

Grief: Special Days and Holidays

After someone dies, you may find that your grief surfaces again and again. Often this seems to happen ‘out of the blue’ and it may feel like an unwelcome intrusion. You may have been enjoying yourself one moment and then be in tears the next. You may also notice that certain days, holidays or public events are more likely than others to cause your grief to increase or return.

If feelings of grief return or increase – perhaps even years later – you may feel surprised or concerned. It may help to know that the experience of heightened feelings at particular times is a common and normal aspect of the grieving process.

It’s also possible that your grief will seem strangely missing on one or more of these occasions. You may wonder why you aren’t feeling something and become concerned that this is not normal. At these times, the absence of your grief may leave you feeling guilty, confused or distressed.

If your feelings on a special day aren’t what you (or other people) expect, don’t be alarmed. Grief has a timing of its own, sometimes appearing – or disappearing – when we least expect it. This ebb and flow of feelings is very natural and is a sign of healthy coping.

Some of these ‘special’ days are personal or family events, such as birthdays, anniversaries, graduations, reunions or funerals. Other special days may include public holidays or celebrations, such as Christmas, Mother’s Day, Father’s Day or Valentine’s Day. In addition, there may be other public events, such as a celebrity’s funeral or a tragic accident, that tap into your own grief.

Here are some of the feelings you may notice on special days:

- Confusion
- Sadness
- Longing
- Irritability
- Worry
- Frustration

For a period of time you may also experience:

- Loss of appetite
- Difficulty sleeping
- Upset stomach
- Repeating thoughts or memories
- Frequent sighing or need to catch your breath
- Disinterest in usual activities

When we are grieving, it is natural to deeply feel the absence of the person who has died. At special times during the year, this felt absence is often intensified. Remember there is no “right” or “wrong” when it comes to mourning – there is only what works for you, and figuring this out takes practice.

Personal and Family Events

- Weddings, funerals, christenings
- Religious and cultural holidays
- Reunions, graduations
- Birthdays, wedding anniversaries
- Other anniversaries

You may find yourself especially bereft or lonely on special occasions when the person who died would have accompanied you. You may feel at a loss when considering invitations to other people's celebrations or get-togethers. Whether or not you choose to attend, consider reaching out to a supportive friend or family member who will respect your choices and be there for you.

There may be special days when you most keenly miss the person who has died because he or she was the only other person who shared or celebrated an event with you (such as a first date or a shared trip). The anniversary of the person's death is also likely to be a significant day for you. Although these days can be trying, you may find them easier if you make plans ahead of time. How might you spend the day? Are there people you would like to ask to spend time with you? Is there a particular place you'd like to be – or avoid?

Symbolic gestures allow us to acknowledge how loved ones remain a part of our lives even in their absence. They can enrich our celebrations with those who live and survive with us.

Tips for Coping with Personal and Family Events

- Make plans that can be changed.
- Tell friends and family what you need, and ask for their support.
- Include the person in your thoughts, prayers or meditation.
- Celebrate a special day by taking time to do something in memory of the person who died.
- Remind yourself that it's okay to laugh as well as cry.
- Look for ways to honour the person who died. Light a special candle; make a memorial planting in a garden; create a memorial space or scrapbook with photos and mementos; sponsor a memorial award or scholarship; make a donation to a meaningful charity.

Public Holidays and Celebrations

- Easter, Thanksgiving, Halloween
- Mother's Day, Father's Day, Valentine's Day
- Christmas and the winter holiday season

Whether you are in the midst of celebrating your own traditions with family and friends or surrounded by the festivities of others, your grief may be reappear as you are reminded of the person and how deeply the loss of that relationship has impacted you. This may be true for you even if the relationship was difficult or troublesome.

If ever there was a time to treat yourself like a cherished friend, this is it. You may need to lower your own expectations as well as talk to others about what you need. If you cry, let that be okay. Allow yourself to experience any sadness that may come. Make room for your feelings, whatever they may be.

Tips for Coping with Special Days and Holidays

- Ask friends and family to support you in making plans that you can change according to your needs. You may need to accept or decline invitations on a ‘last minute’ basis.
- Continue traditions that you enjoy and leave out those that you don’t.
- If you have a faith community, use rituals that support you in your grief.
- Give yourself (or someone else) flowers or another treat.
- Talk with other bereaved people, or with friends and family members who’ve experienced losses to find out how they get through these special days and holidays.

Christmas and the Winter Holiday Season

For many people December is the most difficult time of the year. Memories of past celebrations with family members or friends who are no longer here can magnify feelings of loss, and you may want to avoid reminders of celebration and togetherness. As the holidays approach, it can be helpful to share your concerns, feelings and apprehensions with someone. Let people know what is difficult for you, and accept offers of help.

