



Suggestions for the Holidays For Grievers and Supporters



The Holidays While Grieving

Here are lots of suggestions for everyone

An article for the griever and the supporter

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The holidays are here, and for most people it is a time of coming together with families and friends. Sure, some of you might dread what happens when your families

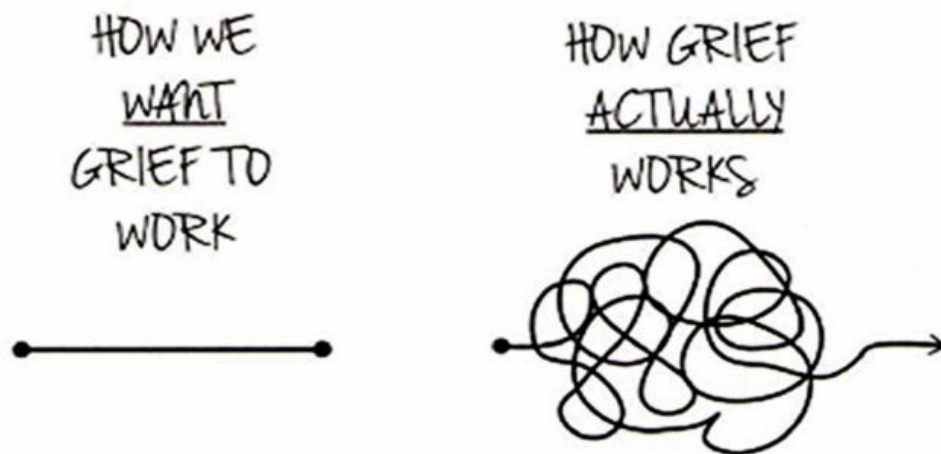
get together and the challenges of getting along begin, or for some it's nothing but a spectacular time with love and laughter and gratitude that you are all together. Yet, for those who are grieving, the holidays, especially for the first few years, are something often dreaded as people try to figure out how to endure the holidays. What used to be a time they looked forward to is now a time they would rather forget about. Grievers need to figure out how to spend those family gathering periods without their child, spouse, sibling, parent, grandchild and other loved ones who have died. For them, the holidays are some of the toughest days of all and a constant reminder that their loved one is not there.

I was recently listening to a radio show where the host was asking people to call in and share holiday stories. She wanted to not only hear funny stories, but also family stories of difficulties and how they were handled. She asked people to share with us their ideas of what families could do to get along better--to bring more loving kindness to each other. Lots of people called and told funny stories of family fights and people trying to get along, as well as beautiful stories about camaraderie and laughter and joy. Advice came in all forms: avoid politics, don't talk about who you are dating, put your differences aside for one day, and so forth.

Yet, not one person called in to talk about the person who was grieving and how they would deal with that.

That is...until I called in.

People often don't think of that--the person who will be there without that loved one who died, whether it was six months ago or 10 years ago. Grief is not something that leaves a person's life after time; rather, it's something a person learns to incorporate into their lives as part of their lives and does so with hard work, by making new memories, creating a "new normal," and keeping their loved one alive and a part of their lives every day. Of course the nature of the grief changes, and people get to a place where they live happy, productive, and meaningful lives. But it is always there...just a little off to the side...just a trigger or reminder away. This is especially true during family gatherings where the griever is acutely aware that their loved one is missing. Yes, it gets easier eventually, and for some more quickly than others.



So this article is for both of you: the person who directly lost their loved one, and the person who is spending time over the holidays (or any time for that matter) with the one who is grieving.

FOR THE GRIEVER

HOLIDAY SUGGESTIONS

1. Say "time out" anytime you need.
2. Talk about him or her during conversations.
3. Tell the truth when people ask, "How are you?" Say, "So sad right now." "I don't know." "Not sure...." "This sucks!"
4. Have some "bah humbug" days.

5. Do things differently than ever before.
6. Leave town.
7. Change your mind.
8. Be where you want and need to be.
9. Allow yourself to laugh and have some fun without feeling guilty!
10. Change directions in mid-stream.
11. Cry.
12. Laugh.
13. Cry and laugh in the same minute.
14. Let your children be part of the holiday planning. They are grieving, too.
15. Don't forget the grandparents if a child died. It's much harder for them than most people realize.
16. Remove yourself from whatever you are doing if it gets too difficult.
17. Do something for someone else (helping others is often very comforting).
18. Have rest, peace, and solitude.
19. Spend part of the day as before and the rest doing something different.
20. Let people know ahead of time what you would like or need, such as your loved one's photo in a prominent place, mentioning his or her name in conversation, sharing memories about him or her, lighting a candle, etc.
21. Allow others to grieve their own ways.
22. **Here's a good one.** One mother whose son died went online and created a huge puzzle using family photos and then had everyone gather and put it together. When it was done, there was lots of joy and talk about memories from the past. You can do this on Zazzle or many other sites.



