

# Finding Comfort on Holidays, Anniversaries and Special Occasions



HOSPICE  
BY THE BAY

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*Serving Marin, San Francisco, San Mateo and Sonoma Counties*

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# Finding Comfort on Holidays, Anniversaries and Other Special Occasions

Thanksgiving, birthdays, Chanukah, Christmas. Valentine's Day, Mother's and Father's Day, wedding anniversaries — for many people, thinking about occasions spent with family and friends brings back a flood of happy memories. However, for those experiencing special occasions and holidays after the death of a loved one, happy memories can be dulled by the pain and sorrow of loss.



Special days, such as birthdays (your own, your children's, as well as that of your loved one), anniversaries (wedding anniversaries, as well as the anniversary of your loved one's diagnosis of illness or the death), and holidays are often extremely difficult after someone has died, especially the first year after the death. On these special occasions, when everyone is supposed to be happy and enjoying each other's company, the bereaved person can feel sad, lonely and depressed.

During holidays, it seems everywhere you turn there is something to break your heart a little more. Stores are decorated with the symbols of the holiday. Television programs tell stories of togetherness, love, and sharing. Familiar music that you enjoyed with your loved one fills the airwaves. As a wedding anniversary approaches, you may be acutely aware of every couple that walks by. Everyone you meet asks the question you dread hearing, "What are you doing for the holidays?" Others cannot wait for that special day to arrive. You may be feeling that you can't wait for it to be over.

Your feelings are normal. And, special occasions and holidays do not have to be entirely sad. There are things you can do to help cope with sad feelings. This booklet explains some steps you can take to help you during difficult times of the year.



### **Plan Ahead**

Many grieving people feel they would just like to go to sleep and wake up after the special occasion is over. Since this may not be an option, help yourself by planning ahead to deal with the challenges you may encounter. During your planning, you may experience some emotional pain. As much as this hurts, you will likely find that, when that day arrives, it is less painful than you anticipated.

## **What follows will help you plan for and anticipate what's ahead.**

### **Accept Your Limitations**

The many decisions you have to make during special occasions, plus the family and social interaction and pressure that accompany those days, can feel overwhelming. However, you have the ability and the right to make choices about what you do.

### **Decisions you may need to consider:**

- To accept or decline party and dinner invitations.
- How to handle meal tasks, including cooking and baking.
- Decorating the house.
- Thinking about what would be most helpful for children who may also be grieving.
- What would be best for me?
- Family or holiday traditions — do you let them go this year, try to keep them, or choose to develop new ones?
- Do you or the family want to visit the cemetery that day?
- Do you even want to attend the gathering or just stay at home that day?

Thinking about these decisions should help you feel better, not worse. One strategy to help you keep from feeling overwhelmed is to choose to deal with just a few of the decisions at a time, rather than trying to think about them all at once.

## **Take Care of Yourself**

Take care of yourself physically. A grieving body is more susceptible to illness and needs proper nourishment and rest.

***Exercise.*** Exercise reduces stress and can increase your sense of well being. If you are not currently exercising, don't overdo it. Start by simply walking a few minutes a day. As you gain strength and stamina, increase your speed and distance.



***Eat a properly balanced diet.*** Your body needs the strength and energy from eating properly. Fight the tendency to rely on junk food because it's faster, easier, or less hassle.

Comfort foods, especially if they are associated with your childhood or the person you lost, may be soothing. Just be sure you get enough foods with nutritional value too. This helps with the fatigue grief can cause, as well as balancing your mood.

***Avoid excessive use of drugs or alcohol.*** It will only postpone painful feelings, not eliminate them. It may even increase feelings of depression.

***Get adequate rest.*** Experiencing the death of a loved one requires a great deal of physical and emotional strength. Your body and mind need rest to regenerate.

***Consider talking with a Hospice By The Bay grief support counselor.*** Our professional counselors offer individual and family grief counseling and support groups that are available to anyone in the community. See the back page on how to contact the Hospice By The Bay office nearest you.

