

Getting Through The Holidays

Birthdays, anniversaries, Thanksgiving, Mother's Day, Father's Day, The Fourth of July, religious holidays such as Christmas, Rosh Hashanah, Ramadan—these and other annual reminders of a loved one's death can be challenging, particularly during the first few years. Everywhere you turn sights and sounds and smells trigger memories. In addition to fond remembrances, you may feel depressed or encounter waves of terrible loneliness. Be gentle, accepting, and kind to yourself. In years to come you will once again be able to enter sincerely into these times of celebration, although they may lack the joy they once had for you.

You may find some of the following suggestions helpful in coping with these painful or awkward times.

Plan Ahead – Decide in advance how the special day or days will be spent. Be flexible if you find things aren't working as you expected. The plan was made to help you, not to cause more distress.

Talk about your grief – Don't be afraid to express your feelings. Tell family and friends this is a difficult time for you. Allow people to comfort you. They need to feel they are helping in some way.

Re-evaluate family traditions – This year won't be the same. Attempting to keep everything exactly as it was in the past may only exaggerate the person's absence. Do something symbolic to memorialize your loved one. Visit your relatives rather than them visit you.

Cry – Allow your tears to come, but still look for joy amidst the pain. Crying is perfectly acceptable. Don't try to keep your emotions inside to spare other family members. Chances are they are thinking of your loved one as well.

Be good to yourself – Honor your feelings. Realize there will be good days and bad days. Get enough rest and exercise. Eat balanced meals. Buy something for yourself. Just do caring things for **you** this year.

Be patient and realistic – It is difficult to be realistic when you are grieving, but it is also an important strategy for health and well-being. Remember that you are grieving. Be kind and gentle with yourself, and realistic about what you expect.

Spend time with people you trust – Try not to isolate yourself. Surround yourself with friends who do not judge your behavior, who allow you to talk about your grief and value your feelings.

Mention the name of the person who has died – Include the person's name in your holiday conversations. If your loved one would have enjoyed a certain part of the day, mention it. Look at old photographs.

While holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries are a difficult time for those grieving a close and recent death, don't create problems for yourself by expecting the worst. Simply be aware that certain circumstances may trigger sorrow and other painful feelings. Be prepared, stay flexible, and trust your ability to handle whatever arises. Chances are everything will go relatively smoothly.

Your holidays can still be a significant time for you. They will be different, but they can still be meaningful. They may hurt, but they can also hold hope.

The holidays can become a time of reflection and peace, a time to cherish the gift your loved one has been – and continues to be – in the life of your family.

May love be what you remember most.

If you would like to speak with someone or feel you need help with your grieving please call or email the Cancer Information Service:

1-800-237-1225

Email: cancer-information@uiowa.edu