

Grief in Times of Celebration: The Empty Spot

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Grieving the death of a family member or close friend is hard, exhausting work. This work may be especially difficult during holiday seasons, and other days that are filled with family and community traditions, such as anniversaries, birthdays, and mother's and father's days. During these times you may be keenly aware of the empty spot left by the one who has died, whether that death happened recently or years ago.

If your loss is recent, you may dread the approach of a holiday and wonder how you and your family will get through it. While others in your family or friendship circle may share your dread, talking about it with them can be difficult. You may believe that mentioning the empty spot that will be present during the holidays will simply deepen your pain and sadness. The tendency to avoid addressing this empty spot is so common that some have compared it to an elephant in the room that no one wants to talk about.

Other people who expect you to be over your grief and to get on with your life may add to your difficulty. Their excitement and happiness in the holiday season may feel like a mockery of your emptiness and a judgment on your sadness. As you and your family try to face the holiday season, you may feel alone and out of step with your community or culture. However, you are not alone. Many people around you are painfully aware of the empty spots left by death in their own family circles. Each grieving family faces a similar task of finding new ways to live through the holidays.

New ways to live through holidays

When bereavement is recent and grief is fresh, people often talk about "getting through" or "surviving" the holidays. This attitude may continue for years after a significant loss. It acknowledges and expresses the pain and distress of loss that wells up at special times of the year. This deep ache and sadness is normal. Recognizing the grief you and your family feel is the starting point for developing new ways of living through the holidays.

There is no one right way of facing holidays when you and your family are grieving. If those in your family circle can share with each other the feelings that come up before or during the holiday, you can think together about how to approach the holiday differently. Exploring ways of honouring old family traditions while creating new ones can give your family a sense of stability and hope in the midst of loss and change. Finding ways to include the reality of the empty spot, without making it the primary focus of the holiday, can help you to take new steps in the healing of your grief.

As you and your family seek new ways of living through holidays you may want to consider the following suggestions.

Honour your loved one

Consider ways of honouring the memory and continuing presence of your loved one as part of your holiday tradition.

- Light a candle in a special candleholder at a holiday meal or throughout the holiday season.
- Mark the empty spot at a holiday meal with a photograph, single flower, or some other memento. This could be particularly helpful within the first year or two after your bereavement.
- Visit the gravesite and leave a holiday symbol, such as an ornament, ritual object, or personal note.
- Set up a small memory tree and invite family members to hang remembrances on the branches. A memory bowl or basket may be an appropriate alternative.

- Write a letter or poem to your loved one in your journal. You may want to read it at a family gathering if others are open to this.
- Have photo albums or slide shows at hand so that family members can reminisce together. This sharing of memories is likely to be bittersweet and may include both laughter and tears. The sharing of memories and stories can affirm the strength and identity of your family in the midst of your sorrow.
- In conversation or a prayer, express your gratitude for memories of times shared with your loved one and for family ties and the support of friends. Referring to your loss in such direct ways can be painful, but also very comforting.

Respect your limits

Respect your limits and take care of yourself emotionally, physically, and spiritually.

- **Simplify your holiday plans.**
Discuss with your family what is most important and most enjoyable in your past holiday traditions. Think together about how to reshape these in light of the gaps left by your loved one's death. Roles will have to be shifted, and changes in time, place, and kinds of activities may need to be made. You and your family may feel off balance, but working together to re-create your holiday rituals can help your family discover its resiliency.
- **Exercise in a way that fits for you.**
This may be as simple as going for a daily walk or bike ride, but could include visits to a fitness centre or an exercise routine in your home. Grief often depletes your energy and makes you feel lethargic. Intentional exercise can help you be healthier for responding to the challenges of grief
- **Maintain or return to a nutritious diet.**
Holiday meals are often a time of indulgence. You may be tempted to compensate for the sorrow you carry with overeating or excessive alcohol. On the other hand, you may experience a lack of appetite and a disinterest in the festivities surrounding food and drink. Avoid judging yourself for either over-indulgence or lack of participation. Use your energy instead to return to a diet that you know works well for your mind and body.
- **Keep yourself centred.**
Take time to be by yourself. Meditate in ways that are familiar and that have proven helpful to calm and centre you. Reflect on the meaning of this holiday and on how its meaning has changed in light of your loss. Contemplate new insights that are emerging. Pace yourself so that you have time to process what you are feeling.

Connect with the outside world

Consider some of these ways in which to remain connected with the world.

- **Accept social invitations and attend social events.**
You may feel you just want to be alone during a holiday season. You may feel out of step with the season and apologetic that you cannot share in its mood. However, contact with your friends can help you deal with the loneliness and sense of isolation that frequently accompany grief. Use your judgment to decide which social events and occasions may be helpful. Give yourself permission to cancel at the last minute or to leave early.

- **Care for others.**

Your sorrow may sensitize you to the suffering or needs of others. Reaching out to others with care can be surprisingly strengthening and healing. Consider these suggestions:

Give a gift to a charity in memory of your loved.

Visit a nursing home or volunteer at a soup kitchen.

Do a small act of kindness for a neighbour or friend.

Call or email a lonely acquaintance

- **Participate in community events.**

If religious faith is part of your life, attend a worship service in your faith community. If you do not consider yourself religious, look for community events that capture the meaning of the holiday for you. Events that connect you to the larger meaning of the holiday can give you both inner strength and a sense of community.

- **Attend sessions on coping with grief during the holidays.**

Check whether a local funeral home or hospice and palliative care group in your area offer sessions on coping with grief during the holidays. Such sessions will help you realize you are not alone in what you are feeling and give you new ways to handle holiday traditions after losing a loved one.

The importance of taking charge

Loss and grief are unwelcome intruders into family life. They threaten your family's identity and common experience. When grief is recent and strong, you and your family members may feel disoriented or lost. This is a time to be gentle with yourself and with each other. However, it is also a time to take charge of what you can. This can help you find new ways of continuing traditions and rituals that have been meaningful in the past, and to work together in creating new ones. The suggestions in this article may help you in these tasks. While they have focused on holidays and holiday seasons, they can be adapted for other significant days in family life, such as birthdays and anniversaries.

Meaningful rituals and traditions can help you and your family to do your grief work. They provide opportunities to:

- connect to the past and to what seems lost;
- develop a new sense of yourself and a new identity as a family as you change your attachments to your loved one;
- give your loved one a new place in your family that marks the movement from being a living participant to someone who is present in spirit.

As you try out new ways of living through holidays, reflect on what is meaningful and what does not work. There may be some trial and error involved in this time of change. Discussion with other family members will help you to find hopeful ways into the future.

Even when there are empty spots holidays can still be special times.