



**Coping
With
Christmas
While
Grieving**



Coping With The Holidays Checklist

Check what you would traditionally do with a (T) and then check with a (W) what you want to do this year. Share this with your family or have them do one of their own and compare notes.

Christmas Cards

- Mail as usual
- Shorten your list
- Include a "Christmas letter"
- Elect to skip this year

Decorations

- Decorate as usual
- Modify your decorations
- Ask for help
- Let others do it
- Make changes, such as: an artificial tree instead of a real one
- Have a special decoration for your loved one
- Eliminate the tree or other decorations

Shopping

- Shop as usual
- Give cash
- Shop through catalogs
- Ask for help
- Shop early
- Make your gifts
- Give baked goods
- Shop with a friend
- Ask for help wrapping gifts
- Do not exchange gifts now but perhaps later
- Make a list of gifts you want before you go out.

Christmas Music

- Enjoy as usual
- Avoid turning the radio on
- Shop early before stores have Christmas music on
- Listen to it, have a good cry and allow yourself to feel sad

Traditions

- Keep the old traditions
- Attend holiday parties
- Don't attend holiday parties
- Go to an entirely new place
- Bake the usual holiday foods
- Buy the usual holiday foods
- Bake but modify what you would usually do
- Go to the religious service
- Do not attend religious services
- Attend the religious service but at a different time
- Attend a totally different church
- Spend quiet time alone
- Visit the cemetery
- Open gifts on Christmas eve
- Open gifts on Christmas day

Christmas Dinner

- Prepare as usual
- Go out for dinner
- Invite friends over
- Eat alone
- Change time of dinner
- Change routine of dinner, such as, this year do a buffet
- Change location of dinner, eat in a different room
- Ask for help

Post Christmas And New Year's Day

- Spend as usual
- Remove the Christmas decorations early
- Go out of town
- Avoid New Year's parties
- Attend a New Year's party
- Have a New Year's party
- Spend time with only a few friends
- Write in your journal your hopes for the new year
- Go to a movie
- Go to bed early

Coping With The Holidays While Grieving

When a person is grieving, birthdays, anniversaries and holiday celebrations are special times of the year that commonly cause unavoidable *anniversary reactions*, regardless of how long it has been since the death occurred.

Christmas is a date to be reckoned with, as it invariably causes sadness and depression all over again. It is the longest holiday celebration of the year, and the biggest milestone in the long grieving process. Christmas is the time when family members and friends who may not have met since the funeral, or throughout the year, get together. Whenever this happens you will be reminded of the person who is missing.

It is also the holiday that requires the most preparation. If you are grieving the recent loss of a loved one, chances are that you neither have the energy or enthusiasm to prepare for Christmas. You may be facing the day with dread, not knowing how you are going to get through it. Anxiety about Christmas is often more worrisome than the event itself. It can be a relief when the day finally comes.

Although you cannot change the past, you can take care of the present. Being prepared for Christmas is easier if you know how you wish to spend the time and can arrange it that way. Make Christmas as important as you want it. Choose how involved you wish to be. Make your wishes known to others. They will take their cue from you. If you plan to spend time with family and friends, choose only those whom you feel comfortable with. Above all other feelings, you need to feel accepted right now.

How important are traditions to you? Decide what you want to continue, and what you don't. Past associations and memories will effect this decision. **MEMORIES ARE IMPORTANT.** They enable you to stop awhile, and then move on.

It often helps to take some time to recall the past before going to an event which will evoke memories. This may prevent a flow of grief during the occasion, which could be embarrassing to you. Take some time prior to Christmas to remember in some way, with those who also remember. Look at photographs or home movies, then put them aside when you are ready to move on. Make a toast to the memory of the person who died. Your loved one may not be with you, but his or her memory is still alive.

Balance the time you spend alone, with the time you spend with others. Both are important. Solitude can refresh you and be a sort of tonic. It provides you with time and space to remember. Being with others can act as a reminder that life for you still can, and will, again hold some meaning.

The holidays in the first year of grief are always the worst. Gradually, as each Christmas comes around, you will dread it less and manage it more easily. This does not mean that you no longer love the person who has die, or that you will ever forget him or her.

NOTHING DIES THAT IS REMEMBERED.

Some Suggestions For Coping With Christmas

Allow yourself time to think about and acknowledge your grief and realize your holiday may have both happy and sad moments.

Decide on how much, if any, you can or want to handle, and modify your traditions accordingly.

Elect to do something completely different, so that the absence of your loved one won't be quite so obvious.

Pass up writing cards, baking and trimming a tree, if you don't feel up to it, or ask family members to do it instead.

If shopping is too difficult, try gift certificates, send flowers or catalogue order.

Let family members and friends know what your plans are and hear theirs. They have their needs too. This way you may be able to reach a compromise.

Set limits for yourself. Grief is exhausting and you need some quiet time to rest and reflect.

Honor your deceased loved one by decorating his or her photograph with evergreens and putting it in a prominent place.

Create a new tradition which has meaning for you. Hold a special ceremony, buy flowers, light a candle, cook his or her favorite dish. Buy a special decoration and hang it on the tree in your loved ones memory.

If you can find someone who is willing to listen, take time out to talk to them about the person who has died.

Avoid excessive food and alcohol as this can make you depressed.

You could work or volunteer on Christmas Day. Keeping busy at Christmas is a way to reduce the pain of remembering, whilst giving joy to others at the same time.

Be good to yourself.

