

HAVEN

Caring for Ourselves
Through the Holidays

With the approach of fall and winter, those of us who have lost a loved one may find it hard to keep up with the hustle and bustle this time of year brings. We may find it difficult to enjoy familiar activities or family traditions because we are grieving. Many of us may not be prepared to deal with the emotional and physical aspects of grief, which can make getting through the holiday season challenging. Haven wants to offer you some helpful guidelines on how to prepare for the approaching holidays.

Look at Your Fears

Anticipation of the holidays is almost always worse than the actual event. Looking at the sources of your discomfort can help you make decisions about what you choose to do or not do. Ask yourself the following questions:

- » Are you dreading the entire holiday season or specific times or traditions without your loved one?
- » Do you think you might "lose it" in front of people by crying and feeling out of control?
- » Are you afraid of feeling angry toward others who can more easily enjoy the holidays because they have not lost someone dear to them?
- » Are you afraid people will not mention your loved one because they think reminding you of your loss will upset you?
- » Are you afraid people will talk too much about your loved one and not allow any celebration?
- » Are you afraid of having to pretend you are enjoying yourself when you are feeling down?
- » Are you afraid of being alone or feeling like a fifth wheel wherever you go?
- » Are you afraid of feeling your grief more intensely as holiday memories remind you of special times with your loved one?

Answering these questions may help you clarify your feelings and make them seem less overwhelming and more manageable.

Some of my fears are: 				

Remember Your Loved One

This time of year can bring up deep emotions. You may remember past memories and times cherished with your loved one. It is important to find ways to memorialize him/her. Here are some suggestions:

- » Light a candle next to his/her picture to remember and honor the person's life.
- » Write your loved one a thank you card about what you have learned from him/ her and how your loved one had an impact on your life.
- » Buy a gift you would have bought for your loved one, and donate it to a local charity in his/her name.
- » Offer a prayer or toast to your loved one.
- » Create a special ornament for display in honor of the person.
- » Ask members of the family to write down what they are most thankful for having received from the loved one, wrap it and put it under the tree.
- » Display a single fresh flower during the holidays.
- » Attend a holiday grief support program in your area offered by Haven or your place of worship.
- » Plant a tree in memory of your loved one.
- » Spend time with people you feel comfortable sharing memories of your loved one with.

Some ways I can rememb	er my loved one are:

Express Your Feelings

Both crying and laughing are okay. It is important to allow yourself to feel. You may have good moments when you can carry on your daily routine. Sometimes you may have bad moments when you see, hear or smell something that reminds you of your loved one. Other times, you may laugh at something he/she said or did. There may be feelings of anger, guilt, despair, fear, resentment or apathy. All of these feelings are normal parts of grief. Talk to a trusted friend, or write in a journal. Feelings expressed ultimately disappear, but when you suppress them, nothing changes. You don't have to be "brave" or "strong." Strength comes through acknowledging your grief and trusting yourself to work through it and find your way.

Some of the feelings I have been experiencing are:

Lower Your Expectations

The holidays can be filled with unrealistic expectations of happiness and joy. The reality is that many families do not have the kind of holidays the media presents to us. If you are grieving, chances are the holidays could be difficult. By confronting feelings and fears head-on, it helps to take away their power to throw us off balance when they pop up unexpectedly.

Some expectations I can let go of are:				

Be Kind to Yourself

Accept your limitations and give yourself permission to grieve. Take good care of yourself. Eat healthy food, exercise, avoid excess alcohol and drugs, and get plenty of rest. Fatigue is a normal reaction to grieving. Do not allow the pressures of the season to overwhelm you. Decide how much or how little you want to do and participate in. Give yourself a special gift of a massage or whatever will nurture your body and spirit.

Ask For What You Need

Other people do not know how you feel or what you need unless you tell them. They may make assumptions that do not fit. They may think you want to talk about your loss, or they might think it will upset you if they mention the person you lost. Be honest about what you want. Do not be afraid to ask for help with planning, shopping, decorating, entertaining or just trying to get through the day. People are usually well meaning, but they are sometimes at a loss as to what to do and what to say. Remember that it is a gift to others to allow them to give to you.

What do I need?

Create Support for Yourself

Sharing your pain eases it. Find the people who will listen and walk with you through this painful time. When spouses or family members hurt as much as you do and cannot be a support, find an alternative, perhaps a friend, another grieving person or a counselor.

