



**The Dougy Center**  
for Grieving Children & Families

## δ δ δ Help For the Holidays δ δ δ

Holidays can be hard times for grieving families. The season is filled with family get-togethers and festive events, many of which grievers are accustomed to sharing with the person who died. Surrounded by holiday “cheer,” the pain of loss can seem overwhelming. Sometimes, a simple “Happy Holidays!” from a well-meaning friend can send you into a tailspin. It’s hard to “put on a happy face” when you’re grieving inside. Events during the holidays can renew the loss and what were once familiar and anticipated moments can stir-up intensified feelings of sadness and loss. Writing the holiday greeting cards, hearing a special carol, unpacking the ornaments, eating the holiday meal and so many other events once shared together become at best bittersweet and often daunting tasks to be avoided.

For the bereaved family member, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukkah, New Years and other traditional holidays may be especially difficult. You might see the perfect gift for a loved one, and then realize he or she is not here to enjoy it. Whether your grief is new or old, there are ways you can make the holidays more bearable and less fatiguing for you and your children. You may also discover ways to honor the memory of the person who died and to begin new meaningful traditions in the family. Here are some suggestions, reminders and activities. Take what is helpful to you.

### Helpful Strategies and Reminders:

- Accept your limitations. Grief can be all-consuming, no matter what time of year it is. Holidays place additional stresses and demands on our lives. You may not be able to do all the things you’ve always done. Lower your expectations and allow yourself time and space to grieve.
- Respect everyone’s individual feelings and wishes for the holidays. Just as grief is unique for each individual, so are the expectations and desires of each family member. Be especially considerate to children. Involve them in the discussions.

- Be prepared for holiday well-wishers. Cards from people who do not yet know of the death will be addressed to the entire family. Greetings of Merry Christmas or Happy Holidays ring through the air. Everywhere you go there are tidings of joy. Brace yourself and know that others do wish you well and that their greetings are not intended hurtful reminders.

- Be informed before attending events. It can be helpful to know some of the specifics before attending a get-together: who will be there, how long is it expected to last, do you need to do anything to prepare for it? Inform the host/hostess that this may be difficult for you and your family. Make sure to prepare the children as well for the situation, possible questions and avoidance tactics of others.

- Ask for help if you need it. There's a good chance that friends and family are looking for ways they can be helpful to you during the hard times. You may want to continue certain traditions around the holidays, but feel you can't do it alone. Involve others. People enjoy supporting others in concrete ways, such as cleaning, cooking, baking, shopping and running errands. Sometimes it's hard to ask for help because we worry about burdening others. But more often than not, they are more than happy to contribute.

- Allow for rest. The holidays can be physically and emotionally draining for us all. Grieving is tiring too. Naps, walks and other quiet activities – even for short periods of time – can be revitalizing. Encourage children to have times of rest and quiet play as well. Remember to eat well and drink plenty of fluids as well for good self-care.

- Eliminate unnecessary stress. Of course we can't entirely remove stress from the holidays. But we can set limits. Scale back and try not to do it all. For example, we all know how exhausting shopping can be, especially as we get closer to the holidays. If you plan to buy gifts, consider shopping early, buying from catalogs, or purchasing gift cards. Remember as well, that the anxiety and anticipation prior to holiday events can be particularly stressful, even more so than the event itself.

- Plan ahead. Decide ahead of time what you can and cannot do comfortably and let your friends and family know. For example, can you handle making the family dinner or should someone else do it? You may want to make a list of all the things you usually do – greeting cards, baking, shopping, decorations, parties, dinners, etc. – and decide what you most want to do. Talk with your kids about the plans and allow them to be involved in deciding how the family spends the holiday. They will appreciate being included. Following is a holiday check list that may be helpful.

## Holiday Checklist:

### Cards

- Mail as usual
- Shorten list
- Include an update letter
- Skip it!

