

Coping with Loss During the Holidays

While the holidays can be a time of joy and often greater connection with family and friends, the holidays can also serve as a reminder of loss for many people — an annual reminder of the people and experiences that they once had — which is now no longer present.

And especially when a loss is more recent, people are likely to experience strong emotions, including feelings of grief during the holidays. This is often true with the death of a loved one, but it can also include the losses experienced as the result of a natural disaster or forced immigration — such as with the loss of one's home, possessions, job, daily customs and rituals, sense of safety, control and stability, and even the loss of one's cultural identity. Here are some tips for coping with loss during the holidays:

Accept that the holidays may feel quite different: Try to prepare yourself for feelings of sadness, loss, grief, and mourning. And the holidays may feel much harder right now.

Acknowledge your grief: It's ok to feel sad during the holidays. Allow yourself to mourn and remember that grief is not a linear process — and that everyone grieves in different ways and on their own timeline, try not to bottle up your emotions or feel you have to pretend that everything is ok when it's not.

Plan ways to take care of yourself: Be proactive in building in small moments and experiences that contribute to your sense of well-being, self-care, and that bring you joy or a sense of peace (i.e. being in nature, sitting outside, taking a walk, getting a massage, a haircut, taking a bath, taking the time to eat or cook your favorite meal, stay hydrated, call a comforting friend, write in a journal, or sleep longer than usual, etc.). You may even want to create a “go-to” list of activities or coping skills to use, whether you're at home or at a social function.

Allow yourself permission to feel happiness: Along with feelings of grief, it's also ok to have moments of joy, appreciation, gratitude, and even fun -- and keep in mind that many people who are bereaved do get to a place where they are able to enjoy the holidays again.

Talk to someone who understands: Think about those family members, friends, or even neighbors or colleagues that you feel you can confide in or just enjoy being around, and let them know that you may need a bit more support during this time, if that would be helpful. Connect with others. And don't forget that support is available. Seek professional help if you need it.

Set boundaries: Think about what you feel you can handle during the holidays and let your family and loved ones know. And allow yourself to change your mind about what may feel ok to you. Do what feels right for you at each moment. There are no set rules for how you should or might feel.

Consider re-examining your priorities: Ask yourself what tasks you enjoy during the holidays, which ones you might be able to forgo, and which ones you might be able to share with others. Allow yourself to change your priorities as needed during this challenging time.

Talk about your loved one: Keeping their memory alive can be a source of comfort. Consider telling stories about your loved one, sharing pictures, and/or sharing memories at the dinner table, burning a candle, saying a prayer, or making a toast in honor of your loved one.

Start new traditions: While we may take comfort in honoring old traditions, allow yourself the leeway to start a new tradition or make changes to your holiday customs and traditions that feel more comfortable and appropriate to you. Keep in mind family members may have differing opinions regarding maintaining or changing traditions, so try to talk openly about your thoughts, ideas, and expectations.

Find ways to give back and honor your loved one: Consider doing something special for someone else, volunteering, or planting a tree or flowers, or making a donation in your loved one's honor.

Take things one day at a time: Healing is a process and journey that takes time, so be gentle with yourself as well as with your expectations of others. Allow yourself to take things slowly, and at your own pace, one day, and sometimes one moment, at a time.