

COPING WITH THE HOLIDAYS AFTER A LOSS

For some people, the sights and sounds of the holiday season are times of dread. An empty chair at the Thanksgiving table or a Christmas stocking that needn't be hung can be searing reminders that someone has died. Whether the loss is recent or from years past doesn't really matter. All the holiday traditions and rituals may serve to accentuate the fact that someone is missing. Here are some suggestions for remembering that lost person in a positive way and some for helping the bereaved cope.

Remembering...

- Light a "memory candle" on the mantle. This can be a way of saying, "Hey, there was this wonderful person who lived!" Try to commemorate that person's life, not death.
- Hang that person's Christmas stocking up and suggest to family members and friends each put a note in the stocking (each person can then decide if they want their note shared with others or not). Children may want to draw a picture or make a card.
- Buy a live Christmas tree this year and then plant it outside in memory of that person.
- Give the money you would have spent on gifts for that person to a needy family or favorite charity or buy an actual gift for the deceased person and give it to someone in need.
- Send a poinsettia to the church in that person's memory.
- Hang a particular ornament for that person or decorate a separate evergreen for him or her.

Helping the bereaved...

- Let your needs be known. Do you want to talk openly about the deceased or not? Do you want someone else to take the responsibility for the traditional holiday dinner that you always served? Say no. Make changes in the traditions if that will help you feel more comfortable. It's okay to mix old traditions with new ones.
- If you're the kind of person who is energized by being around friends and family, don't isolate yourself. If such gatherings drain you or if you feel (at least this year) the festivities are sort of a betrayal to your lost loved one, curtail such activities.
- If the loss is quite recent (or if it just *feels* resent) give yourself permission to take a vacation from the holidays. It is okay to tell others that you'd rather down-play the holidays this year. After all, there will be other holiday seasons.
- Consider planning a vacation soon after the holidays. It can give you something to look forward to, and be a sort of "reward" for making it through the holidays.
- Be aware that while you may get through the holidays with seeming ease, after New Years you may "crash." Some bereaved persons have a sort of "holiday anesthesia" which wears off in January. Be on alert for this possibility.
- Take better care of yourself. Remember that when you're reliving grief, you are not functioning at normal capacity. Pay closer attention to your physical needs at this time. Remember, you're more likely to get ill when stressed out, and the physical ailments can add to the stress of bereavement, and the cycle continues.
- Buy yourself a special gift – if you spouse died, buy yourself a gift he or she may have brought for you.
- Set aside time exclusively devoted to remembering the deceased loved one. What did you learn from that person? Recognize that the holiday season may be a time of mixed joy and sorrow.