

MANAGING GRIEF AT HOLIDAY TIMES



Christmas and the holiday period, (along with special times such as birthdays and anniversaries) can be particularly difficult times for those who are bereaved or have experienced other forms of loss.

The Christmas period—supposedly a time of joy and celebration, and for families being together can accentuate the absence of the deceased person more than any other time. For those who have had a family member or someone close die through the year, there is no doubt that life is different, and that it will never be the same again. Perhaps you wish that you could just cancel Christmas this year.

Some planning and special preparation for what you do and do not want to do, may help. Listed below are some suggestions you might find helpful:

- Prepare ahead in order to reduce as much stress as possible. Try and enlist others to help where you need it.
- As someone who is grieving you might find that the anticipation of Christmas is likely to be more distressing than the actual event.
- There is no wrong or right way to deal with the day. Some will choose to carry on family traditions; however, you may choose to do something completely different, perhaps start a new tradition.
- It is important not to set expectations which are too high for you or others—nurture yourself. For example, it may be that it is too difficult to send out Christmas cards this year.
- Allow for the fact that other members of the family may react or express themselves differently. This does not mean that they are not grieving.
- Remember that sadness and happiness do not cancel each other out. It is important to be able to laugh as well as cry. Laughter/happiness may feel like a betrayal of your loss, but it is unlikely that your loved one would want you to remain unhappy.
- Plan ahead for shopping tasks. You may wish to avoid the shops completely. Shopping online may be an option or asking someone else to help.

Some Suggestions for Christmas Day:

- ☀ Plant a special tree, shrub, or other plant in recognition of your loss
- ☀ Light a memorial candle for the day. This can create the symbolic presence of your family member and is also a way to recognize your own sense of loss.
- ☀ On Christmas Day share a favourite or humorous story about your family member or invite a written message addressed to them which can be collected in a special place for all to read.
- ☀ Make a dish that was a favourite of your loved one to eat on Christmas Day
- ☀ Buy a special gift for yourself (or someone else) in memory of your loved one.
- ☀ Purchase a gift for a lonely or forgotten person or invite them to share your Christmas meal. Give a donation in your loved one's name or give food to the needy. Volunteer or help others on Christmas Day.
- ☀ Write your relative a message and place it in a balloon, releasing it outside. This can be very meaningful if done as part of a family ritual where every member releases a message balloon.
- ☀ Allow written expressions of your thoughts and feelings. Some of the most moving poems, letters and prose writings have followed a bereavement, and have been a source of help to others in a similar position.
- ☀ Prepare a special memory book to keep your memories alive for the next generation.
- ☀ Hang a special Christmas ornament
- ☀ Have a selection of non-Christmas DVDs and activities to do.

Thoughts based on material from The Road Trauma Support Team (Melbourne). Suggestions also drawn from Rando, T, *How To Go On Living When Someone You Love Dies*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1988 (pp289- 292).

Useful websites and contact numbers:

- The Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement, http://www.grief.org.au/resources/information_sheets
- Lifeline, Phone support 24/7, Ph 13 11 14