



## **griefHaven Newsletter**

### **Holidays and Grief**



#### **How do I Deal with the Holidays When I Have So Much Grief?**

#### **How do I Help Someone During the Holidays Who is Grieving?**

**"The holidays naturally afford opportunities for remembrance and renewal. Experimenting with a few ideas will let you find creative ways to beckon your loved one into the gatherings. And as voices and stories begin to fill the silence, you will have lit a symbolic candle in a time that otherwise might be dark."**

**– Dr. Robert Neimeyer**

**"As we move into these upcoming holidays, together we can create moments of meaning and 'continuing bonds' with those we have lost, whether we are the person who is grieving or the person who wants to know how to provide loving**

For many of you, planning for the upcoming holidays 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.**

**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.

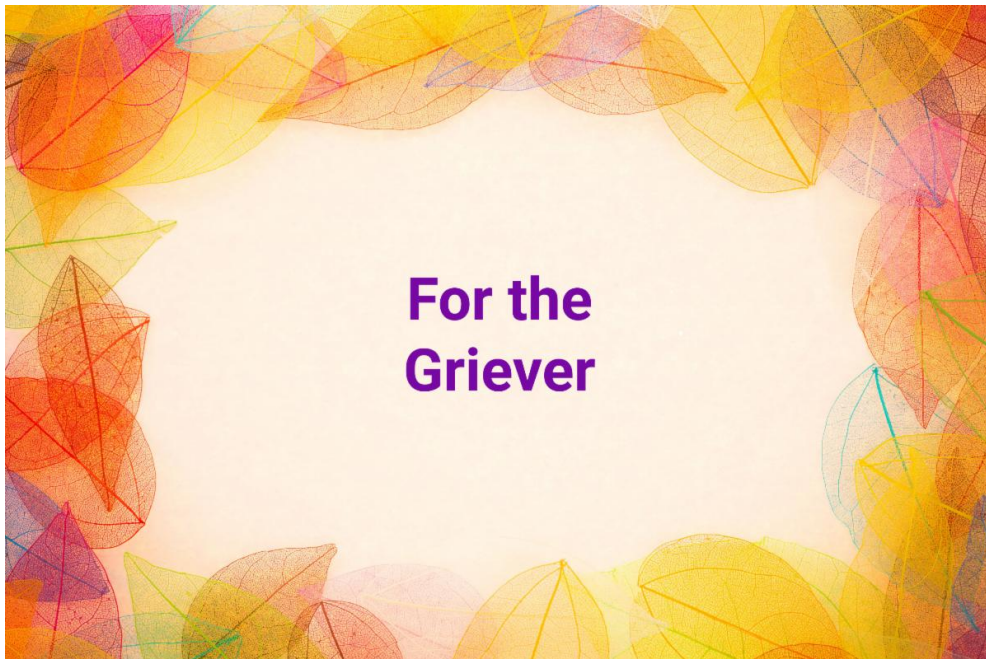
This is even more difficult if there is no mention of the person's name or, when gathered together, everyone acts as if nothing has changed.

**Make these days meaningful.**

We regularly hear, "What can I do to just get through these times? What can I do to at least minimize the hurt I feel with their absence? Their absence is so in my face. How can I get my family and friends to understand how much it means to me for them to be included?"

**Supporter: 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, even if it's been many years.

**Griever: 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. With that said, some people choose not to do anything, and that's okay too. Check out the suggestions below or come up with your own ideas.



**For the Griever**

Thanks to Dr. Robert Neimeyer, Dr. Alan Wolfelt,  
and Susan Whitmore for input to this article

**"As you approach the holidays, remember: grief is both a necessity and a privilege. It comes as a result of giving and receiving love. Don't let anyone take your grief away. Love yourself. Be patient with yourself. And allow yourself to be surrounded by loving, caring people."**

**–Dr. Alan Wolfelt**

**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.

**Love does not end with death.** Dr. Wolfelt states, "Since love does not end with death, holidays may result in a renewed sense of personal grief—a feeling of loss unlike that experienced in the routine of daily living. Society encourages you to join in the holiday spirit, but all around you the sounds, sights, and smells trigger memories of the one you love who has died. No simple guidelines exist that will take away the hurt you are feeling."

**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. Family members 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, do *something*. Hold a moment of silence, say a prayer, light a candle, arrange a place setting, share memories, visit the gravesite, or cook their favorite food.