Tips for Coping with the Holiday Season

- Think about how you will respond to others when they offer holiday good wishes. You can simply say “Thank you” or “Best wishes to you”.
- Consider cutting back on your holiday traditions by not sending cards, or by enlisting the help of other people with meals and decorating.
- If you find Christmas shopping upsetting, it may help to shop early, to shop by telephone, the Internet or catalogue, or to take along an understanding friend. Family may be willing to shop for you if they realize how difficult this is for you. You may also decide to go “shopless” this year and make a charitable donation in the name of the person who has died.
- Consider alternatives such as developing new traditions, going away, eating at restaurants or buying gift cards.
- Create a special decoration and give it a place of honour.
- Remember that you can always do things differently next year.

The New Year

Whether you are facing the start of a new calendar year or the beginning of your second year of bereavement, the “New Year” may bring unexpected feelings. You might have been looking forward, anticipating the relief, ‘healing’ and improved well being you were going to feel at having made it through the difficult times. Sometimes the New Year doesn’t live up to expectations, and you may find yourself feeling anxious, apprehensive or let down.

Remind yourself that grief does not suddenly disappear. It is a journey with its own timeline. It takes time and energy, and it can be hard to see just where you are at times. You may wonder if you are getting anywhere at all. Try to let go of any expectations that you or anyone else has, and instead trust in yourself and the process. Let yourself be supported by people who allow you to be who and where you are.

Tips for the New Year

- Review the past year – the ups, downs, accomplishments, challenges and ‘gifts’. Consider new approaches if old ones aren’t working.
- Don’t compare your grief to that of others. Treat yourself with patience and kindness.
- Purchase a gift for yourself that your loved one might have bought for you.
- If you feel that friends and family are now less willing or able to support you, consider joining a bereavement support group.
- Give yourself permission to not be your ‘usual self’ or to take ‘time off’. Allow yourself to do things differently – or not at all. Acknowledge that you are doing the best you can.
- Allow a place in your life for your grief. Amidst the activities and demands of everyday life, plan restorative time alone or with supportive others.

Grieving Families

Special occasions can be particularly stressful for grieving family members. Although your family members may be grieving the same person’s death, each of you had a unique relationship with the person who died and so your experiences of grief may be quite different. In addition, everyone grieves in their own way and at their own pace. Some people openly share and express grief while others do not.

Differences may also be seen in how people cope with special days and holidays. When coming together for special days and events, it may help to be flexible and work toward compromise. Consider meeting with your family members prior to special days and holidays so that you can prepare and strategize ahead of time. Good communication and patience will help to reduce family tensions.

Tips for Talking with Family Members

- Make room for differences. Talk honestly about needs and wishes.
- Acknowledge difficulties. Discuss how you want to handle the changes to family duties, routines and roles.
- Adjust your expectations. Family members may not be able to support one another as they have in the past.
- Try to find a balance between who and what is missing, and what remains.
- When planning family gatherings, explore whether or how to include memories of the person who has died.

Children and youth may also experience changes in their grief during special days and holidays – but your child may not have difficulty with the same days that you do and may not share your reactions or feelings. Ask about his or her thoughts and feelings. Find out what is most important and remember to include your child when making any plans.

Tips for Talking with Children and Youth – Questions to Ask

- What part of this day/event is most important to you?
- What about this day/event do you think might be hard for you?
- How would you like to remember the person who died on this occasion?
- Is there any part of this day that you don’t want to participate in?

Understand that this may be a time of heightened emotions and low energy for you and your family. Aim to be kind and patient with yourself and each other. Remind yourself that these special days will be different now, and that your family is just beginning to learn how to cope with those differences.

Caring for Yourself

Holidays are usually times filled with memories, and you may feel especially tender and vulnerable. Consider making time for yourself and your memories as a part of new holiday traditions. Caring for yourself can be another way of honouring the person who died.

Many times, the more we need to take care of ourselves, the less we do it. You may notice that you have been ignoring your own health or don't care very much about yourself; or you may believe that you don't deserve self-care. If you have a physical problem brought on by stress or an emotional reaction, try to pay attention to it.

Grief at any time is tiring and challenging. When special days and holidays approach, you may need to pay more attention to yourself and ask, "What do I most need now?"

Tips from Other Bereaved People

- Exercise. Stretch. Breathe deeply.
- Rest. Slow down or stop. Grieving requires a lot of energy.
- Balance time alone and time with others.
- Eat foods and drink fluids that are healthy.
- Trust yourself. Be guided by your own instincts.
- Spend time in nature or take a walk around the block.
- Connect with a new or old friend for lunch, a movie or a walk.
- Simplify daily life and responsibilities whenever and wherever you can.
- See your doctor for a complete physical and be sure to let him or her know that someone important to you has died.
- Be gentle, patient and tolerant with yourself. Take it one step at a time.

Expect your feelings to change, perhaps without much warning. There may be times when you feel sad, angry or frustrated. You may feel loneliness or longing for the person who has died. At other times, you may experience joy and laughter or enjoy yourself for a few moments – and then feel guilty. Remind yourself that this is part of the healing process. Try to make room for your feelings, whatever they may be.

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