23. Include one of your loved one's favorite dishes in your holiday meal.
24. Make a donation to a charity that was important to your loved one in their name.
25. Buy a gift you would have given to your loved one and give it to someone in need.
26. Put a gift for your loved one under the tree or Hanukah bush.
27. See a grief counselor. Maybe you've been putting it off. The holidays are especially tough, so this may be the time to talk to someone.
28. Pick a few special items that belonged to your loved one and gift them to friends or family who will appreciate them. At some point, we gave Erika's bed and all of the linens to cousins, and every time we visit them, we get to see the bed!
29. Make a memorial ornament, wreath, or other decoration in honor of your loved one. Get the kids involved, too.
30. It's hard to part with your loved one's clothing, so perhaps you might use the holidays as an opportunity to donate some items to a homeless shelter or other charity, but only if you are ready.

31. Send a holiday card or email to friends of your loved with whom you have lost touch.
32. Visit your loved one's grave site and leave a grave blanket, wreath, rocks, flowers, or other meaningful holiday item.
33. Play your loved one's favorite holiday music.
34. If your loved one hated holiday music, or you do too, that's okay! Play whatever music they loved.
35. Journal your thoughts and feelings like never before. Let it all out!
36. Skip some holiday events if you are in holiday overload, and try not to feel guilty for doing so.
37. Drive yourself so you don't get trapped. You need to be able to leave if necessary. Oh, and there's always Uber!
38. Pull out old photos and spend some time looking at them. If it gets too hard, put them away.
39. Talk to kids about the holidays. It can be confusing for kids that the holidays can be both happy and sad after a death. Let them know it is okay to enjoy the holiday, and it is okay to be sad.
40. For children, see if you can keep the traditions as regular as possible, for they need to return to their normal routines as soon as possible.
41. Make a dish that your loved one used to make and share it with others.
42. Leave an empty seat at the holiday table in memory of your loved one.
43. If leaving an empty seat is too depressing, invite someone to fill that chair who doesn't have anywhere else to go, such as a neighbor, elderly person, or student who is not going home for the holidays.
44. Don't send holiday cards this year if it is too sad or overwhelming.
45. Skip or minimize gifts. After a death, material things can seem less meaningful and the mall can seem especially stressful. Talk as a family and decide whether you truly want to exchange gifts this year or if you are even able to shop for gifts. If you do, shop online and have gifts shipped.
46. Make a new tradition of exchanging gifts for the children only. Buy your gifts online and have them shipped.
47. Put out a photo table with photos of your loved one and others' loved ones who have also passed.
48. Go to a grief group. When everyone looks so gosh-darn filled with holiday cheer, sometimes it is helpful to talk with others who are struggling.
49. Skip (or minimize) the decorations if they are too much. Don't worry, you'll see plenty of decorations outside your house.
50. Volunteer in your loved one's memory.
51. Let your perfectionism go. If you always have the perfect tree, perfectly wrapped gifts, and perfect table, accept that this year may not be perfect and that is okay.
52. People mean well when they tell you what you ought to do for the holidays. But you need to listen to yourself, trust yourself, communicate with your family, and do what works for you.
53. Speaking what you are grateful for changes the brain and helps with grief. Share one thing each day, at least one, that you are grateful for. Say it out loud, go around the room and have each person share as well. Write it down, photograph it, share it on Facebook.
54. Watch what you eat. You are especially sensitive now, so enjoy but don't hurt yourself.
55. Watch what you imbibe. Alcohol can take the edge off, sure, but it is also a depressant and can make you feel worse.

56. If you usually cook, have potluck instead or order "in."
57. Buy a gift for yourself--something that would have pleased your loved one, or even make the gift from your loved one.
58. Say yes to help. There will be people who want to help and may offer their support. Let them do it. It often helps others feel good to do something nice for you.
59. Ask for help, even if it's hard.
60. Donate a holiday meal to a family in need through a local church, synagogue, salvation army, or department of social services.
61. Identify the people who will be able to help and support you during the holidays and identify who may cause you more stress. Try to spend more time with the former group and less with the latter.
62. Practice self-care. Self-compassion is a powerful way to help you with your grief, and is an important part of your grief journey. Never before have you needed to be kind and loving to yourself the way you do now.
63. Support kids by doing a memorial grief activity together.
64. Remember, being happy is usually only "moments." No one is happy all of the time. So allow yourself to have those moments. It doesn't diminish how much you love and miss the person who isn't there. And if you feel guilty when you do have a moment of happiness? Well that's just so unfair, isn't it? So come back to self-compassion and remind yourself that being human means moments of happiness.
Thanks to "What's Your Grief" for some of the great holiday suggestions!