### *Be Prepared for Physical and Emotional Responses*

Although everyone's grief is different, some physical and emotional responses are commonly experienced by bereaved adults and children. These include:

#### **Physical**

Stomach distress  
Difficulty breathing  
Muscle weakness  
Dry mouth  
Headache  
Chest pain  
Change in bowel pattern  
Change in eating habits  
Lack of energy  
Nervousness  
Difficulty sleeping  
Over-activity  
Skin rash

#### **Emotional**

Shock  
Disbelief  
Sadness  
Loneliness  
Guilt  
Anger  
Anxiety  
Crying  
Nightmares  
Lack of concentration  
Fear  
Preoccupation with, or thoughts of, the deceased

### *It's Okay to Feel Sad*

Unrealistic expectations of happiness and joy can accompany holidays and special family occasions. Even people who have not experienced a major loss can feel the pressure, depression, and fatigue that can come with special occasions.



Accept that there will be times when you are sad and depressed. Give yourself permission to feel unhappy. People who have lost a loved one have every right to feel sad, depressed, and anxious.

### ***It's Okay to Feel Good***

Also, give yourself permission to feel good, to laugh, and even have fun. Some bereaved individuals feel guilty if they find themselves enjoying an activity. Feeling good and laughing is your body's way of letting you relax for a few moments and regain strength during your



grief, as well as reminding you that you are still alive. These are normal and healthy reactions. You are in no way being disrespectful to the memory of your loved one if you enjoy yourself.

### ***Cry, Cry, Cry***

Whatever you do, allow yourself to cry when you need to. Ignore advice to be strong and hold back your tears. Crying helps both physically and emotionally, as, similar to exercise, it reduces and calms anxiety.

### ***Lower Your Expectations***

Go easy on yourself. Remember you are going through a physically and emotionally stressful time. Holidays and special occasions will inevitably be different without your special person there. You can smile, laugh, and enjoy the day, but it will take time to adjust to your new situation.

### ***Confide In Someone***

Find someone who will listen to you without feeling she or he must come up with answers to your problems. Find someone who will let you say the words that are bottled up inside you, even if you need to say them over and over again. This person may be a family member, friend, or clergy member. You may also want to talk with Hospice By The Bay's grief support counselors.

# Tips for Handling Activities on Special Occasions

## Shopping

If you feel you must shop, pick a time when the stores aren't crowded, such as when they first open. If you don't want to go alone, ask someone to shop with you. If going to stores seems too difficult, try using a catalog, home shopping television programs, or buying on the web. This may also be an appropriate time to de-emphasize material gift-giving, if that has been the custom.

## Sending Letters

If you choose to mail holiday cards, shorten your list. You may decide you want to let it go this year. Decorations and festive meals can also be limited or postponed to another time, unless they bring you joy and comfort.

## Accepting Invitations

Lower demands and expectations on yourself. You do not have to accept every invitation you receive or participate in all your usual activities. However, if you find yourself declining all invitations and postponing all activities, try to attend or participate in just one or two rather than isolating yourself. Choose those that allow you to be with the people who most comfort you.



## Traditions: Old and New

The most difficult aspects of special occasions can be long-time traditions. A death in the family may mean that a once-loved tradition may lose some of its joy or its importance. It's also possible that, in light of your loss, you wish to start new traditions.

For example, if you always host a meal on holidays, and serve the same food, ask someone else to act as host this year or try changing the menu. Many people find that eating out that day can reduce stress and anxiety.

Attend religious services at a different time, or at a different church or synagogue. Open gifts at a different time or location than in the past. Some find that going away on a short trip during anniversaries and holidays is a welcome change.

**Remember: if you try something new and it doesn't work, you do not have to keep doing it.**

If other family members are also grieving, discuss your needs with them, and determine how to best meet everyone's needs. During this discussion, it is important to be honest about your feelings. It is also important to be somewhat flexible and to work out a meaningful compromise that meets everyone's needs.

### **Memorialize your Loved One**

Remember your loved one in a way that is meaningful to you. Although these special tributes may cause some tears, they are usually helpful and therapeutic.

Doing an activity that your loved one enjoyed can make the day more meaningful. An activity the entire family can participate in can strengthen the bonds of togetherness and sharing. However, it is also appropriate for individual family members to create a memorial activity that is personal and private – something that is between just her or him and their loved one.

The following suggestions come from bereaved individuals who memorialized their loved one on special occasions or started new traditions:

- Light special memorial candles on birthdays, anniversaries, or each day during the holidays. You can also use a large candle that you light each day.
- Display a single fresh flower as a reminder.
- Have time set aside when the family shares memories of your loved one.
- At a meal, offer a prayer or toast to your loved one.
- Purchase a gift for your loved one, and then donate it to a charity.

