

# KNOW! TO HELP YOUTH NAVIGATE GRIEF DURING THE HOLIDAYS



As the fall and winter holidays approach, many families gather to celebrate and connect. While this season can bring joy, it can also be bittersweet for those coping with grief and loss. After someone dies, the holidays often become a secondary loss – a reminder of the absence that now touches familiar traditions. As [What's Your Grief](#) explains, secondary losses occur when loss “impact[s] many areas of one’s life, creating multiple losses from that ‘primary loss.’”

For young people, the holidays can bring up especially strong emotions and memories. Grief may surface in unexpected ways, and navigating it can feel overwhelming.

Here are a few ways to support the young people in your life as they move through grief during the holidays:

## Talk About Changes to Traditions

Holiday traditions bring belonging and comfort, but after a loss, those same rituals can feel different or painful. It’s natural for traditions to change, and it’s important to involve young people in those decisions. Instead of trying to decide everything yourself, invite them into the conversation. Ask what traditions they want to keep, change, or let go of, and remind them that there is no right or wrong answer.

### TALKING TIP

If you decide together to change a tradition, ask, “What value is at the heart of this tradition?”

Let that value – whether it’s generosity, comfort, or remembrance – drive how it evolves. Often, it’s okay for some of the ‘what’ to change, so long as you still connect with the ‘why.’

## Let This Season Be Different

Trying to create a “perfect” or “normal” holiday celebration won’t protect anyone from grief. It may even cause you more stress. No matter how much effort you put into celebrations, everyone still feels the absence of the person who’s gone. Instead of pretending that everything is fine, try to talk openly about how you feel and how much you miss your loved one. Doing so models for young people that it’s okay to grieve and to talk about loss.

### TALKING TIP

Start by sharing your own feelings. You might say, “[Loved one] always made the best cookies this time of year. I really miss them.” You don’t have to ask your child anything, but by sharing your feelings, you create space for them to share, too.

## Maintain Routines When You Can

Both grief and the holiday season can disrupt normal routines. Young people, however, often find comfort in predictable rhythms, especially around meals, bedtime, and family gatherings. Try to keep familiar routines where possible while remaining flexible. Be mindful that your young person’s needs may change from moment to moment. They might want to leave a gathering early or start discussing their loved one right before bed. Patience and flexibility go a long way.

### TALKING TIP

Review your holiday calendar together, pointing out what’s staying the same and what might look different this year. Having a clear picture of what to expect can help young people feel more grounded and confident.

## Create Connection

Holidays can bring up painful memories, but creating new ways to connect to a loved one's memory can help young people stay present while remembering their loved one. You can weave remembrance into familiar holiday activities, such as:

- Making a decoration using photos of their loved one
- Writing a card to them
- Setting a place at the table in their honor
- Cooking their loved ones' favorite recipe
- Creating a memento or keepsake that celebrates happy holiday memories with their loved one
- Volunteering with their loved one's favorite cause or charity

Don't be afraid to join in on these activities with your young person – you're showing them that it's okay to grieve and remember together.

Try asking "What's one thing we can do to remember [loved one] this season?" Let them choose their own idea. Giving them a sense of agency can strengthen their feeling of connection.

### TALKING TIP

## Take Care of Yourself

Supporting a grieving person, especially when you're grieving too, can be emotionally exhausting. Remember to extend to yourself the same compassion you offer your young person. Whatever you feel – gratitude, okay-ness, even joy – is valid. You can hold these emotions and your grief at the same time.

Make space for rest and self-care, even amid busy schedules. Ask for help when you need it. Taking care of yourself not only supports your own healing—it also models healthy coping for the young people who look to you for guidance.

**Grieving during the holidays will always be difficult. Grief doesn't end, and even years after a loss, the holidays may bring difficult emotions. There's no "right" way to navigate this time. The most meaningful thing you can do is love the young people in your life, listen without judgment, and let them know that all their feelings are welcome.**

## RESOURCES

- [64 Tips for Coping with Grief at the Holidays | What's Your Grief](#)
- [Coping with Grief during the Holidays | Children's Hospital of Orange County](#)
- [After a Death, the Holidays are a Secondary Loss | What's Your Grief](#)
- [16 Ideas for Creating New Holiday Tradition After a Death | What's Your Grief](#)
- [Five Tips for Living With a Grief Monster | What's Your Grief](#)
- [Setting Holiday Boundaries \(even when it's hard\) | What's Your Grief](#)
- [Coping with Grief During the Holidays | Prevention Action Alliance](#)

## SOURCES

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

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