

Happy Holidays—or are they?

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Many of us are hustling and bustling around at this time of year. We may be shopping or going to parties and other seasonal events/programs. Maybe we're sending cards, making gifts, or baking. Perhaps we're planning and/or seeing family and friends during this busy time. Yet for some of us a significant change in our life this past year may be preventing us from having that "magically, wonderful, perfect" Christmas. A Christmas the media entices us to believe we must attain.

However some of us may not feel that way. We may have experienced a loss such as - death of a loved one, divorce, moving to a new town/state, friends or family move away, changes in health or physical ability, and other things that may cause sadness. The sadness we may be feeling is very normal. It is part of the grieving process we experience with a loss. Going through a grieving process has its times of peaks -times when things feel pretty good and valleys -times when we wonder if it will ever get better. Those valleys are much more likely to occur at special times/events of the years such as holidays, anniversaries (including anniversary of the loss), birthdays, and other times of special celebration. These special times are centering moments of our lives. When we experience a loss that moment of centering will be changed and not be the same as it was before the loss. Let's focus on how experiencing a loss may be during the holidays and look at ways we can cope better during the holidays.

If we have lost someone we love (death, separation) or are separated from family or friends, we will be very aware of what that person meant to us. We may miss their presence in our lives. This sadness may make us feel very out of step with the festivities of the season. We may feel different, alone, or depressed and we may actually be physically alone in some cases (new home, divorce, death, etc.). At this time of year we may have other complicating factors like receiving cards addressed to the other person, loss or change in how the season is celebrated (different routines or rituals), or we may see that perfect gift for the person who is gone out of our life.

The important thing about grief and the holidays is to understand and accept that the holidays *may* be painful. By acknowledging that feeling sad is normal and a natural reaction to loss, we can open the door to finding better ways of coping with the season. Here are some strategies we can use:

- Taking care of yourself is your number one priority. Do only what you can handle. Eat properly, exercise, and get plenty of rest.
- Discuss with family and friends how you want to spend the holidays. Express your needs for privacy or companionship. *It's OK to not feel obligated to do or attend everything.* But remember to appreciate your loved ones for they may need support too.
- Develop a support system. Discussing your pain with others tends to lessen its impact. Utilize people who are not closely involved with your loss as a sounding board.

- Express your feelings don't deny them. This helps us to heal. Your support system may be very reassuring at these emotional times. But remember, during the holidays we are not only going to experience anger and sadness, we will also experience joy and happiness regarding memories and the newness of the present season. Don't feel guilty about any of your feelings. *We don't have to feel a certain way.*
- Don't compare your life with others. Holidays are not ideal times for families whether things are intact or not. We have a lot of stress at this time of the year. Comparison can add to your misery.
- Try not to have expectations of how things will turn out. This will set you up for disappointment.
- Don't be a victim of your pain by sitting around and isolating yourself with your thoughts. Try to make the best of a tough situation. You may want to volunteer, try new ways of celebrating, or maybe make new friends.

Remember the holidays may be a difficult time for your grief, but time will be a friend and you will heal. The holidays won't be the same as they once were and it's important to experience our joy as well as our sadness without guilt. Loss teaches us about living one day at a time, the preciousness of life, and to live each day to its fullest. 'Tis the season' with an abundance of feelings.

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