Families Struggle with Grief during Holiday Season

Like many families, mine will soon gather around the dinner table to celebrate the holidays. As long as we all are together, I have always felt content. But this year, all isn’t in order with my world because there will be two empty chairs that last year my beloved parents filled. What shall we do? How can we celebrate without them? How do we cope?

“My family isn’t unique,” says Kris Jenkins, MU extension human development specialist. “Thousands of families will face empty chairs and each will find their way to mourn and eventually to move on. It’s the cycle of life.”

Grief recovery specialist, Mel Grazer wrote, “Death is like a one-two punch: the first punch, he died. The second punch, he’s not coming back. That is often the harder punch to accept.”

“Beyond the grief,” adds Jenkins, “is the reality that now my siblings and I are the “older” generation and that it’s up to us to bind the family together. Clinical psychologist, Susan Dunn shared these thoughts about that first holiday of loss:

1. When you grieve you have no energy. You don’t deal with things well. Decisions, even small ones, are difficult and the smallest chore takes so much effort. A holiday celebration incorporates all the above!

2. Take care of yourself! Your immune system will be struggling so eat right, rest, and keep things simple.

3. You can cancel traditional holidays if you want. Instead, take a trip or plan something different for your family celebration.

Dunn wrote, “Time does heal and it becomes less raw with time; however, when that time does come, it comes at its own pace. Be forgiving of yourself and others, and, well, have a celebration. Or don’t. One way or another that particular day will pass and you’ll have survived your first time without them.”

The Creative Living Newsletter is a partnership among the Guadalupe Center, Shepherd’s Center, and University of Missouri Extension. If you have any suggestions for its content, please contact Nina Chen, Ph.D., Human Development Specialist, 816-252-5051.

*Spanish translation provided by Kelly Loeb, MSW through Support of Shepherd’s Center of Kansas City Central.