The people who are there for me include:				

Help Another Person in Need

Doing something for another person can help take your attention off your own pain. If you have the energy, there are many ways to volunteer to help others.

Ways I can help others:				

Appreciate Your Other Loved Ones

Enjoy the other people you love. Do not isolate yourself. Although it may be difficult to think of anything except your loss, others need your love and attention too. And in return, their love can nourish and help you begin to heal.

Don't Compare Yourself With Others

Feeling jealous, resentful or lonely after a great loss are natural reactions. Actually, the holidays are often not ideal times for many families. Even within a family, everyone feels and expresses their grief in their own way. Sometimes family members aren't the best support for each other. Seek out those who can be there for you. Be prepared for well-meaning people to wish you a "Merry Christmas" or "Happy Holiday." Although this may be painful to hear or may evoke anger, you can respond with a simple "I'll try," or "Best wishes to you," and let it go.

In what ways can I prepare myself for the holiday?				

Plan Ahead... for How and Where to Spend the Holidays

Planning ahead can decrease anxiety. Sit down with family members and discuss what each member wants or needs. Is it really important to send cards, bake or decorate? Let others know what you want. Many people wish to keep their holiday traditions intact and try to celebrate as usual. This can be difficult to do as the death of the person you loved has created an obvious void in your life. Just be aware that it will not be the same.

Some people choose not to celebrate at all. They might go on a vacation, to the movies or some other distracting place. Others try to begin a new tradition or keep the comforting ones and not the painful ones. The more we try to recreate the past, the more obvious is our loss. Changing some traditions can be an alternative and satisfying way to spend the season. Be flexible and play it by ear. Do what feels right for you. There are no right or wrong answers. Use this checklist to help you decide how to plan for the holidays. Share with your family and compare.

Holiday Activities	Is it important to me?	Do I want to continue?	Make changes? How?
Send cards			
Decorate inside			
Decorate outside			
Shop for gifts			
Exchange gifts with family			
Exchange gifts with friends			
Cooking or baking			
Attend religious services			
Attend holiday programs			
Listen to holiday music			
Holiday dinners			
Family gatherings			
House cleaning			
Entertaining			
Other			

Utilize Your Faith

Even people of great faith may find themselves asking questions such as, "Why did God let this happen?" or "Where is God in all this pain?" You may even find yourself angry with God or questioning your belief system. You are not alone in this. These same questions and doubts have been raised in the spiritual or religious texts of most major faiths. Consider setting aside some time for prayer or meditation, reading spiritual literature or talking with a spiritual leader. Talk to members of your faith to learn how others have responded when their grief tested their faith.

Ways I can utilize my faith are:

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Children and the Holidays

Children need to be included in the planning of the holidays. If there are changes planned in their routines or traditions, they need to be prepared for them in advance. They may need extra reassurance during this difficult time. Sometimes children may regress to an earlier stage of development due to the stress. Adolescents in particular may need to spend time away from family and be with their friends. It can be unrealistic to expect them to always want to be with their families. Peer support is very important for teenagers, and they may have friends who can identify with or help them understand their own feelings. Planning a special activity for children to remember the person who died or doing something for others in honor of the loved one can be comforting to them. Plan some extra time to spend with each child during the holidays.

Ways I can include and support the children in my life are:

Other Special Days and Holidays

This pertains to other special days or events after the loss of a loved one. Birthdays, anniversaries, Mother's or Father's Day, weddings, the start of summer vacation, and many other special times may bring up intense grief. Planning ahead, communicating your needs, and finding ways to honor or celebrate the person who died can help you get through these difficult times.

for are:

You Will Survive

You may hurt, but you will survive. The holidays may be some of the most challenging times for you. Eventually you will heal and your memories will persist without pain. In the meantime, it is okay not to have a good time, and it is okay to have a good time. Stay present in the moment and accept whatever support is given. Cry if you need to, but don't deny yourself love, laughter and life because someone you loved has died. Death teaches us, more than anything, that every day is precious and worth living to the fullest. The best gift we can give ourselves and others is to live our lives to the fullest.

Be open to both giving and receiving love. Forgive yourself when you fall short. Know that your life is richer for loving.

More thoughts:

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"What we have once enjoyed we can never lose. All that we love deeply becomes a part of us."

—Helen Keller



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If you need these services, contact Haven Customer Service, 4200 NW 90th Blvd., Gainesville, FL 32606, by phone 1-800-727-1889, by fax 1-352-379-6290, or by email to cscmail@havenhospice.org.

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