of a family member, a divorce or marital separation, or a child leaving home may be especially difficult, often for all members of the family. The holiday symbolizes a permanent change in the family which must be mourned. The grieving may be particularly difficult if the family has not learned how to grieve together.

Holiday depression raises the old debate about the similarities and difference between depression and grief. It is true that grief looks like depression and that unresolved grief can contribute to the development of clinical depression. Gerald Klerman has found that many depressions are precipitated by losses and reminder of loss including holidays. Klerman had also found that depressions may be used as a defense against mourning. If, for example, we direct the anger in grief against ourselves to form what Freud called depression, then the anger is deflected away from that which is lost and we avoid dealing with the ambivalent feelings which are central to the grief process. We defer the time of open mourning. Holidays frequently breach our defenses by reminding us of our losses.

William Worden, a Harvard specialist in grief counseling, expresses the following distinction between grief and depression:

“In depression as well as grief, you may find the classic symptoms of sleep disturbance, appetite disturbance, and intense sadness. However, in grief reaction, there is not the loss of self-esteem commonly found in most clinical depressions. That is, the people who have lost someone do not regard themselves less because of such a loss or if they do, it tends to be only for a brief time. And if the survivors of the deceased experience guilt, it is usually guilt associated with some specific aspect of the loss rather than a general overall sense of culpability.”

What is the positive side of holiday depression? What can we gain from grief revisited? Holiday depression can challenge the shallow values of our culture and lead us to appreciate (through reactivated grief) that which has been lost. It can also help us to accept loss as a part of life and grieving as a gift for growth.

Holidays are often family times in which we can learn to grieve together. This not only helps through integrating our losses but also through reconciling us with each other and with those who are gone. Holidays are a time to appreciate our losses, both individually and as a family and community. As Ann Stearns says, “All of us have both the right and the responsibility to take our losses seriously. Grief and pain, when ignored or denied, can do us in, harming us in dozens of ways. Facing our losses is part of how we find our freedom again.”

Holidays, then, can be a time of both sadness and joy, a time of remembrance and of transpersonal awareness which unites us with all that has come before us, a true celebration of the communion of saints.

So, acknowledge the *gift* of “holiday depression.” Enjoy the holidays and appreciate the gift of grief revisited.