

Living with Grief and Loss – Coping with Holidays and Anniversaries

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For those who have read my articles on kitchen coping, you may remember me writing, living with a chronic illness means adapting to various types of limitations, basically doing things differently than we did before the current flare up of symptoms. This same approach applies to living with loss, including the differences, loneliness, fear, anxiety, depression, frustrations, conflicts and other challenges that can arise approaching holidays, birthdays and anniversaries. Holidays do not have to set you back for weeks or months. There are simple steps you can take to conserve your energy, improve your state of mind and actually enjoy yourself this holiday season.

You may feel that you do not want to do anything or see anyone. I encourage you to do at least one thing during a holiday, birthday or anniversaries. You are a human being and human beings are social animals. People need people.

The most obvious yet least often performed task is to make your health the number one priority. Only plan to attend or accept invitations to the number of parties, shopping trips, visits to friends or family and other events that you can do without pushing past your activity threshold. This threshold is the amount of things you can do without getting over tired, without causing dramatically increased muscle or joint pain, sleep deprivation, headaches, anger, negativity, helplessness, hopelessness or other symptoms.

The natural human tendency is to want to do nothing at all or to do more than you should, to perhaps do as much as you used to be able to do before you became single. Special days do not have to be bad days, however, they will be different. You may experience anger or rage at the person who is no longer there. You are here and you have the choice in how you choose to look at the special day.

A healthy choice would be to say to yourself, this [birthday] [valentine's] [Easter] [Christmas] [Chanuka] [Eid Al-Fitr] [wedding anniversary] [death of partner] [date of separation] [date of divorce] will be an opportunity for me to create a new tradition. Creating new traditions is important for your family and friends also. It helps them relate to you in your new situation as a single person instead of the couple you were part of.

Before going out or hosting a party, plan for it. Organize the shopping, cleaning, cooking and other preparations over a period of days or weeks limiting the amount of energy that you spend to the same amount of time you would spend on a typical day if it was not the holidays. Don't try to do everything on the day of an event. If you do, you will be setting yourself up for a flood of emotions, resentments, disappointments, exhaustion or any combination of these.

Try something new, host a pre-planned pot luck instead of you making everything for a dinner. You can get a friend, child or family member to help. This not only shares the workload, it also gives you some quality time to talk with another person while you make preparations and quality time with others during the event. You can make and freeze food in advance. Give yourself time to prepare well in advance so that an event is not a stressor but a stress reliever. The time it takes to prepare for events or shopping well in advance, pays big dividends while hosting or attending the events because you are more rested and having less symptoms. Then if you are experiencing a flood of memories or emotions on the day of the event, the work is done so you can acknowledge your feelings, take a few moments for yourself and then have true friends to spend some time with.

You have a suffered a major loss. You do not have to explain yourself to anyone, or justify why you cannot participate in things. Family and friends need to learn to respect your limitations, not criticize you for them. If they refuse to accept your reality and your needs, sometimes it may be necessary to stay away from or take a vacation from negative people for awhile until they learn to respect you.

Reclaim the holidays and anniversaries on your terms. Be good to yourself by planning ahead and only doing as much as your mind and body are capable of. Your plan may be to go somewhere by yourself and do something that you really enjoy instead of being with a group. That is ok. It is important to listen to what your mind and body are telling you that you need. Rest when you need to. When you absolutely cannot do the cooking, driving or shopping yourself, allow yourself the grace to accept it and then have the wisdom and courage to ask for help from family or a friend. Joy, fun and friendship are good for the body, the mind and the spirit.

The first year as a newly single person can be the hardest as each special day is the "first time" that holiday or anniversary is happening in your new life. You have a right to your feelings. Allow them to surface. Please don't judge your thoughts and feelings, instead, acknowledge them, name them, and decide that if they help you to keep them and if they hurt you emotionally or spiritually, gently let them go. Sometimes you may need a friend to listen to you or a counselor to help you in this process of acknowledging how you feel and in letting go of thoughts or feelings that are hurting you or holding you back.

Ultimately no one else can make you feel better. You are the person with the choices. You can have hope because you have these choices. It is your choice to hold on to hurts, or to treasure happy memories with gratitude, let go of the hurtful memories and then make new memories to bring you peace to allow some new joy and happiness into your new single life. I wish you peace this holiday season and on anniversaries.