

Handling Grief during the Holidays

By Susan Loscalzo, MA, LPC

Major losses are comprised of many different losses, the primary loss being the loss of the dream, hope or expectation for the future. Most of us live with an underlying expectation of the future, that certain things in our lives will remain the same and certain things will change. We work and plan for that anticipated future. But a major loss can change all of this expectation and planning. Because this loss of a dream, hope or expectation can be invisible to others we do not always get the support or understanding we need in grieving our loss. This can be especially true during the holidays.

When we suffer a major loss, holidays, anniversaries, and birthdays inevitably bring fresh memories and a re-experience of the pain of grief. If the loss is recent, you might feel numb much of this holiday season, but next year's holidays may send a new wave of grief your way. Others may look as though they are moving forward faster than you are ready to do. Loved ones may want you to be "back to normal" so they can stop worrying about you. You may want to scream, "I'M NOT READY YET!!"

At holiday time, many people who are dealing with loss are caught in a dilemma between the need to grieve and the pressure to get into the spirit of the season. Holidays or not, it is important for the grief-stricken to find ways to take care of themselves. The following guidelines may be helpful:

- Don't be surprised at the intensity of your grief. Feelings of anger, panic, depression, despair, guilt or regrets, fearfulness, loneliness, isolation, as well as physical symptoms can feel stronger during this time. This is normal. It is not a setback; it is how grief is.
- Help yourself by gaining an understanding of the grieving process. Read a book on grief, attend a lecture, see a counselor or attend a support group.
- Remember what has helped you earlier in your grieving - these techniques will help you again.
- Tell important people in your life that this is a difficult season and let them know what they can do to help. Don't expect people to remember or to know what to do.
- Don't be surprised if others struggle, too, or if you see others hesitate to speak of the loss. They are probably afraid they will make you feel sad, and are unsure whether you want to talk about it.
- Allow some time to feel sad. Have a good cry if you need to.
- Be careful with excessive use of alcohol or medications.
- Try to keep on a routine. Eat as well as you can, get your rest, and keep up with your exercise program.
- If you need some quiet time, take it.
- Some people feel that a change of pace is more helpful than old familiar traditions. Do you want to do something entirely different, such as spend the holiday at the beach or in the mountains where you won't be so acutely reminded of your loss? Sometimes new traditions may develop.
- Set priorities! Grief is exhausting; know that you may tire quickly and save your energy for the most important things. Grief is also can make us fuzzy headed and forgetful. FORGIVE YOUR SELF!!!!

- Give yourself permission to express your feelings. If you feel an urge to cry, let the tears flow. Tears are healing. Scientists have found that certain brain chemicals in our tears are natural pain relievers.
- Shakespeare once said, "Give sorrow words..." Write an "un-sent letter" to your loved one, expressing what you are honestly feeling toward him or her at this moment. After you compose the letter, you may decide to place it in a book, album or drawer in your home, leave it at a memorial site, throw it away, or even burn it and let the ashes rise symbolically.
- If you aren't up to a large family affair, have a scaled-down event with a few close family members or friends.
- If you cannot tolerate being at family gatherings with babies and small children, it is ok not to attend these events this year. You will not be feeling this way every year, but it is how you are feeling now. Find a polite way to excuse yourself that works in the context of your family.
- Or if you choose to attend events where you are feeling vulnerable, let someone there know that you may signal them that you need help changing a topic or running with them to another room to cry.
- Delegate! Let others share the workload by helping with decorations and preparing food.
- The anticipation of a holiday or family event often may be more difficult than the actual day.
- Play music that is meaningful and comforting to you. Take a few moments to close your eyes and feel the music in the center of your being.
- Give yourself something to look forward to after the holiday.

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