

I Can't Face the Holidays!



"I can't face the holidays" is a common complaint I hear from those who have experienced the death of a loved one. The Christmas season brings back many memories of good times that are gone forever. You can't avoid Christmas unless you go to a place where there are no stores, no radio or T.V. and...no people! For most of us that would be impossible to do.

Everywhere we go there are reminders "'tis the season to be jolly." Christmas music fills the air. The stores are filled with people shopping for the special people in their lives. People rush about wishing one another "Merry Christmas" while you feel like replying "Christmas? Humbug!" And then you are caught off guard when you spot the perfect gift for your loved one and then remember he or she is gone.

One of the worst feelings you will experience following the death of a loved one is that of being alone. "I am the only one feeling this way" is a common thought of a grieving person. It may help you to know what to expect of yourself during this difficult time.

Anticipating the worst For many people the anticipation of a holiday is worse than the day itself. The day will come and go and you will get through it.

Fear of preparation You may be a person who has traditionally made elaborate preparations for Christmas. This year you may feel paralyzed with fear over how the preparations will be made.

A wish to avoid the whole season You would love to go away for the holidays, but you can't. "If only there were a way to miss Christmas completely this year."

You feel under a great deal of pressure "Everyone expects me to carry on as if nothing has happened this past year."

You are under pressure to decide what traditions you will keep "Will it appear disrespectful to the one who has died if we change the way we observe Christmas this year?"

Guilt feelings if you are having a good time "I feel guilty because I went to a party last night and had a good time."

Anxiety over doing what is "right". "It is difficult finding the balance between what my family and friends want me to do and what I want to do."

On top of all these feelings, you may experience some of the symptoms of grief that you knew closer to the time of the death: anger, loneliness, sadness, depression and others. This isn't a regression to a phase you thought you had passed through. The holiday season has a way of rekindling some of these feelings. You are OK and you are going to be OK.



SUGGESTIONS FOR COPING WITH THE HOLIDAYS

Light a candle in memory of your loved one. Buy a special candle that you can light to symbolize the spiritual presence of the one who has died. It will provide you with a focus for talking about your loved one during this season.

Eliminate the pressures as much as possible. How much can you do? What do you want to do? Don't set expectations too high. Remember, your needs are important, don't put all your energy into looking after others.

Evaluate family traditions. It is helpful to have a discussion with other family members. Remember to include the children. What do you like and what do you dislike about the way you celebrate Christmas? Is it important to carry on the traditions or is this the time to make changes. Consider each of the following:

The Christmas tree: Where will we put it, who will put it up, when?

Decorations: Should we use the old ones, or should we buy new?

Christmas dinner: where will we have it and when on Christmas Day or Eve.

Gift exchange: Should we change the time that we normally do it?

Church service: If you are in the habit of attending church at Christmas, can you change the time (ie from Christmas Day to Christmas Eve)? Is it possible to attend a different church?

Christmas cards: You may not feel like sending them, but it is a way to keep in touch with people. Some of your friends may not have heard about the death and a card is a good way to send an announcement about the death to friends you only communicate with at Christmas.

If baking and other food preparation are a chore, then save your energy for other things. Buy some of the special food rather than spending time in preparation. You may want to consider sharing the experience with other family members who are also feeling the pain of the season.

Since this is an emotionally and physically draining time, get lots of rest. Make time for yourself.

Do something for someone else who is less fortunate than you. Buy a gift in memory of your loved one and give it to a needy person...or make a donation in memory of him or her. Ask someone who is alone to share Christmas day with you. Making someone else happy is a great antidote to sadness.

There is never a good time to suppress your emotions. Don't do it now! Talk with someone and let them know how you are feeling and accept their support.

Reach out to others for support. If you are alone, invite others over to help decorate the tree. Ask another person to help with food preparation.

Rather than placing all the emphasis on Christmas Day, try to celebrate the season. This may be difficult. But the message of Christmas is one of hope. Every day you live, every event such as Christmas you observe, puts the death of your loved one day further into the past. Live in hope that the future will be brighter and some day you will enjoy Christmas again.

HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH THE HOLIDAYS



There are many factors that hinder children in their grieving process. One of the difficulties children have in dealing with their grief is that they are often discouraged from expressing their thoughts and emotions. Since the grief of a child increases the pain adults are feeling, adults often avoid talking with children about their feelings. Another difficulty arises from the fact that adults do not understand how a child grieves. This is especially true at Christmas. The following are some points that will help children deal with the season ahead.

Include children in any discussion about the holidays. It is a time of great insecurity for them and they need the security and support of the family.

Include the children in any discussion of what Christmas Day will be like. Ask them what they want and what they don't want. It is best to know ahead of time what is going to happen rather than approach the day without any plans.

Get the children's ideas about an appropriate gift or donation in memory of a loved one. Make them part of that exercise.

Children may wish to buy or make a decoration for the tree in memory of the person who had died. This may, or may not, become a permanent decoration on the tree in years to come.

Give children a break from the family. If they need to spend part of Christmas Day with their friends, let them.

Encourage children to talk about the one who has died. This can be a painful experience, but it can prove helpful in allowing them to express their feelings.

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