

COPING WITH GRIEF DURING THE HOLIDAYS

The holidays are a joyous time for most, but for those who have experienced a loss, the usually festive time of year can be a painful reminder that their loved one is no longer around.

"Traditionally, it is a time of family, friends and laughter, but for people who are in the grieving process, the holidays can enhance feelings of personal grief and separate us from what used to make us happy," says Cynthia Bozich-Keith, a clinical assistant professor in Purdue University's School of Nursing.

She says that although every person's grief is individual, there are several things a grieving person can do to get through the season.

She offers the following suggestions for healing:

- Be gentle with yourself. Be sure to take time out to care for yourself, whether it is through pampering or just slowing down your pace.
- Be sure to eat a nutritious diet, exercise, get adequate sleep and avoid alcohol.
- Talk about your feelings with people you love and who love you. Allow yourself the right to talk about the person who died. The process of sharing memories may help with the healing process.
- Set limits. Be realistic about the difference between what you want to do and what you can do vs. what you should do. "The shoulds will get you every time," Bozich-Keith says. "It's important to let go of the need to be perfect or doing it all. If you're used to doing all of the shopping, cooking and decorating around the holidays, perhaps this is the year to share those things with others."
- Don't feel guilty if you find yourself enjoying yourself around the holidays. "It is not disrespectful to the memory of your loved one if you have a good time," she says. "Your loved one would be happy to know you are enjoying yourself."
- Embrace your memories and find comfort in them. "This is the bittersweet part," she says. "Our memories often bring us to both tears and laughter, but they are what sustain us through the years."
- Celebrate life. Attend a holiday or religious service if faith is part of your life. Some people find comfort in acts of remembrance such as donating a poinsettia in memory of a loved one at church or making a donation in their name to a charity. Also, recognize that it is acceptable to create new traditions.

Bozich-Keith says it is important to keep in mind that sadness is normal during the holidays, no matter how long ago the loss took place.

"Try to ride the wave of emotions and accept that feelings of sadness and pain are unavoidable and are heightened during certain times," she says. "The intense feelings will pass, but grief is an ongoing process. Don't ever expect closure. It gets easier with time, but there will always be an empty space at the table."

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