
◆ Strategies for Coping with the Holidays ◆

from *The Parenting Through Grief Series*

The information provided here is the outcome of a parent to parent workshop on this topic.

We have also taken excerpts from "Guiding Your Child Through Grief" by Jim and Mary Ann Emswiler. While this flyer is not comprehensive, it does touch on some main points. Also, all of the participants in our workshop celebrate Christmas so we would welcome comments reflective of other faiths.

Big Thoughts

The holidays come every year. Surprisingly, the first holiday after the death may not be the worst. Some "alumni" parents felt that they were in a haze the first year, and they don't even remember what they did. The second time the holidays come around can be more of a challenge. The third time may be easier, but you will continue to re-evaluate what to do at the holidays. Doing something one year does not commit you to continuing with the tradition. Each year you can think about what worked and what didn't.

The expectation of the event is usually far worse than the actual day.

There is no right or wrong way to spend the holidays.

"Skipping" a holiday is acceptable.

Take Care of Yourself

Exercise – Even if you just walk around the block, exercising reduces stress.

Watch what you eat and drink – Holiday sweets will give you a quick lift, but then a sugar-crash. Drink

All those people who said, "If you ever need anything, just ask" are waiting for you to give them a job to do. Have them help you during this really tough time.

The people around you feel powerless, most of the time, and would love to do something tangible for you.

water and ease up on caffeine and alcohol to keep in balance.

Ask for help

All of those people who said, "If there's anything I can do" would love to hear from you. They would *love* to help you. Let them help you. It will make them feel better that they can do something tangible for you, and you will be cared for.

Here are some ideas on ways to have people help:

- One parent had her sister come over and set up the Christmas tree and decorate the house with her children.
- Friends can go shopping for you. Don't worry that they are busy during the holidays, they would love to do this for you.
- Let family come and decorate your house with their decorations so you don't have to look at yours. They can tell you about the meaning of their decorations.

The Children's Room

Center for Grieving Children and Teenagers, Inc.

1210 Massachusetts Ave.
Arlington, MA 02476
(781) 641-4741

www.childrensroom.org

Barbara Clarke, Executive Director
bclarke@childrensroom.org

Donna Sharff, Program Director
dsharff@childrensroom.org

Strategies for Coping with the Holidays (continued)

Establish a place in your holiday for the one who died

- There are many ways to incorporate your loved one.
- Purchase gifts in their honor and donate them to charity.
- For Christmas, decorate a special tree either in the home or at the cemetery.
- Bake the person's favorite cookies or make their favorite meal and give them to friends. This is a nice way to thank all of those people who may have come and brought you food.
- Write memories down on pieces of paper and put them in a special spot throughout the season. Some people have decorated ribbons on wreaths with memories; stuffed stockings with scraps of paper; or filled a decorative vase, etc.

The expectation of the event is usually far worse than the actual day.

On dealing with sentimental decorations:

Give yourself permission to leave those cherished decorations in their box if it would be too painful. Less is more. You can purchase inexpensive decorations and have friends and family create their own. When you are ready, you can open that other box. However many years it takes.

On holiday cards

Follow your instincts. Are you feeling good, and you want to share this with others? Then send cards. Or, are you feeling stressed and sad, then don't send cards. You probably have a friend or two who would help you address envelopes, so call them.

On giving gifts

No one should expect a gift from a bereaved person, except perhaps, your children. If on-line or catalogue shopping is not meeting your needs, then ask friends and family to help. Once again, they would be grateful to help you in this way. No bereaved person should go into a mall during the holidays.

Social Events

Evaluate each social opportunity on a case by case basis. If you think you may want to go, give a tentative RSVP but tell the person that you may decide to back out at the last minute. Tell the host that some days are better than others, and you are just taking things one day at a time. Tell them you would enjoy attending but aren't sure how you will feel on that day.

Instead of going to a holiday party, even one with close friends, try to see fewer people in a smaller setting. Pizza and a movie is a fine way to get together.

Make January plans

Reward yourself for getting through the holidays.

Spend a day with your family going to a museum or place that you have never been to before.

Help others

Sometimes helping others will make you feel better. Getting out and volunteering is a good way to reduce stress and do something to help others. There are numerous resources for volunteering such as:
www.volunteerfamily.org
www.bostoncares.org

Keep in mind that organizations are overwhelmed with volunteers during the holidays, so making plans for February or March is better.

Birthday Wishes (www.birthdaywishes.org) puts on birthday parties in homeless shelters. You can donate in memory of someone and even go help out at a party. Mention The Children's Room if you donate.