- Hang a special Christmas stocking or other holiday decoration in memory of the loved one.
- Purchase a small evergreen tree from a nursery, decorate it, and replant it after the holidays.
- Give the money you would have spent on gifts to a charity in your loved one's name.
- Celebrate a holiday on another day, such as having Christmas on New Year's Day.
- Focus on helping others.
- In honor of your loved one, do activities that he or she would have especially enjoyed (e.g. watch their favorite movie; go to their favorite restaurant; go skiing or ice skating).

## Holidays, Grief and Faith

Many holidays involve celebrating religious traditions. Our diverse faiths and spiritual beliefs may call us to reflect on love, light, divine guidance, renewal and hope. Lighting Christmas candles, feeling the sense of community during the fall Jewish High Holy Days, or enjoying winter New Year's festivities — occasions such as these can be especially difficult when we are grieving the loss of a loved one.



For people who have a faith tradition, it is normal to question beliefs and understandings about God's presence in our lives when we suffer a loss. We may feel our faith is shaken or weak if we cannot feel the hope and joy it once inspired, or if we feel angry at God or doubtful about divine mercy. Holidays, with their focus on sacred milestones, can trigger these issues. It is no reflection on your faith or on your relationship with God if you do not feel up to attending holiday services or being part of holiday meals.

Even for people who do not identify with a particular religion, it is common for questions of meaning and purpose to arise during the grief process. You may want to talk with an interfaith Hospice By The Bay Spiritual Support Counselor or Bereavement Counselor who can guide you through the spiritual aspects of grief.

# Providing Emotional Support for Children

Keep the following guidelines in mind when attending to the unique needs of children coping with grief:

- The behavior of adults, particularly parents, has a tremendous influence on a grieving child. The child's ability to cope with their feelings depends on how the adults who are important to the child express their grief, and whether they assure the child that it's okay to express a full range of feelings. Parents must let children know that adult tears are not a rejection of the child. If Mom or Dad says, "I feel sad because I miss Grandma," the child understands it's okay if he or she misses Grandma, too.
- Don't avoid long-standing family traditions during the holidays, birthdays, or anniversaries, if you are willing to participate in them. Children often find comfort in a big family dinner, hiding Easter eggs, or lighting the candles on the menorah. Traditions can be a way for the child to express his or her thoughts and feelings. However, minimize the pressure of the holidays by using available practical and emotional support from family and close friends.
- Create a special time during the holiday or anniversary to talk as a family about favorite memories of the person who died. Children often find it helpful to look at photographs as they talk about the person.
- Provide children with extra attention, praise, and emotional support at these times.
- Take an active role in helping the child to express their feelings. Young people often don't show sadness as openly as adults. They may go to their rooms and suffer in silence. Pay attention to cues about how children are feeling, and talk openly about how natural it is to be thinking of your loved one.



- Recognize that the child may have questions about your loved one's death that didn't occur to them until this point. Children process their grief anew at each new developmental stage. Be patient and honest in your answers.
- Ask yourself, "Is what I am saying and doing comforting to the child?" Provide reassurance through actions as well as words.
- Recognize that children need to talk, not just to be talked to. Listen.

## Memorial Activities for Children

Many families have found that creating a special memorial activity for children can be meaningful and comforting. Although adults can have input and give guidance, the children should decide what they would like to do.

Some suggestions that have proven helpful to others are:

- Have children help bake cookies for a nursing home or group that had meaning to the your loved one. Have the child write a note explaining that the gift is a memorial and adding something personal about your loved one.
- Plant a tree in the backyard.
- Have the child write a note, draw a picture, or make a small gift for your loved one. Then take it to the cemetery, and bury it at the grave, or let it float away in a river, lake, or ocean. Or, keep it in a special place (e.g., on a family altar).



# Thinking about Helpful Activities and Rituals

The following questions can help you think about what to do during anniversaries, birthdays and holidays. The chart leaves space for common activities and for you to add your own activities.

Each member of the family can complete a chart, which everyone can then review. The family can then decide together about an appropriate activity. The discussion usually involves some bargaining and compromise on everyone's part.

- List holiday/birthday/anniversary activities you have done in the past.
- List the activities you've enjoyed in the past.
- Which activities would you enjoy or feel comfortable doing this year?
- Are there changes you would like to make from past years' activities?
- Are there special things you would like to do this year because of your recent loss or to honor the memory of a loved one?
- List other possibilities and ideas.

## **Writing Can Help**

Some people find great comfort and meaning in writing down how they feel. Use the rest of this page to get yourself started.

# Your Notes



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