

How to Honor Your Loved One During the Holidays

By Linda Lehmann, MA, LP

As the weather chills and fall arrives, you may already be dreading the onset of the holiday season that follows close behind. The thought of the upcoming holiday season may clash with where you are in your grief right at this moment. You may be tempted to get caught up in the frenzy of the holidays in order to avoid the pain of your grief, or you may not be up to any of the traditions of the season because your grief is so enormous and all encompassing.

The challenge to you will be how to find a balance between holding onto the traditions that continue to work for you and your family, letting go of the traditions that no longer work, and finding space and time to remember and reflect on the life and the death of your loved one.

Sometimes loved ones cannot allow themselves to feel any pleasure because it feels like some kind of betrayal to the loved one who died. However, remember, that even when you are not working on your grief, your grief is working on you. Even when you feel moments of pleasure, you are still grieving. The grief is felt in every cell of your body.

Grief is a lot like looking at the sun. Sometimes you have to look away in order to get through it. In order to allow yourself to feel the depth and breadth of your pain, it is necessary to take little breaks from your grief. These little breaks are those moments when you can allow yourself to feel pleasure, to have fun, to smile, or to chuckle.

So, as you make plans for your holidays, build in those moments of fun and relaxation while at the same time being intentional about your grief. This means finding ways to honor your loved one as you feel your deep sense of loss and grief. It calls upon you to make plans, but also to be willing to have "escape plans" if you don't feel up to it. It means being in the moment with your grief.

Now is the time to start thinking about what you will do to make this happen. If you don't, there is a possibility that your grief will go underground and resurface after the holidays in a much more intense way. Or, you will only feel the misery of your grief and miss out on the joy you can feel, despite your grief.

Following are suggestions of ways to honor your loved one over the holidays:

- * Burn a candle throughout the holiday season in memory of your loved one. Pick a scent that is pleasing to you. Burn the candle especially when the family spends time together such as meals. If you celebrate Chanukah, recall a memory for each of the eight nights that you light the Menorah.

- * Make a centerpiece for your holiday table in memory of your loved one to acknowledge him or her to yourself and to others.

- * Place a holiday tree at the grave and solicit others to help you decorate it.
- * Buy a tree ornament each in memory of your loved one and hang it on the tree.
- * String popcorn and cranberries together and put them on trees outside to feed the birds. Sometimes nurturing others gets us outside of our own pain for a while, especially when we nurture beings that depend on us.
- * Find a child in need that is the same age that your child would have been and buy him or her a holiday gifts.
- * Nurture yourself by surrounding yourself with the sights, sounds, smells, and the taste of the season. There is something very comforting about the familiarity of the things we associate with the holidays in the past. They remind us even though our lives were forever changed by death of our loved one, some things never change and remind us of the rhythm of life.
- * Wrap up a beloved keepsake or picture of your loved one and give it to another family member who is grieving.
- * Recall memories and stories from holidays in the past that you celebrated with your loved one.
- * Donate money to your favorite charity in memory of your loved one.
- * As a family, sit down and talk about what things you want to change about the holidays and what things you want to keep the same.
- * Sometimes changing the setting of where you celebrate the holidays can help to bring a fresh perspective and ease some of the pain.

These ideas are just suggestions. Remember that you do not have to be a victim to the holiday season. By being intentional about the holidays, it will help you feel like you are more in control and help you enjoy parts of it despite your very painful loss.

The loss of a child affects the whole family, and children and parents will influence each other. Consequently, it is important for children to observe their parents nurturing themselves and setting an example in grieving in whatever way feels right for the family.

The challenge for both children and adults following the death of a loved one is to work through grief in a way that you can draw meaning from the loss and continue life. With support, communication, and acknowledgement of the loss, bereaved siblings may be able to develop unique maturity, resiliency, and empathy in the midst of this tragedy.

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