FOR THE SUPPORTER

Are You With Someone Who is Grieving During the Holidays?

What Can You Say? What Can You Do?

Want to know how to help the person who will be joining you for the holidays and who has lost a loved one? Great! Here ya go!

(You might also be grieving the loss of this person, so be sure to read the tips above.)

1. If you are hosting, ask the person if there is anything you can provide that will make the day easier, such as a photo of their loved one or mentioning them in the conversation.
2. Ask the person if they would like you to let other guests who will be coming know that they are grieving and (a) that they would love to talk about their loved one; or (b) that they would prefer not to be asked anything about it.
3. Give them space to not attend any gatherings you might have for as long as they feel the need to change things around. Don't worry. Eventually, they will be able to be with you again.
4. If you are open to it, think about going somewhere else to celebrate the holidays, such as a restaurant or even out of town. Many families do this, and it works well.

5. Don't go silent when they bring up the name of their loved one or tell a story. Join right in as part of the conversation no differently than you would have if the person were still alive.
6. Remember that death ends a life, but never a relationship. The person will always carry their loved one with them wherever they go and want to keep his or her memory alive.
7. Make it okay for the person to cry. Don't let the crying be a downer. It's healthy and normal to cry, especially when surrounded by others whose families are intact and their loved one is glaringly missing. You can give a little compassion, too, like hand her a Kleenex or give him a hug.
8. Say things like, "I'm so sorry you are feeling so sad today." or "I can't imagine how you must be feeling." or "I miss him too." Don't say things like, "It's okay, don't cry." or "He wouldn't want you to be sad." Definitely do not try and change the subject if someone has a cry during the day, hoping that to skirt the issue might make it all go away. You only make the person feel worse and that they should avoid being with family in the future because it's too hard for you. Right now, it's your love and compassion they need until they get to a point where they are stronger. It's a long journey they are on.
9. Allow yourself to show the griever that you love them and are okay with however they might act or express their sadness. Over time, all of that will change and the person will begin to feel joy and express happiness when you gather together.
10. Don't be surprised if the person needs to leave periodically throughout the day. Make it okay. It's not personal.
11. Don't be surprised if the person needs to leave. Period. Make it okay. It's not personal.
12. Think of something special you can do for the person's loved one/in memory of that loved one. Perhaps if you say a blessing you will include his name with the others who have also died.
13. Create something unique and meaningful that everyone can join in together. See number 21 above. Such a GREAT idea!
14. Music can be a killer for someone who is grieving. Figure out a way to find out if certain types of music will just be too painful for the person who is grieving. One mother told us that she tried to spend time with her family right after her daughter died, and they kept playing music like Josh Groban's "You Lift Me Up" and other songs that ripped her heart out. She had to leave, which was so sad. It would have been nice if that music simply wasn't played that year.
15. Not talking about a person's loved one is one of the worse things of all to those who are grieving. They feel as if the person is being forgotten OR that everyone is avoiding it because it's just too hard. Incorporating everyone's grief over the person who died and including that person's life as part of the holidays will make the grieving person feel loved, understood, and safe. You will end up being the one who helps them heal as they find their way of creating that "new normal."
16. Remember that losing a significant loved one and having to rebuild a new life without him or her is one of life's greatest challenges. We hope you will be a part of the healing journey that they so desperately need.
17. Don't take it personally if the griever is hurt by something you did that you thought would be something they would appreciate. At least you tried!
18. Know we are not saying your holidays are over and it's now all about this other person. First, the holidays may very well change forever, but that doesn't mean they won't be wonderful--just different. Second, it really is a lot about the one who is suffering and how you can help that person feel the loving kindness as you spend a

holiday with them. Grief is a life challenging experience that can take years until the new balance of life is found again. It comes in waves and often blindsides the griever. So thanks to all of you who care and who took the time to read this list of suggestions.

**May you all have a Peace-of-Heart holiday
with moments of laughter and joy sprinkled in!**

What did we miss? Please tell us at
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