**Talk about them.** Talk about your loved one. Tell a favorite story, give a toast, write a poem, play their favorite song, or go around the table and have each person tell a story about your loved one. 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 (kids/teens/adults).** 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.

**Expectations.** Lower your expectations and the pressures you put on yourself. You do not have to celebrate the holidays in exactly the same way you did before. Plan your day, keeping it simple. Allow yourself time to face the hard reality of your loved one's death (in a manageable dose) if you think you can do so this year. For some, celebrating the holiday according to family tradition may be a comforting coping strategy. If it is not,

allow yourself to take a break.

**Perspective.** Death puts things into perspective. Since the death of your loved one, some of the routine things that you used to care about may now mean almost nothing at all. Festivities and all of the hubbub might, for now, seem meaningless. Reassure yourself that eventually you can come to a new and deeper understanding of each special day and how you will handle it.

**Take care of yourself physically.** Because the holidays can be physically draining, especially if this is your first or second experience with a holiday since the death of your loved one, respect your mind and body. Failing to take care of yourself physically will only add to your fatigue and frustration.

**Rethink the holidays.** If you find yourself dreading spending time with people who won't talk about your loved one, who carry on as if everything is the same, who ignore your requests for simple things, and who seem to avoid and ignore the fact that this day is one that is difficult and requires some greater sensitivity and understanding, then you might need to rethink how you will spend this holiday season. Maybe it's time to take a break and do something different.

**A new take on shopping.** If gift shopping either seems like a daunting task or you don't want to be anywhere near stores, shop online or send a gift card. You may also ship items to a loved one if you are not spending the holidays together. If you simply cannot gift shop at all, that's okay. Let others know that you will not be exchanging gifts this year. Another possibility is to have your family members make an agreement that no one will exchange gifts this year or make an agreement to only give gifts to the children.

**Your role.** Think back to how you celebrated the holidays. What was your role in the celebration? How might that be different now that your loved one has died or that you aren't able to be together? Begin to consider how you might want to handle your traditional ways of celebrating this day following his or her death.

**Invitations.** If you accept a holiday invitation to someone's home, give yourself some leeway. Be up front with them when you accept the invitation, letting them know that you will try to participate, but that you may well excuse yourself at some point. We suggest that you not host an event until you are truly ready to do so. As a guest, you can leave when you want or even cancel at the last minute. As a backup plan, you might also wish to consider making alternative plans that may feel more comfortable.

**Make room for them under the tree.** Put up an ornament or other object that is a reminder of your loved one; something that invokes their presence. You can be sure that its simple presence on the tree will also invite their presence into the room and into the thoughts when anyone walks by, conveying the feeling that they are indeed with you during this season in your hearts and minds. If you have children, include them in this process. In fact, they could make a special ornament or object for the tree.

For those without a tree, create a special object that you will place somewhere special or sacred that will invoke your loved one's presence as part of your holiday celebration.

**Write a letter.** Writing to your loved one can be meaningful and gives you a chance to express what you want to say. Recall several memories you have of the holidays in which this person played an important part. In that letter, write:

- *When I think of this holiday without you, I feel ...*
- *The thing I miss most on this holiday without you is ...*
- Or just let them know what is going on in your life.

**Photos/Movie.** Get out photos and sit together as a family remembering, sharing, and hopefully laughing as you recall that moment in the photo. Put together an online photo montage or video of everyone in the family and watch it together.

**Memorabilia.** Go through cards, letters, pictures and other personal memorabilia associated with your relationship with your loved one. Re-live the occasions as you review the mementos. Again, this should only be done when you feel ready.

**Share memories.** Ask your friends and family to write down their favorite memory of your loved one and share them via email or while you are together. Then you can collect them in a keepsake book.

**Bring a memento.** Bring or wear something of your loved one that's meaningful and special to you, such as a piece of clothing or jewelry.

**Photo display.** If you are visiting someone else's home, ask that person to display a photo or some other memorabilia of your loved one.

**No have-to's.** Remind yourself throughout the holidays that there are no "have-to's." Your heart has been broken, your life has forever been changed, and you are simply attempting to find what will and what won't work for you as you rebuild your life without 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.

**Help someone else.** Some find it meaningful and special to reach out and help another on this day. You can find a shelter or other place where they need servers, food to be delivered, someone to talk to, or some other type of help. You can make this part of the day and then the rest of the day is about your family. Include your children in this.

