



Coping with Grief during Holidays

and on Other Special Occasions



Coping with Grief at the Holidays and Other Special Occasions

After someone special has died, holidays throughout the year—as well as special days of all kinds—can be particularly difficult for us.

The feelings of grief often seem to be intensified during these times.

Holidays from Thanksgiving to Memorial Day, from Valentine's Day to Halloween to Mother's or Father's Day, can be traditional times where family or friends get together.

Other occasions can be just as special as holidays. Birthdays and anniversaries come around every year, while significant rites of passage are notable just because they're once-in-a-lifetime events.

Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, First Communion, a Senior Prom, a child going off to grade school, high school or college, or a family wedding are occasions where sharing with the ones we love can make them even more special.

During these times, the togetherness we experience with those around us highlights all the more clearly the absence of the one who is missing.

“The presence of that absence is everywhere.”

—Edna St. Vincent Millay

Memories of past seasons of celebration and fun, of sharing and togetherness, contrast with present feelings of sadness, emptiness, and dread.

For those traditions which have been observed year after year, having the day come around this year without our special person there to help us to celebrate it can feel profoundly incomplete—whether it's the first time without them, or we've already gone through this in previous years.

The fact that these days are special seems to make it worse. Sometimes it's their very specialness itself that hurts. When the one we love is missing, their absence is all the more noticeable on days like these.

And it's also easy to feel even more set apart—different—during these times. Children and adults can feel all alone, outside the circle of fun, laughter and togetherness.



Holiday Questions

Holidays, special days, and the days of anticipation leading up to these days, can bring up their own sets of questions—

- What do I do now?
- How will I get through these days without the one I miss so deeply?
- Should I act like everything is normal?
- Do I continue with the old traditions?
- Should I do something new?
- Should I celebrate the holiday or special day at all this year?

There are no universal right and wrong answers to these questions. But there are general patterns that those who have gone through this have discovered.

The following thoughts have been gathered as Caring Place families have shared their experiences of holidays and other special days.

Realize that the anticipation of the holiday or other special occasion is often as difficult—or even more difficult—than the day itself.

Remember your limits. Grieving takes energy. You may find that you have even less energy now than at other times of the year. Be gentle with yourself and your children, and allow yourself to take whatever time for yourself you need.

Seek out supportive people. Find those people who accept your feelings, who understand that a holiday or other special day can be more difficult and who allow you to express your feelings. Ask for support.

Don't get caught in unreasonable expectations. Losses and separations of all kinds make holidays difficult in lots of ways. For many of us, special days produce more stress and pain than joy. In light of this, be gentle with yourself. There is no perfect way—only the best way that you can manage at this time.

“Have patience with all the world,
but first of all with yourself.”

—Francis de Sales



Take time beforehand to plan out your activities.

Focus on your needs, and the needs of your children. Decide with your family what traditions you would like to continue, and traditions you're going to need to let go of this year. Allow your children to be a part of this process. Having a plan can help you from being caught off-guard, but you can also allow flexibility in the plan for the unexpected drop in energy or change of heart. It will take time to discover new meaning for these days.

Embrace your memories. Memories are one of the best legacies that exist after someone dies. Sharing and hearing your memories and your children's memories, crying and laughing together, keeps the person who died a part of these special days.

Talk about your grief, and about the person who has died. Share your feelings and your memories with people you trust. Say the person's name, and invite others to do the same.

Remember that everyone grieves differently—even within the same family. Allow everyone in the family to express their desires for the special day. If some family members can't bear to even see decorations, and other members would like to make things as much like the "Old Days" as possible, try to see how much each person's wishes can be accommodated. In many cases, the choices don't have to be all or nothing. Be respectful of each other's grief and hopes.

Allow children and adolescents space to grieve in their own way. Be prepared for any type of reaction from children. Be patient with anger or meanness, but also be careful of a child trying to "be strong" for you. They need to grieve as well. Give kids space when they need it, alone or with the support and security of friends.

Remember that your grief is important and

unique. Be patient with yourself, and don't let anyone take your grief away. And, know that there are times, despite your best efforts, that nothing will seem to work. So remember—be gentle with yourself, and with your children.

“What we have once enjoyed and deeply loved we can never lose, for all that we love deeply becomes a part of us.”

—Helen Keller

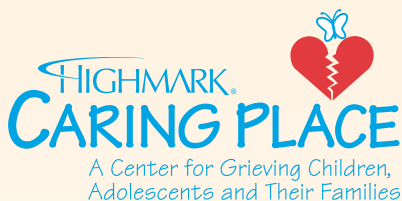


About the Highmark Caring Place

The Highmark Caring Place is dedicated to making a difference in the lives of grieving children.

It is the Mission of the Highmark Caring Place:

- To raise awareness of the needs of grieving children
- To provide programs to address those needs
- To equip the community to support those children who have experienced the death of a loved one



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