

grief and the holidays: a survival guide

At some point in life, everyone will experience grief. During the holiday season, when everyone expects you to be happy or at least act happy and join in the festivities of the season, the added pressure and stress can make grieving even more difficult.

Whether you're grieving the loss of a loved one or are the friend, coworker, neighbor or family member of someone who's grieving, here are a few tips to get you through.

For the boss/coworker/neighbor of someone who's grieving:

1. ***A little acknowledgement goes a long way***
When confronted by a situation where a good friend, coworker or other such associate is grieving during the holiday season, a little acknowledgement can go a long way in an already alienating environment. Express your sympathy honestly and openly. And while someone who is grieving may choose not to attend, it's still important to extend the invitation to regular holiday activities like lunches and office parties.
2. ***Have a little faith in me***
Trust in the decision of someone who's grieving. Despite their world being turned potentially upside down, it's critical that you trust their judgment and not push them to join in on the fun at an office party because YOU think "it will be good for him/her." Listen to them when they say, "Thanks, but I'm just not ready yet."
3. ***Use the deceased's name***
Often there's a fear about saying the name of the person who's died; as if somehow saying the name will cause more pain. However, phrases like, "So sorry for your loss," and even using only pronouns like, "She was so wonderful," and "He will be truly missed," tend to negate the person's existence in the first place.

For the person grieving:

1. ***You don't have to***
If certain family traditions are making you uncomfortable this year don't do them. For instance don't carve the turkey if you don't want to, or don't sing along if you don't want to. Be careful not to throw out all your traditions, but don't be afraid to drop some either. You can always pick them up again later.
2. ***Drop before you shop***
Feeling overwhelmed by a long gift list – 12 days of Christmas, 8 days of Hanukkah, or everyone seems to have been born in the same month!! Simplify. This is a perfect time to give yourself the gift of simplicity and the joy that comes with it.
3. ***Checking it twice***
Whether the holiday involves, cooking, shopping, cleaning or organizing, you have plenty of details to keep up with. Let a list do the work for you. If you are grieving, your memory may not be up to par, or you may be having trouble concentrating. That's "normal." Rely on your notes and lists, and keep them handy.

4. ***Do you remember?***

Companionship, laughter, tenderness... what do you remember? The person you are grieving gave you all kinds of gifts – tangible and intangible during your time together. Write them down and keep them someplace special.

5. ***Where's the party?***

Just because everyone always comes to your house for the holidays or special occasions doesn't mean they have to come this year. Feel free to try something else to give yourself the space you need to grieve. Too tired to whip up your famous recipe? That's okay. Let someone else prepare it to your specifications.

6. ***Surprise!***

Be prepared for the holidays as well as birthdays and anniversaries and other special occasions to be an emotional time for you. Don't be surprised by tears and sadness, and don't fight them off. Instead carry tissues. Tell the people you are with that you probably will cry, and invite them to cry with you.

7. ***Just say no***

If you are feeling pressured to participate in more than you're comfortable with try saying "no". "No thank-you." You don't owe anyone an explanation. Be kind, but firm. People will want you to feel welcomed and included, but they will also understand that you need some time.

8. ***Share the love***

Holidays and special occasions where gift giving is the custom may be hard in that no gift is being purchased for the deceased. Consider buying a gift for someone who would otherwise not have a gift or make a contribution to a charitable organization in that person's name.

9. ***Tell me again***

Instead of trying to push back memories of the person you are grieving this holiday, ask friends and family members to share recollections of the person with you in photographs, stories, and mementos. Some families box, wrap and give each other memories. Trinkets that remind us of the family member or friend are especially enjoyed by, and helpful for, children.

10. ***Pay attention***

Most importantly, pay attention to yourself. Listen when that little voice tells you you're tired, and need to take a break from holiday preparation. Give yourself the option of not attending another party or event. And be sure to let your friends and family members know what you're up for and what they can do to help.