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magazine

Holidays in the Palisades



HOLIDAYS AND GRIEF

griefHaven Founder Susan Whitmore shares about holidays and the “what to do” when a loved one has died.

BY SUSAN WHITMORE

For many of you, planning for the upcoming holiday brings a sense of excitement and is something you look forward to. For others, not so much, and that includes those who have had a significant person in their lives die—a person whose presence is so blatantly missing that the holidays become a time to “get through” rather than a time to enjoy.

You as the supporter can make a difference. And you as the griever have many options.

It does not matter how many years that person has been gone. Love never dies, and that loved one will always be missed, especially during specific dates and holidays. The holidays are a constant reminder that someone beloved is gone. This is even more difficult if there is no mention of the person’s name or, when gathered together, everyone acts as if nothing

has changed.

We regularly hear, “What can I do to just get through these times? What can I do to at least minimize the sadness I feel during this time? How can I get my family and friends to understand how much it means to me for him/her to be included?”

The greatest gift you as the supporter can give is to do something—even a small thing—for a person who will be joining you this year whose loved one has died. They will be forever grateful. And, if they cry, that’s OK. You’ll know that you have touched them in a meaningful way.

If you aren’t sure about any of the suggestions below, you can always ask the person, “I was thinking about putting out Jeff’s photo this year, but wanted to make sure that’s OK with you. Or is there something else you might prefer?”

The greatest gift you as the griever can give to yourself is to do something at some point in the day that is meaningful and includes your loved one’s memory in whatever way you deem appropriate. Check out the suggestions below or come up with your own ideas.

For the Griever
Share this article. Show your

family and friends this article so they will have a greater understanding of how the holidays can be made easier and meaningful.

New normal. Your holidays were once wrapped in love and family closeness as you celebrated together. With the death of a family member, others may try to “cling” to old family traditions, even though this may cause you much pain. Others need to try to accept that nothing will ever be the old “normal.” If everyone can join together, then you can create new family traditions without leaving anyone out.

Acknowledge your loved one’s presence and absence. Do something to acknowledge and remember your loved one at these times. In other words (pardon the poor grammar), “Don’t do nothing.” Hold a moment of silence, say a prayer, light a candle, arrange a place setting, share memories, visit the gravesite, etc. Have a family meeting (include children) to identify ways to acknowledge your loved one. Create one or two new rituals or traditions.

Talk about them. Talk about your loved one. Tell a favorite story, give a toast, write a poem, play their favorite song, go around the table and each person tell a story of gratitude about your loved one, or make a favorite food. These will help you express the

importance of them, and then perhaps you and other family members will be able to appreciate the holidays with an even deeper and more meaningful significance.

Children. No matter the age, children are grieving too, and the holidays are also difficult for them. Listen to what is important to them, and then see if you can incorporate their hopes or wishes into the holidays without completely giving up what you need.

You can also break the day up into smaller segments of various types of events, such as opening presents at home as a family, a visit to the cemetery as a family, dinner with relatives, and then home early where you share memories of your loved one, work on a puzzle, or watch a movie.

Have a family meeting (including children) to identify ways to acknowledge your loved one. Create one or two new rituals or traditions.

Plan ahead. Talk with others about the reality that your loved one has died and that therefore your life (and your celebrations) will feel and be different. Make a plan regarding how you will get through the day and with whom you will spend it. Think about spending time with other “like hearts” and people who are compassionate and

understanding of your needs.

There is a decided advantage in thinking ahead about what you want the day to include and with whom you want to spend it. If you haven't told others what you would like for the holidays, then do so. No one is a mind reader, and what is comforting to you might not occur to someone else.

Grief group or therapy. If you are in a grief group, discuss your concerns and possibilities in group. Don't hesitate to meet with a grief professional to assist you in deciding what to do. Trained grief professionals can help you articulate your feelings, fears, hopes, losses and concerns. When those are expressed, you will be better able to figure out what you can and can't handle.

Other ideas include lowering expectations, taking care of yourself physically, rethinking the holidays, trying a new take on shopping (like shopping online or skipping it altogether), connecting with others (including via Zoom or FaceTime), giving yourself leeway when accepting invitations, write a letter, and looking at photos, movies or memorabilia that include your loved one.

Be kind to yourself. Be gentle and tender with yourself. Seek out the softest place to land so that you are

in a position to honor your loved one, while also creating new traditions. One day you will most likely look forward to holidays filled with the true meaning of the holiday spirit.

For the Supporter

Read the suggestions in the griever's section above. Many of the suggestions above also apply to those who want to know how to support someone who is grieving.

Change expectations. Grief, especially in the first year or two, can be physically exhausting. If you can, allow your loved one to take a different role on planning and/or preparing and cleaning. They may insist on helping, and that's OK too.

Gifts. Depending upon the loss, some mourners find it hard to pick out gifts, at least for the first holiday and sometimes even longer. Be patient if they ask whether it's OK to skip gifts this year. In fact, you can even suggest it. The time will come when mourners get back to being able to buy gifts.

Children. Regardless of how old the children are, if they have lost a loved one, whether it's a parent, sibling, grandparent or other, they are grieving too. Remember to include them in special ways that are age appropriate. Young children can be engaged in

play or other fun activities, while teens might not want to talk about their loved one and instead be doing other things, such as sports. Take your cues from the teen or even ask the parents ahead of time what they think would be best.

Perspective. Just as with the griever, a significant death puts things into perspective. Many of the things that used to be exciting and fun to those who are grieving are not that way right now. Eventually they will find that "new normal" they are grappling with, but they will never be the same person they were before.

Their view of life has changed on many levels, and as painful as that is, it is also a life-affirming experience. They need your love and patience if they just aren't into doing things the way they used to. In fact, they may truly feel as if much of the holidays are utterly ridiculous unless the days include a deeper meaning.

Connect. If they are not joining you in person, connect with them and their family through Zoom or another platform so they aren't too isolated and feeling alone and forgotten. Even a simple phone call to say hello is nice.

Ask them. Talk with those who are grieving and will be joining you and ask if there is some specific way they would like you to honor their loved one.

You might even send over this list of suggestions and ask which of these, if any, they would like.

Ahead of time. One of the most difficult things for the griever is when there are guests who do not know that they have lost a loved one, especially in the case of a child or spouse.

As part of getting to know each other, a guest will always eventually ask, "So, do you have children ... ?" It's uncomfortable for the person who asked the question, and it's very difficult for the person who has to answer. Let your guests know ahead of time that your brother will be attending and recently lost his wife.

Other suggestions for the supporter include talking about the loved one in the normal course of conversation, getting out photos, putting out a photo display, acknowledging their loved one's presence and absence, making room for them under the tree (including an ornament), considering going somewhere else for the holidays, making it OK to cry and making them feel welcomed.

For more information about griefHaven, a nonprofit based and founded in Pacific Palisades, as well as a full version of this article, visit griefHaven.org.



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