Grief and the holidays

If you have recently lost a loved one, the holidays may be very painful for you. Here are some guidelines about dealing with your grief during a time when so many are joyful:

✦ Expect some pain. Don’t be afraid to cry. Worrying about crying is an extra emotional burden. Let your feelings flow.
✦ Think about your holiday traditions and routines. You might keep your favorites but begin new ones:
  ✦ Have your holiday dinner at a different time, place or serving style (i.e., buffet instead of sit down dinner).
  ✦ Worship at a different service.
  ✦ Buy gifts on-line or from catalogs. Ask a friend to do your shopping. Or skip gift-giving for this year. It’s all okay.
  ✦ Eliminate baking cookies, sending cards or decorating if it seems like more than you can handle right now.
  ✦ Focus on winter activities rather than holidays.
✦ Accept invitations to spend time with people you enjoy, and prepare them for the possibility of your leaving early. Decline invitations that will make you feel sadder.
✦ Don’t act as if the deceased never lived. Talk about your loved one. Encourage others to share stories that will enhance your memories.
✦ Do something for others. Donate your time, talents or resources for someone in need.
✦ Get enough rest. Grief is exhausting. Rest heals.
✦ Remember that next year you can change your mind about this year’s choices.

Prayer: Dear God, there are many who are missing from my holiday gatherings. Even as I grieve their absence, help me take comfort in my memories of them. Amen.

How to help a grieving friend

Many newly bereaved say the holidays from Thanksgiving through New Year’s Day are the hardest for them. That is when the void caused by loss of the loved one is most acutely felt.

If you are a friend to someone who is grieving during the holidays, you can help in small but meaningful ways:

✦ Be there. Your loving presence means more than you can imagine. You need do nothing special.
✦ Listen. Let your friend set the pace and direction of your conversation. Avoid offering advice. Avoid platitudes. Simply listen. Be comfortable with the silences.
✦ Encourage your friend to express his feelings – sorrow, anger, disbelief, whatever needs airing. Respect those feelings, and don’t try to talk him out of them or ask him not to cry.
✦ Offer your help with the extra work the holidays bring – shopping, baking, wrapping gifts. Do this work together if possible. Small blocks of time often work best.
✦ Honor your friend’s loved one by speaking her name. Share rich memories of her. Perhaps you will want to express your own sorrow at her absence and your wish that she were with you both during these holidays.

Be patient with your friend. Grief is a journey that is different for everyone – and it knows no timetable.

Recommended books and websites:

• Don’t Take My Grief Away From Me by Doug Manning
• A Grief Observed by C.S. Lewis and Madeleine L’Engle
• A Decembered Grief: Living with Loss While Others Are Celebrating by Harold Ivan Smith
• Good Grief by Granger Westberg
• advocatehealthcare.com
• griefnet.org
• grief-recovery.com
• griefshare.org/holidays