### Decorations

- Decorate as usual
- Modify
- Ask for help
- Let others do it
- Have a special decoration for the person who died
- Skip decorating this year

### Shopping

- Shop as usual
- Give cash/gift certificates
- Shop online
- Ask for help
- Shop early
- Make your gifts
- Shop with a friend
- Exchange gifts at a later time during the year
- Shop at off times and go prepared with a list

### Holiday Music

- Enjoy as usual
- Purchase new music
- Avoid radio

- Shop before the music begins at stores
- Listen to it and allow yourself to have whatever emotional reaction comes up

### Traditions

- Keep all your traditions
- Attend parties
- Don't attend parties
- Go to a new place/vacation destination
- Bake and buy the usual foods
- Start new food traditions
- Go to your religious service
- Attend a new religious service
- Skip religious services
- Spend quiet time alone
- Visit the cemetery or place that the person's ashes were scattered
- Pick a time to open gifts

### New Year's Eve and Day

- Spend as usual
- Go out of town
- Avoid parties
- Attend parties
- Have a party
- Spend time with a few friends
- Write your hopes for the new year in a journal
- Go to a movie
- Go to bed early

- Acknowledge the life of the person who died. There are many creative ways to honor a person's memory during the holidays. You may wish to do so by carrying on your family traditions or by creating new ones. Family remembrance activities whether done just once or year after year can create a time and space where loved ones can come together, share memories, say the person's name, construct memorials and maintain a relationship with the deceased. Particularly at the holiday season it can be difficult to participate in past rituals and celebrations while acutely aware of the deep sense of loss the person's absence has left. Here are some ideas for remembering your loved one at the holidays.

Light a memorial candle. Consider their favorite color or scent when choosing a candle or decorate vellum to wrap around a votive. Share a memory or special reading.

Write a card or letter to the person who died. A variation of this activity would be to write a card from the deceased person using the words that are missed and loved.

Make a memory chain. On strips of paper write special memories that family members have of the person who died or cherished gifts that person left with you. Loop the paper strips to create a chain.

Parting gifts from the person who died. Wrap small boxes in holiday wrap. On each gift tag write a gift that person has left you with, i.e. courage, special stuffed animal, piece of jewelry, strength.

Hang a special decoration in memory of the person, such as a wreath or stocking. If a stocking is used, family members can place memories inside the stocking.

Buy a gift that the person would have liked to receive and donate it to a social organization.

Unwrap a special gift of memories. Wrap a big box in holiday wrap. Cut a slit in the top large enough to push paper notes through. Family members can write memories or gifts given and received and place them in the box throughout the season. At a special time the box can be unwrapped and the memories/gifts shared with each other.

Keep a place setting at the table during a special holiday meal. Decorate the place setting with a single flower, poem, card or memento.

Create a memorabilia table or corner. Place photos, stuffed animals, toys, cards, foods, and any other kinds of mementos together in a special location.

Share a meal of favorite foods. Make a few of the favorite foods the person who died enjoyed and share them in a meal with family and friends, along with special memories.

Decorate the gravesite. Use flowers, ornaments and other decorations to adorn the grave.

Observe a moment of silence or prayer before the holiday meal (or at another appropriate time) in honor of the person who died.

Include a toast at the holiday meal in honor of the person who died and share a memory or something that you are thankful for that the person gave you.

Decorate a tree in memory of the person who died. Make personalized ornaments with the picture and name or buy an ornament that reminds you of the person. Create a tradition by placing a memorial ornament on the tree each year or invite loved ones to bring an ornament to a special gathering, trim the tree and share memories.

Make clay memory stones, pins or ornaments. Using an oven-bake clay such as sculpey or fimo, create a shape in memory of the person (an angel, star, fish, basketball, etc.). Place a twisted wire in the clay before baking for an ornament or a pin back on after baking.

Bake your loved ones favorite cookies. Celebrate together with friends and family or donate the cookies to a social agency.

**Remember:** There is no right or wrong way to “handle” a holiday. Some may wish to keep family traditions while others choose to change them. Everyone grieves differently. Honor yourself and your grieving. Have a peaceful holiday.