

KNOW! Navigating Grief During the Holidays

As the winter holidays approach, many families gather to celebrate and be with one another. This time of year is exciting, but for those coping with grief and loss, the holidays can be challenging and bittersweet. After a death, the holidays often become a secondary loss. [What's Your Grief](#) explains secondary losses in the following way:

"Death does not just create a single hole in one's life. Instead, the loss can impact many areas of one's life, creating multiple losses from that "primary loss." Though it is easy to think that our grief is solely the grief of losing the person we cared for so deeply, our grief is also the pain of the other losses that were a result of the death. You will hear these losses referred to as "secondary losses," not in the sense that their impact is secondary, but rather that they are a secondary result of the primary loss."

The secondary loss of the holidays may weigh especially on young people who are experiencing grief or have recently experienced grief, whether due to the death of a loved one or a major transition in their life. The holidays often bring up emotions and memories that are difficult to navigate.^{4,6}

Here are a few ways that you can support the young people in your life as they cope with grief during the holidays:

Start a Conversation about Changes to Traditions

For many, holiday traditions are the most anticipated part of the season. Traditions provide us with a sense of connection, belonging, and comfort. After a loss, however, traditions sometimes change. Losing traditions is never easy. As a caring adult, it may feel like your responsibility to decide which traditions to keep, change, and leave behind. Instead of trying to figure everything out by yourself, try planning for changes with the young person in your life. Ask them what they want to do regarding a certain tradition. Remind them that there is no right or wrong answer - you are just asking them to share how they feel.

If you decide together that you want a tradition to change, you may want to ask: What is the value at the heart of this ritual? Your tradition may be centered around a common holiday value like family, generosity, comfort, or remembrance. Allow the value to drive how your tradition evolves. Work with the young person in your life to make a list of ways that you connect with the values at the core of your traditions. Be creative and keep an open mind - there is no right way to connect to your values. You'll likely find that it's okay for some of

the 'what' to change, so long as you still connect with the 'why.' Together, you can create new traditions and memories in honor of your loved one.^{1,3,5,6}

This [values worksheet](#) from What's Your Grief may be a valuable resource as you navigate changes to holiday traditions. This [article](#) provides ideas for new holiday traditions in the absence of a loved one.

Allow the Season to be Different

Trying to create the perfect holiday celebration will not protect you or the young person in your life from experiencing grief. It may even cause you both more stress. No matter how hard you try for perfection or normality, no one forgets that someone they love is missing. Don't expect yourself or your family to put on a brave face. Instead, you can try to talk openly about how you feel and how you miss your loved one. This sends the message to the young person in your life that it is okay to talk about your feelings and that you are a safe person for them.

Remember: struggling with grief during the holidays is common, regardless of when the loss occurred. You don't owe anyone the perfect holiday and you don't have anything to prove. You're allowed to let the holidays look and feel different this year.^{1,5}

Create Connection to their Loved One

The holidays tend to bring up memories and connection to the past. These memories can easily become overwhelming and make it difficult to be present. It may bring you and your young person comfort to remember that you are not leaving your loved one behind, [but rather you can bring them with you to the present](#). There are many ways to help a young person connect to the present while remembering their loved one during the holidays. As with holiday traditions, try asking them how they would like to remember their loved one. Many methods of connection can be incorporated into your typical holiday activities. Some examples include:

- Making a holiday decoration using photos of their loved one
- Writing a holiday card to their loved one
- Letting them set a place at the table where the empty chair will be
- Making their loved one's favorite holiday recipe
- Creating a memento or keepsake in memory of happy holiday times with their loved one
- Volunteering with their loved one's favorite charity

Don't be afraid to join in on the activities with your young person - you are showing them that it's okay to grieve openly.^{2,5,6}

Stick to Routines but Allow for Flexibility

Young people benefit from having a normal routine. Both the holiday season and experiencing loss can disrupt their usual routine. As best as you can, try to maintain a steady routine, particularly with meals and bedtime. If there are events or gatherings you always attend during the holidays, try to uphold your celebration schedule. There will be days when your emotions make sticking to a routine difficult - it's okay to express these emotions, but to whatever extent is possible on these days, try to stick to your established routine.

That being said, allow for some flexibility with the holidays. Try your best to keep an awareness of what your young person needs in the moment. They may start discussing their loved one right before they are meant to go to bed or want to leave a gathering - be patient and flexible with their needs. Some aspects of the holidays may be particularly challenging for your young person. Give them grace to break out of the routine if they need but stick to a routine so that your young person can know what they can expect.^{5,6}

Take Care of Yourself

Helping a young person navigate their grief during the holidays can be draining, especially if you are grieving as well. Just as you give your young person grace, be sure to give yourself grace. Take care of yourself. Know that whatever you are feeling is okay. If you find yourself experiencing positive emotions like okay-ness, happiness, comfort, gratitude, and joy you don't have to feel guilty. You can hold these emotions and your grief simultaneously. Incorporate coping activities and breaks for rest into your schedule, even if you are busy with activities and gatherings. You deserve to take care of yourself and ask for help when you need it.¹

Grieving during the holidays is always going to be hard. Grief never ends, and no matter when a loss occurred, the holidays may reignite difficult emotions and memories. There are no hard and fast rules to coping with grief during the holidays, for yourself and the young people in your life. The above lists are suggestions - but loving the young people in your life and allowing them to share their emotions with you are the most important ways you can provide support during this time.⁵

Feel free to check out these resources!

- [5 Tips for Living with a Grief Monster](#)
- [Grief Resource Packet](#)
- [64 Tips for Coping with Grief at the Holidays](#)
- [Thanks For the Offer, But I Don't Know What I Need!](#)
- [8 Tips for Supporting a Grieving Friend This Holiday](#)
- [Continuing Bonds](#)
- [16 Ideas for Creating New Holiday Tradition After a Death](#)
- [Remembering Loved Ones During the Holidays: 19 Practical Suggestions](#)
- [Setting Holiday Boundaries \(even when it's hard\)](#)
- [Coping with Grief During the Holidays](#)
- [13 Ideas for the Empty Christmas Stocking](#)

Sources

- [7 Ways to Go Easy on Yourself While Grieving at the Holidays](#)
- [8 Tips for Remaining Present at the Holidays \(While Grieving\)](#)
- [Changing Holiday Traditions; Keeping Holiday Values After a Death, the Holidays are a Secondary Loss](#)
- [7 Ways to Help Grieving Children During the Holidays](#)
- [10 Ways to Help a Child Cope with Grief Through the Holidays](#)

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6171 Huntley Road Suite G | Columbus, Ohio 43229
6145409985 | contact@preventionactionalliance.org