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# Pathways

A Newsletter to Help in Bereavement

## Those Sneaky Spring Holidays

by Dr. Kenneth J. Doka

I am often asked to speak prior to Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Chanukah on “How to Handle the Holidays.” Yet, I’ve never been asked to give such a speech as spring approaches and we prepare for significant holidays such as Easter, Passover, Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, and Memorial Day.

There are some things that may make those holidays different – and perhaps even less difficult. The days are getting longer rather than shorter. More sunlight may affect everyone’s mood, especially those who suffer from Seasonal Affective Disorder brought on by limited sun. As the days get warmer, we spend more time outside, allowing us more opportunities to divert our grief, either by being with others or by working outside in the garden or yard.

There may even be fewer reminders – not as many cards or television specials that remind us of our loss. So it is easy to ignore those spring holidays. That is why our reactions can surprise us.

The spring holidays just sneak up on us with little forethought or warning.

Despite the differences, they can still be tough. These

holidays, too, are invested with memories. They are centering moments when families gather and the losses are all still keenly felt. Some, like Mother’s Day or Father’s Day, may be especially painful if we are dealing with the loss of a parent or child.

In the roller coaster ride of grief, the spring holidays can be those unexpected plunges – a wild part of the ride that we may never have expected.

So we need to prepare for them as carefully as we prepared, or wished we had prepared, in the winter. We can begin by deciding what holidays might be the most difficult. Which holidays have the most

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significance? What are the ones where we will feel the absence most? Once we understand the challenges that each event presents, we can prepare.

We will need to decide how we want to spend the holidays and with whom we wish to spend them. However difficult these holidays are, we must be careful not to isolate ourselves.

Even spending a little time with others who care about us is useful. Yet it is appropriate if we wish to spend a little time alone. Jane does that. Her adult son, Ivan, died a number of years ago. Every Mother’s Day, she takes great solace in the hour or two it takes to bake his favorite cake. Later in the day, she brings it over to share with Ivan’s widow and children. “I need to miss him alone,” she says, “and then miss him together.”

Rituals can sometimes help. When I was a child, one of our rituals on Mother’s and Father’s Day was for my parents to place flowers on the graves of their parents. After that, we would have a family meal – a celebration of our parents. As I look back, I think it was an effective model for us to handle our loss – looking backward to what is lost while still looking forward to the present and future.

While the spring holidays can be difficult, perhaps the very nature of spring helps. Spring reminds us of renewal, offering a metaphor for the life that will one day emerge from the desolate winter of our grief.

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