Look for information or a workshop on how to cope with the holidays.

If you find the stress, anxiety and loneliness too overwhelming, reach out for help. Contact your clergy, a good friend or professional, or call the Distress Line at 482-4353.

TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF.

RELIEVING TENSION.

Tension and anxiety are our normal reactions to defend against threats to our safety, well-being and happiness. There are times in our lives when we feel an increase in anxiety and tension. Below are 11 steps you can take to deal with your tension.

TALK IT OUT

Talking helps to relieve strain and see the problem more clearly.

ESCAPE FOR AWHILE

It gives you a chance to recover breath and balance. Lose yourself in a movie or book. Take a drive or walk in the country - but be prepared to come back and grapple with the problem when you are more composed.

WORK OFF YOUR ANGER

Acknowledge that you are angry, then do something constructive with that pent up energy. Dig the garden. Clean out the garage, or kitchen cupboards. You will then feel a sense of achievement and positive self-esteem. This should enable you to deal with any problems better.

GIVE IN OCCASIONALLY

Stand your ground, but do it calmly. Be prepared to admit that you might be wrong sometimes and be gracious about it. You will relieve tension and have a feeling of satisfaction that way.

DO SOMETHING FOR OTHERS

This may give you time out from worrying about yourself and your problems.

TAKE ONE THING AT A TIME

Begin with the most urgent jobs and leave everything else aside. Once you have accomplished what you have to do, the other tasks will seem easier.

SHUN THE "SUPERMAN" ROLE

Don't be so hard on yourself. Decide what you do well and put your major effort into that. Then tackle the things you do less well. Give it your best shot, but don't expect too much, then you may be pleasantly surprised by the results.

GO EASY WITH YOUR CRITICISM

Expecting too much of others can lead to feelings of frustration and disappointment. Each person has his or her own virtues, values and shortcomings and a right to develop as an individual, which may be different from our own. Instead of being critical, search out the positive points and concentrate on those. This will help you and the other person gain a better perspective on life.

GIVE THE OTHER FELLOW A BREAK

When people are under emotional tension, they often feel competitive. If you allow others a break, you often make things easier for yourself. If the other person feels less threatened by you, he may stop being a threat to you and others.

MAKE YOURSELF AVAILABLE

When you are feeling tense, you often feel left out, neglected, or rejected. You may just imagine that other people feel this way about you, when they may be waiting for you to make the first move. Instead of isolating yourself, continue making yourself available, without being too pushy.

SCHEDULE YOUR RECREATION

Recreation is essential for good physical and mental health. Schedule in your recreation time, before anything else. Set aside definite hours for a hobby or sport that will absorb you completely. Allow yourself time to forget about work and worries. That way, you will find energy to do all that you want to do and with more ease.

REACTIONS AND RESPONSES OF GRIEF

Normal grief encompasses a wide variety of reactions and responses associated with the experience of a major personal loss such as death. Unfortunately, societal taboos regarding loss and death prevent a grieving person from realizing that he or she is experiencing something which is perfectly normal. Often feeling isolated and unable to talk about their experience, they carry the added fear that they are going mad.

The following list gives commonly experienced feelings, physical sensations, thoughts and behaviors, which are all considered normal reactions and responses to loss. However, a grieving person will not necessarily experience all of these.

FEELINGS

Sadness; may or may not be expressed by crying.

Anger; often resulting from frustration that there is nothing that could have been done to prevent the loss or death. This may be directed at the person who died, but prevented from being expressed because of the societal belief that "We should not speak badly of the dead".

Guilt and self reproach; about what happened or did not happen.

Anxiety; feeling unsure about how to carry on living, plus a heightened awareness of one's own mortality.

Loneliness; physical and emotional.

Edginess, nervousness and irritability.

Fear; of dying oneself or contracting the same illness.

Fatigue; in the form of apathy or listlessness.

Shock; occurs more acutely when loss or death is sudden. It is still experienced at the actual time of loss even in cases of progressive deteriorating terminal illness.

Yearning; sometimes called pining.

Numbness.

Relief; particularly after a painful and/or lengthy illness.

Emancipation; a positive feeling after death, that one no longer has to care for a sick relative, or get on with someone or something that was problematic.

PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS

Hollowness; in the stomach

Nausea.

Tightness in the chest

Oversensitivity to noise

Sense of unreality; nothing seems real, including oneself.

Sexual disturbance; impotence, menstrual changes.

Irregular heartbeat.

Breathlessness.

Weakening of muscles.

Dryness in the mouth.

Lack of energy

Digestive upsets; constipation, diarrhea.

Psychosomatic problems; headaches, migraines, skin and back problems.

THOUGHTS

Disbelief.

Confusion; inability to concentrate or make decisions.

Sense of presence of the deceased.

Preoccupation with thoughts of the deceased.

Visions of the deceased; hearing their voice, or feeling their presence.

Inability to make decisions.

No confidence or self esteem.

BEHAVIOURS

Sleep disturbance; inability to sleep or early morning awakening.

Appetite disturbances; under-eating, over-eating or drinking.

Absentmindedness; inability to concentrate.

Social withdrawal; from other people and current affairs.

Dreaming of the deceased; normal dreams and nightmares.

Avoidance of reminders of the deceased person.

Searching, for, or calling out the name of the loved one.

Sighing and pining

Restlessness; over-activity.

Crying; sometimes uncontrollably, for long periods.

Treasuring places or objects associated with the deceased.