IN BRIEF

Handling holidays and difficult times

Holidays, anniversaries, birthdays, and events that would otherwise be joyful can be especially hard on people who are grieving. If the grief is fresh, holiday cheer can seem like an affront. Celebrations may underscore how alone people feel. Likewise, it’s hard to accept that others may not mark the days that you do—the first time you met your loved one, a birthday, or the anniversary of an illness or death. The following strategies may help people ease pain around holidays and other difficult times.

Start a new tradition. People can remember the deceased on special occasions by placing a lighted candle on the table, leaving an empty chair, or saying a few words of remembrance. If the person who died always played a special role in festivities, another family member may be able to carry on the tradition.

Change the celebration. Sometimes people opt for a simpler celebration. They go out to dinner instead of planning an elaborate meal at home. Or they schedule a trip or an outing with family members or friends.

Ask for advice. It may help some people to talk to others who have lost people close to them to find out how they have managed holidays.

Express personal needs. People who are grieving may find it hard to participate in all the festivities or may need to let go of overwhelming or unsatisfying traditions. It’s all right to tell people you’re just not up to it right now or to change plans at the last minute. Don’t feel pressured to do more than you want to do. Leave an event when you wish to go.

Plan to mark the day. Others find it helpful to make special plans for an anniversary, birthday, or other special day. This can include walking through a nature preserve, visiting the cemetery or the place where ashes were scattered, or enjoying an activity the deceased would also have loved. Think of a ritual to help you connect. Light a candle and say a prayer. Release balloons. Carry a memento from your loved one.

Help someone else. It may also help to volunteer through a charitable or religious organization. Make a donation to a favorite cause in memory of the person who died.

Resources

Organizations

AARP
601 E St. NW
Washington, DC 20049
888-687-2277 (toll-free)
www.aarp.org

AARP is a nonprofit membership organization for people ages 50 and older. Its Web site offers many helpful publications on grief.

The Compassionate Friends
900 Jorie Blvd., Suite 78
Oak Brook, IL 60523
877-969-0010 (toll-free)
www.compassionatefriends.org

This national nonprofit organization offers bereaved parents, grandparents, and siblings friendship and understanding delivered by others who have stood in their shoes. The Web site has a chat room and offers many supportive brochures for family members, friends, teachers, and various professionals.

GriefNet
P.O. Box 3272
Ann Arbor, MI 48106
www.griefnet.org

This online community offers e-mail support groups for children and adults. The Web site also includes links to other helpful organizations.

Books

Healing Your Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas
Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D. (Companion Press, 2001)

This simple book is packed with thoughtful coping strategies described briefly and compassionately. The author, a psychologist and grief counselor, has written many more titles in this series, including Healing Your Grieving Heart for Kids, Healing Your Grieving Heart for Teens, and Healing a Parent’s Grieving Heart.

Saying Goodbye: How Families Can Find Renewal Through Loss
Barbara Okun, Ph.D., and Joseph Nowinski, Ph.D. (Berkley Books, 2011)

While death used to be a swift act—an event—the act of dying is now a process that family members may have to live with for a protracted time, as modern medicine is increasingly able to keep very sick people alive. Two psychologists guide readers through the complex journey of “living with death” in this reassuring and hopeful book. Real-life stories illustrate lessons about practical matters, such as taking care of finances, and emotional ones, such as talking with children about death.

Seven Choices: Finding Daylight after Loss Shatters Your World

This book chronicles the author’s experience of losing her young husband and the experiences of more than 60 other grieving women and men. Neeld describes seven turns in the road and the opportunities she believes each one presents as those who’ve been bereaved seek to honor the past while building a future.