

Bereavement and Coping: The Season of Light
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It's dark outside, and it's only 4:30 am. It's cold. Frost traces delicate etching across the frozen window panes and filters what little light is left of the day.

Already the gloom has descended. Tiny flickers of light begin to penetrate the darkness as we try to chase away the night with the warmth of candles and lamps.

But the lights we turn on do not seem to pierce the emptiness of this winter season. As we set the dishes and count the silverware, we are acutely aware of the empty places at the family. We try to find the holiday spirit, but when the *family circle* has been broken by death, the only things that sparkle this season, may be tears. Instead of bringing warmth, love and excitement, the holiday seasons can be a painful reminder of the empty space at the table, of the terrible hole in the family fabric.

The holiday seasons can be a time when the *past* and the *present* collide. We try to recapture what we once had or blot out bad memories. We try to ignore the empty chair. It is a time of short days and longer nights, of icy winds, cold hands and empty hearts

While most of the world seems to be addressing holiday greeting cards and planning holiday menus, the bereaved are struggling with other concerns: How long does grief last? Will the holidays always be *this awful*? How many stockings do we hang? What do we do with the empty place at the table? What is there to be thankful for *this* year?

Maybe nothing seems quite right in your house or in your heart this season. Can you ever be happy again? Will the sights and sounds of the holiday season ever touch you again? Will there ever be *light* again?

We hold our breath and hope the holidays go quickly. We doubt we can endure too long. We sit in the dark, because we think we have forgotten the light.

We wish for some sign of hope in this season of icicles...some magical sign that will keep us going until the warmth of spring arrives. We turn on all the lights in an attempt to chase away the grief.

There must be light somewhere! No matter how shattered our lives, how fragmented our dreams, there must be hope somewhere!

Our loved ones have died. We did not lose them or the love we share. Practice thinking and saying, "My loved one died," not, "I lost my loved one." Our loved ones are still and always will be a part of us. We cannot lose their love.

Sometimes, especially in the early months and even years of grief, all we can remember is the pain and horribleness of our loved ones death. Pain seems to over-shadow everything.

At first, all I could remember were the awful things. I kept track of all the things I didn't have any more and made mental lists of the things I would never know or experience. Joy had been buried one afternoon in late fall and there was to be no light for us...ever again.

But, as I *lived* through those memories, I discovered that the pain of this darkness could change its intensity and its depth. Slowly, gently, as I allowed them to, those painful memories faded and were replaced, in time, with memories of his smile, his *life* days, not his *death* days.

I began to remember that my loved one *lived*...not just that he died. His light had given birth to our happiness and once I acknowledged the darkness, the light could begin to peek through!

So, in this season of little light...

Be patient with yourself

Know that hardly anyone is as happy as you think they might be. We all have our hurts to bear. Do what you can this season and let it be enough.

Be realistic

It will hurt, but don't try to block bad moments. Be ready for them. Lay in a supply of tissues. Let those hurting moments come, deal with them and let them go.

Be kind and gentle to yourself

Figure out what you should do, balance it with what you are capable of doing and then compromise. Forgive yourself for living.

Plan ahead

Grieving people often experience a lack of concentration. Make lists. Prioritize everything. Decide what is really important to you.

Listen to yourself

As you become aware of your needs, tell family members and friends.

Ask for help when you need it

Take care of yourself physically

Eat right. Exercise (or at least watch someone else). Gift wrap some broccoli. If nothing else, jog your memory!

Change something

Everything has already changed, so don't be afraid to change some traditions. Try whatever pops into your head. You can always stop if it doesn't feel quite right or doesn't

work! But don't toss out everything this year. Keep some traditions. You choose which ones.

Leave the word "ought" out of this holiday season

Hold on to your wallet and charge cards

You can't buy away grief, but you might be tempted to try.

Understand....

That the heartaches will be unpacked as you sift through the decorations, but so, too, are the warm loving memories of each piece. Don't deny yourself the gift of healing tears.

Share your holidays

With someone, anyone! Ride the ferry, visit a soup kitchen or nursing home, spend an evening at the bus station. There are lots of lonely people who could use your love and caring.

Work at lifting depression

Take responsibility for yourself. We cannot wait for someone else to wrap up some joy and give it to us. We have to do that for ourselves. Think of things you enjoy and give yourself a treat.

Hang the stocking

Place a wreath on the grave. Do whatever feels right for you and your family.

Light a special candle

Not in memory of a death, but in celebration of a life and a love shared.

Learn to look for joy in the moment

Get a pair of rose colored glasses and change the way you look at things. Joy happens when we look for it!

Find the gifts of your loved one's life

Think of all the "gifts" that your loved one gave to you...joy, safety, laughter, companionship, etc. list these "gifts" on strips of paper and keep them somewhere close to you. Some may put them in a gift box while others may decide to place them in the stocking. Some may decorate the tree with them or simply keep them in a memory book or in a secret place. But, wherever you place them, know these small strips of paper hold reassures far beyond our capacity to understand. They hold tangible evidence that someone lived. It is a reminder that we did exchange gifts, even if the giver has gone.

Live through the hurt

So that joy can return to warm your heart! This is the season of light...for it is the season when we remember that once we loved and were loved. And that is the greatest light and memory of all!