

Coping with Holidays and Special Days **Kansas City Hospice - (816) 363-2600**

Holidays and special days present challenges even when our lives are running smoothly. These days bring us together to celebrate traditions or honour an individual and the absence of a loved one is deeply felt. Our first family gathering without a loved one can seem overwhelming. Often we aren't just dealing with one day to get through, but a whole season and all the anticipation that goes with it. Other difficult days include birthdays, anniversaries, reunions and graduations. We do have some control over what happens on these days, if we choose to take it. Let's look at the four "Cs" of coping with the holidays and special days.

- **Communicate Your Needs.** Communicate your needs and concerns clearly to those around you. Families that sit down together and discuss the holiday ahead of time do much better and avoid some of the fatigue, resentment and disappointment that can surface. What does each family member need to make it a special day? What can comfortably be put on hold? What changes will make things more bearable? Can the responsibility for the holiday be shared among several family members?
- **Change Your Routines.** A few families stick exactly to traditions, but most families find it helpful to make minor, or very major changes. Having a meal at a different location or different time of day can help. Going out to eat can ease some stress. Opening gifts at a different time or location might work. Families who find worship routines too full of memories have attended a different service with a friend or neighbor. If you find yourself dreading a certain part of the holiday rituals, use your creativity to find an alternative. Sometimes, we worry that if we change or drop a tradition, we will lose it forever. It might help to be clear that we are just putting that particular piece of the holiday on hold until some time has helped with the healing.
- **Cut back on your activities.** Grief is physically and mentally fatiguing. You may also be experiencing some disorientation or lack of motivation and disorganization. Streamlining commitments during holidays is an important self-care activity. You probably won't lose friends if you skip cards or send them more selectively the first year. Gift certificates, catalogs and cheques can help you avoid distressing shopping trips. Limiting the time you spend at family and social gatherings can conserve precious energy. While it's important to touch base with family members and special friends, setting realistic limits is essential. If you find yourself involved in an activity that just doesn't feel good, give yourself permission to withdraw.

- **Celebrate the memory of your loved one.** The word celebrate can also mean “to honour”. Many families chose to set aside a special time or create a special way in which to honour the memory of those who are no longer there to share the special day. Some make a gift or donation in their loved one’s name. Others light a candle or put out a picture or photo album. A time to share favorite stories or memories can be valuable. Everyone will be thinking of the person who is gone anyway, and having a constructive way to acknowledge the loss together is helpful. Each family member’s presence becomes especially important after there has been a loss. You may not feel like the best of company, but your loved ones still need some time with you on special days. And remember that it’s all right to have some good times. Laughter and enjoyment are still important parts of living.

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