**Accept help. Ask for help. Delegate.** Utilize the resources and support available to you (extended family, close friends, neighbors, community groups, religious organizations, school community, etc.). Accept offers to babysit, help with cleaning, prepare meals, have someone else host, etc. Task others with baking, decorating, and gift wrapping.

**Give the gifts that keep on giving.** Select a small gift, maybe even something of your loved one's, to give to each child on your loved one's behalf. This can provide both a cherished "linking object" that honors their unique bond with their loved one, and also serve as "conversation starters" about shared memories of a heartwarming or humorous type.

**Invite them to the table.** This is something that is not for everyone, but some families find it meaningful. If you really want to invoke their presence, set an extra place at the table for them. The empty chair would be a strong ritual statement of both their presence and absence.



**If you mention my loved one's name, I may cry.  
But if you don't, you will break my heart.**

**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.

**Perspective.** Just as with the griever, a significant death puts everything into a new 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.

**Children.** Regardless of how old the children are, if they have lost a loved one, whether or not 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.

**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 in planning, preparing, and cleaning. They may insist on helping, and that's okay too.

**Make it okay to cry.** It's healthy and normal to cry, especially when surrounded by others whose families are intact and their loved one is glaringly missing. If you create a safe space for them, you will have given them a true gift.

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

**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 or text message 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 if there is a family loss.

**Talk about them.** Talk about the loved one in the normal course of a conversation. If you say, "I remember when my son was visiting colleges ..." and the grieving parent chimes in and says, "I remember when Beth was visiting colleges ..." go with the flow. Don't look down, go silent, or act as if talking about the person who died is taboo by changing the subject.

**Photos.** Get out photos and sit together as a family remembering, sharing, and hopefully laughing.

**Photo display.** Put out a framed photo of the loved one.

**New normal.** Understand that this person is having to figure out how to live without their loved one, and they need your love and patience. They are not broken, so they don't

need to be fixed, just given a lot of loving kindness. Know that, as you journey with them, they will find that "new normal" that they will follow for the rest of their lives, and it would be great if you were alongside them in ways that are healthy and supportive.

**Don't Judge.** You may think you know or understand grief, and that may lend itself to you feeling as if your loved one should not "still" be grieving or acting a certain way. Yet we know that the grief journey is a long one and can often take years before a person is able to find that new equilibrium. They may never be able to embrace old traditions. Hopefully, you will honor their process and understand that, because they are still crying nine years later after the death of someone beloved, it doesn't mean there is anything wrong with them; there most likely is not. One does not "get over" the death of someone deeply and profoundly loved. They do learn to incorporate the loss into their new lives, and that takes living a lot of life. If you create a safe space for them to be during the holidays, you will be one of the best parts of their journey.

**Acknowledge their loved one's presence and absence.** Do something to acknowledge and remember their loved one. In other words, "Don't do or say nothing." Tell a story about their loved one, acknowledge all of those who are no longer there by name, include loved ones in the blessing, light a candle, arrange a place setting, visit a gravesite, share a nice memory or share a grief memory.

**Make room for them under the tree.** Consider contributing an ornament to the Christmas tree that invokes their presence. You can be sure that its simple presence on the tree will also invite their presence into the room and into the thoughts of those who walk by, conveying the feeling that they are indeed with you during this season in your hearts and minds. The kids can also make something.

**Change it up.** 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 because you are creating new and different memories.

**Remember.** Death ends a life, but never a relationship. The person will always carry their loved one with them wherever they go and will always want to keep their memory alive and talk about them. This is normal and healthy. Help create a space where it becomes the norm to do so regardless of how many years it's been.

**Make them feel welcomed.** "I'm so glad you are here with us" or "If there's anything I can do to make the day easier for you, just let me know" or "I miss her too." Avoid saying things like, "Oh, don't cry" or "He wouldn't want you to be sad" or "Let's not talk about that." Avoid all platitudes, for they are not comforting.

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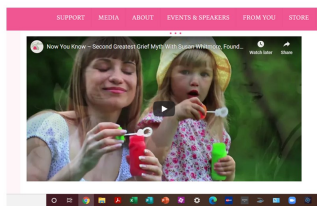


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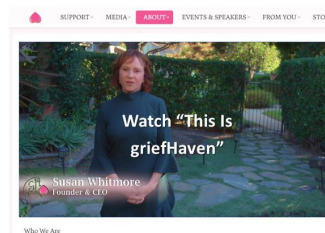
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griefHaven | 15332 Antioch Street, No. 147, Pacific Palisades, CA 90272

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