

Getting Through the Holiday Season

When I was asked to write an article about grief and the holidays, I asked myself what could I possibly share to help the newly bereaved or give them hope? I have been privileged to work with many bereaved people but that doesn't make me an expert on grief. Thirteen years ago I was newly bereaved just prior to Christmas. My darling 16 year old daughter Leah had died and I was facing my first Christmas without her. I was not looking forward to it and reflecting back at times I wondered how the heck I managed, but manage I did. Oh how I dreaded the preparations, the festivities, the entire season. It wasn't going to be Christmas as I had always known it, and it may never be again but there still were some joys to the season.

I hope that you allow me to share with you some ideas that might perhaps help you get through. Some of these thoughts that I share with you are personal and intimate, others are concrete ideas that I have learned from renowned grief experts.

Firstly, if you haven't done so already – simplify. You may have noticed that you have less energy this year. Some tasks that used to be simple and easy may seem overwhelming. Perhaps you won't send out Christmas cards; people will understand that choice. Telephone if you must those few who are very near and dear to you that you feel you just have to convey a message to. You don't have to bake; for years we've known that all that baking isn't good for us anyway. Let this be the year that we don't work ourselves into a frenzy to prepare for that day.

You set the tone for the holidays; state your needs clearly to others. Friends of ours who are bereaved parents decided that it was just too painful to be with family members and others' children, so they decided to go just as a couple to Hawaii. They appreciated being bathed by the warm sun. I on the other hand drew comfort from being with my siblings and chose to stay in town. My point being is; each of us can decide what may help and say that plainly to those around us, so that they can support us with our decisions. Decide what kind of celebration is best for you.

Plan ahead and stick to your plans. By planning ahead and organizing your schedule you'll reduce your anxiety to make each day more manageable. In planning ahead decide what kind of celebration is best for you. If you have always hosted the turkey dinner for your family-you may move the venue to another family members' home, or get help by having everyone bring a dish.

Learn all you can about the grief process. By being knowledgeable about the process you may learn what to expect and not dread it so much. Read up on the bereavement process; speak with others who have been through it. Join a group and attend it to share and learn. Don't be afraid to ask for professional help. Searching for help is a sign of strength and emotional stability.

Look after your basic health needs. Now that may sound simple, but we can easily neglect our health when we are overwhelmed with grief. Make it a point to eat healthily, exercise regularly and if you don't have the energy to do that-even taking a short walk may help. Drink lots of water. Get plenty of rest; experts tell us that we can't heal if we don't sleep. Take time for your own self-care and take time to grieve.

Feel free to express your emotions. It is okay to cry when we need to cry or laugh if we need to. Laughter too is a good emotional release. Be with people that you want to be with; people that will share your emotions and comfort you. It is okay to avoid people that are not comfortable with your grief.

Talk about the person who has died and mention their name. "Grief shared is grief diminished." Others are grieving too and they will follow your lead. If you speak the name of the one that died they will too and not be afraid of upsetting you. Everyone will benefit. Remembering those that have died helps them to live on. Helen Keller wisely said, "Those that live on in our hearts never really die" and that is so true.

During our whole life we use rituals for events. Rituals mark the passing of time, mark special events and help us to remember them. Rituals surrounding the holidays make this season especially poignant. There are so many rituals and familiar traditions at this time of year: special music, trees, ornaments, stockings, gifts, baking, turkey, religious celebrations. One of the joys of traditions is the constant repetition. I encourage you to continue with the rituals and traditions that bring you comfort, don't repeat the ones that are just too painful and begin new ones if it helps. This could be the year to create new traditions.

Give to others, if you are able. Leah and I always participated in the Samaritans Purse program of filling a shoe box for a child in need. I like to continue that custom in memory of her. And, of course in helping someone else I too feel better. I know of other bereaved people that opt to help the homeless and they too feel better by giving. We heal by giving and sharing with others.

Do you remember a time when you wanted to help someone: perhaps you comforted your children when they had been teased, or you helped a co-worker achieve a goal? Maybe your heart ached for a neighbor that had a family member die. Perhaps you felt helpless to comfort them, but you tried anyway, made yourself available, encouraged them or comforted them.

Now you are the person hurting and you need some special care. When your friends and relatives offer their love and help, take it and find joy in the things they do for you.

Most importantly, you need to be good to yourself. You deserve some pampering. Take frequent breaks, listen to your favourite music, eat your favourite foods and be kind to yourself. Be as good to yourself as you would be to a friend. You have been through a life changing, dramatic event; you deserve some kindness.

Many bereaved people learn that the holiday itself may not be as difficult as they imagined. The time leading up to the day and the anticipation of it is truly more trying than the day.

Life will never be the same again, but the potential for joy exists in all of us for as long as we live.

My hope for all bereaved people this season is that they find some joy.

-Kathy Cloutier AHPCA Roadshow Facilitator

