

## **Grief and Loss: The Most Unwelcome of Holiday Guests**

by Jill Crawford, LCSW

With holiday preparations in full swing just about everywhere, it is hard to miss the excitement and anticipation in the air. Shopping bags, window signs, and TV commercials all scream “JOY!” wherever we look, reminding us that we should be happy at this time of year, *imploring* us, in fact, to smile and rejoice... In the past, I have written several columns about holiday stress—a very real condition to be sure. But at the end of all the stressful preparation, most of us collapse with a sense of happy relief, accomplishment, and pleasure as our celebrations get underway. This is not the case, however, for many individuals who find the holidays to be a sad, even unbearable time. For some, holidays are painful reminders of loved ones lost, who are not here with the family. Others may at this time take stock of how the years have gone and may not be satisfied with the state of their relationships. Holidays may become a time of somber reflection for people who have not achieved certain goals they have set for themselves, or who find themselves lacking in supports.

While for some, holidays may cause a low-grade sense of malaise, others may experience a more profound depression, particularly following the loss of a family member, friend, or even a beloved pet. Holidays tend to invite traditions, reminiscing, and warm gatherings, all of which can amplify feelings surrounding a loss. This is as true for children and teens as it is for adults, perhaps even more so, as younger individuals may be less equipped to handle such difficult emotions. Although the fatigue and blues that accompany grief may feel insurmountable as the holidays approach, there are some steps you and your family can take to soften the impact and channel those difficult feelings into healthy, productive outlets.

**Name the feelings.** If you or your child find yourself feeling grouchy, irritable, angry, or sad, check in with yourself and reflect on what might be triggering those feelings. Maybe you notice yourself bumping unnecessarily hard into fellow shoppers in a crowd, or wrestling irrationally with a stubborn tree. Maybe you are unable to stop crying while wrapping presents or looking at old holiday photos. If your emotions seem out of sorts, pause for a moment and think about where they’re coming from. It is quite possible that the mundane day-to-day annoyances you’re experiencing are masking some deeper struggles.

**Embrace memories.** It can be instinctive to push away painful thoughts and memories, and why not? Shutting down and avoiding are very effective ways of handling grief—for the short term. But ignoring the sadness does not make it go away. Rather, it can take on a life of its own and grow until it comes out in explosive or otherwise unhealthy ways. So instead of pushing the pain down deep, let it come out. Embrace memories of happier times. Remember the people no longer here and recall times of joy spent with them. Talk to others who share similar

memories. Look at photos, stroll down memory lane. Laugh, cry, talk, remember. Healing happens this way. If you are brooding about failures in the past, don't hide from them—think about them. Deconstruct them and identify things you could have done differently, how you will do better next time. Planning for the future—for times yet untainted—is inherently optimistic and uplifting.

**Create new traditions.** Grief tends to elicit a sense of powerlessness. Feeling as if you have no control in your life, or that sadness will come to you regardless of how you live your life, can be sad, scary, and frustrating. Finding ways to take control can boost your spirits and make the world feel like a safer place. If you have experienced a significant loss, perhaps create a ritual or tribute to remember that individual, such as making a photo collage or writing a special poem. Maybe you keep these private for yourself, or maybe you share them at a family gathering. If you are feeling dissatisfied with your relationships, make a list of ways to improve them, or how you might try to form new ones. Reach out to someone with whom you may have lost contact, or write a letter to someone expressing gratitude for their friendship. If you have success, this may be something you consider doing annually, even when you are stronger, simply to enrich your life.

**Seek support.** Isolation, which can be tempting during times of sadness, can lead to a deepening of grief. Identify a friend or relative who can understand what you're experiencing, or who is just willing to listen and spend time together. Loneliness can be overwhelming at the holidays, and having someone to talk to, cry with, and laugh with can help ease that burden.

**Honor the feelings.** It's easy to feel like a downer when everyone around you is full of energy and holiday excitement. You may feel pressure to put on a happy face and fake that holiday joy, which can make you feel even worse. Don't hesitate to acknowledge (privately or publicly) that you're feeling low. When you need space, take it. If you need to cry, cry. And if you find yourself laughing or having fun, let the joy in. No guilt allowed.

**Keep expectations realistic.** If you know that you are not at the top of your game emotionally this year, set realistic expectations for the holiday season. Don't take on more than you can handle, internally or externally. Translation: don't overcommit to others, and also don't set yourself up to believe that you *must* enjoy yourself, that the holidays *have to* be fabulous. Give yourself permission to keep things mellow this year, and know that if these holidays aren't so great, there are always more to come next year.

**Remember self-care.** Grief, sadness, and stress can all take a serious toll if not tended to. Once you have accepted and embraced your feelings and no longer need to expend energy pushing

them away, create room for taking care of yourself. Allow yourself to rest, relax, and recover. Spend time with friends. Curl up with a book, journal, or sketchbook. Listen to music that makes you happy. Sleep, and eat well. Get a massage. Sit in front of the fireplace. Take walks in the crisp winter air. As you begin to feel ready, look around you. Breathe, remember your blessings, past and present, and take in the beauty around you. This is the slow, heartwarming process of healing at work.

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