

Holidays After a Loss

When a loved one has died, holidays, anniversaries, and birthdays often bring fresh memories and a re-experience of the pain of grief. If the death is recent, you might feel numb much of this holiday season, but next year's holidays may send a new wave of grief your way.

It may help you to keep the following in mind:

- Don't be surprised at the intensity of your grief. Feelings of anger, panic, depression, despair, guilt or regret, fearfulness, loneliness, as well as physical symptoms feel stronger during this time. This is normal. It is not a setback; it is how grief is.
- Help yourself by gaining an understanding of the grieving process. Read a book on grief, attend a lecture, or participate in a support group.
- Remember what has helped you earlier in your grieving--these techniques will help you again.
- Tell important people in your life that this is a difficult season and let them know what they can do to help. Don't expect people to remember or to know what to do.
- Don't be surprised if others struggle, too, or if you see others hesitate to speak of the person who died. They are probably afraid they will make you feel sad, and are unsure whether you want to talk about it.

Terry Kettering talks about this problem in the following poem:

The Elephant In The Room

There's an elephant in the room.
It is large and squatting, so it is hard to get
around it.

Yet we squeeze by with, "How are you" and "I'm fine."
And a thousand other forms
of trivial chatter.
We talk about the weather.
We talk about work.
We talk about everything--
except the elephant in the room.

There's an elephant in the room. We all know it is there.
We are thinking about the elephant
as we talk together.
It is constantly on our minds.
For you see, it is a very big
elephant.

It has hurt us all.
But we do not talk about the
elephant in the room.
Oh please, say her name.
Oh please, say "Barbara" again.

Oh please, let's talk about the
elephant in the room.
For if we talk about her death,
Perhaps we can talk about her life?
Can I say "Barbara" to you and not
have you look away?
For if I cannot, then you are leaving
me Alone.....
In a room.....
With an elephant...

As unpredictable as grief is, it is not unusual that times that were shared with loved ones like holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries can cause a huge wave of emotion. These events, once anticipated with joyous pleasure, can be difficult reminders that your loved one is not here to celebrate with you. The good news is that you can help yourself.

Something to keep in mind when holidays approach: for many, the anticipation of a holiday is worse than the actual day. Make a plan for the holiday that is approaching. If it is difficult to decide what you want to do, think about what you *don't* want to do and discuss your plan with your family. Holidays are different for each person. One particular holiday may be very difficult for you but not for others.

The following checklist can start you and your family in making the decisions about an upcoming holiday. Ask each family member to fill out a separate checklist, and then sit down and compare notes. You may have to compromise, but in the end everyone will feel better. This is only a start, and there is room for you to add to this checklist.

The name of this holiday is:

Put a "Y" on the things you want to keep.
Put a "N" on the things you can't face this year.

Do you want to:

____ Stay in town
____ Spend the holiday in a different part of the country.
Where would you like to go? _____

Family Traditions

Write in family traditions connected with this holiday

(for example: Send cards)

Decorating

____ Decorate as usual
____ Modify decorations
____ Ask for help
____ Make changes such as: an artificial tree instead of a real one
____ A special corner decorated in honor of your loved one

Giving Gifts

- As usual
- Give to charity instead of buying gifts for each other
- Give gift certificates
- Give home-made gifts
- Adopt a needy family and buy gifts for them
- Draw names
- Other thoughts and ideas _____

Holidays are high stressors under any circumstances. If you are feeling overwhelmed, find a professional you can talk to, or have a family meeting to alter plans. You may be pleasantly surprised that the holidays turn out to be very special in spite of your concerns.

Resources Are Available

Additional information, self-help tools and other resources are available online at www.MagellanHealth.com. Or call us for more information, help and support. Counselors are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week to provide confidential assistance at no cost to you.