

HOW TO HELP OURSELVES THROUGH THE HOLIDAYS

There are many holidays or “special days,” such as birthdays, anniversaries, graduations, weddings, and Easter, to name a few. These are all difficult days for the bereaved, but for many, the most difficult holiday of the year is Christmas. This day more than any other means “family together.” They are synonymous, and it is at this time we are so acutely aware of the void in our life. For many, the wish is to go from Dec. 24 to Dec. 26. We continually hear Christmas carols and people wishing everyone “Merry Christmas.” We see the perfect gift for our loved one who has died, and suddenly realize they will not be here to enjoy it. Eventually, the Christmas season will not be so difficult. This statement may not seem possible to those newly bereaved, but grief will soften and you will begin to enjoy life again, including Christmas.

SHOP EARLY!!!

Shopping may be extremely upsetting. It may help to shop early through a catalog, by phone, or to make plans to shop with an understanding friend. Plan to relax over lunch or a cup of coffee. Friends or relatives might be willing to shop for you if they realize that just the thought of shopping is bothering you. Some people pretend Nov. 25 is Christmas and try to get whatever shopping, card writing, etc. done by that date. By shopping now you are able to avoid hearing the Christmas carols, seeing all the decorations and being wished “Merry Christmas.”

1. Family get-togethers may be extremely difficult. Be honest with each other about your feelings. Sit down with your family and decide what you want to do for the holiday season. Don't set expectations too high for yourself or the day. If you wish things to be the same, you are going to be disappointed. Undertake only what each family member is able to handle comfortably.
2. There is no right or wrong way to handle the day. Some may wish to follow family traditions, while others may choose to change them. It may help to do things just a little differently. What you choose the first year, you don't have to do the next.
3. Keep in mind the feelings of your children or family members. Try to make the holiday season as joyous as possible for them.

4. Be careful of “shoulds” – it is better to do what is most helpful for you and your family. If a situation looks especially difficult over the holidays, try not to get involved.
5. Set limitations. Realize that it isn’t going to be easy. Do things that are very special and/or important to you. Do the best that you can.
6. Once you have made the decision on how you and your family will handle the holidays, let relatives and friends know.
7. Baking and cleaning the house can get out of proportion. If these chores are enjoyable, go ahead, but not to the point that it is tiring. This year you could either buy baked goods or go without.
8. Emotionally, physically, and psychologically it is draining. You need every bit of strength. Try to get enough rest.
9. If you used to cut down your own tree, consider buying it already cut this year. Let your children, other family members, neighbouring teens, friends, or people from your church help decorate the tree and house. If you choose not to have a tree, perhaps you could make a centerpiece from the lower branches of a tree, get a ceramic tree, or a small table-top tree.
10. One possibility for the first year may be to visit relatives, friends, or even go away on a vacation. Planning, packing, etc., keeps your mind somewhat off the holiday and you share the time in a different and hopefully less painful setting.
11. How do you answer “Happy Holidays?” You may say, “I’ll try” or “Best wishes to you.” You think of many answers that you don’t say.
12. If you are accustomed to having dinner at your home, change and go to relatives; or change the time (instead of 2:00 p.m., make it 4:00 p.m.). Some find it helpful to be involved in the activity of preparing a large meal. Serving buffet style and/or eating in a different room may help.
13. Try attending Christmas services at a different time and/or church.
14. Some people fear crying in public, especially at the church service. It is usually better not to push the tears down at any time. You should be gentle with yourself and not expect so much of yourself. Worrying about crying is an additional burden. If you let go and cry, you probably will feel better. It should not ruin the day for the other family members, but will provide them with the same freedom.
15. Consider cutting back on your card sending. It is not necessary to send cards, especially to those people you will see over the holidays.

16. Do something for someone else, such as volunteer work at a soup kitchen or visit the lonely and shut-ins. Ask someone who is alone to share the day with your family. Provide help for a needy family. Donate a gift or money in your loved one's name.
17. As the holiday approaches, share your concerns, feelings, apprehensions, etc., with a relative or friend. Tell them that this is a difficult time for you. Accept their help. You will appreciate their love and support at this time.
18. Holidays often magnify feelings of loss of a loved one. It is important and natural to experience the sadness that comes. To block such feelings is unhealthy. Keep the positive memory of your loved one alive.
19. Often after the first year, the people in your life may expect you to be "over it." We are never "over it," but the experience of many bereaved is that eventually they enjoy the holidays again. Hold on to HOPE.
20. Don't forget: "Anticipation of any holiday is so much worse than the actual holiday."

By Donna Kalb

Although you and your loved one will be apart
May the spirit of Christmas comfort your heart
And may its message of peace be with you each day
To help and guide you along life's way