

Haven Herald



Navigating the Holidays by Sarah Raison

As the winter holidays approach, we are bombarded with messages that this will be a season of joy, peace and love. And yet for those who are grieving, any holiday can be a time of great sadness and stress. While those around us are in festive spirits we may be in a drastically different place: of pain, desperate sorrow, anger, envy, bitterness, regret, or isolation. We may lack the energy or interest to plan or attend holiday events. There may be family conflicts related to where and how the holiday will take place. Many questions and fears may arise:

Who will carve the turkey? What if I start to cry in the middle of dinner? What if I just don't want to celebrate this year? How will I manage to simply cope with getting through the day?

It is important for those who grieve to recognize limitations. We are not functioning at normal capacity and must reevaluate our priorities. This means that we must realize that we have physical and emotional limitations, know that there is no right or wrong way to respond, and set limits with other people. We need to recognize that the absence of a loved one will be painful no matter what we do, and thus allow for the pain. It is natural and appropriate to miss someone we have deeply loved, and no perfect holiday plan will take that away. That being said, there are things to keep in mind that, at the very least, will not exacerbate the pain. Remember to:

Plan Ahead and Express Your Needs

Plan and talk with your family and friends about your holiday expectations and limitations. Listen to your heart and do only those things that feel right to you. It is important to realize that you have limitations. Discussing your holiday plans and your personal needs with those around you will help reduce everyone's anxiety and give you the time you need for yourself. It is okay to be specific about your preferences and desires. Remember to update others when your needs change.

Give Yourself Permission "To Be"

Remember that there is no right or wrong way to grieve. Your emotions may be more volatile during the holidays. You may have a greater need to talk about your feelings. Allow grieving time and breathing space and expect variations in mood and perspective. Those who are grieving work overtime. Not only is life more complicated, but all energy is siphoned into the mental and emotional work of grief. Grieving is nature's way of healing the mind and heart from a great injury. Try not to isolate yourself but ask others to listen and support you through this difficult time.

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Letter From The Executive Director

Haven does not take a break during the winter, but sometimes the weather has a different idea and provides time for us to take a pause. Days are shorter and colder, but there is also warmth, light and beauty in this season of winter.

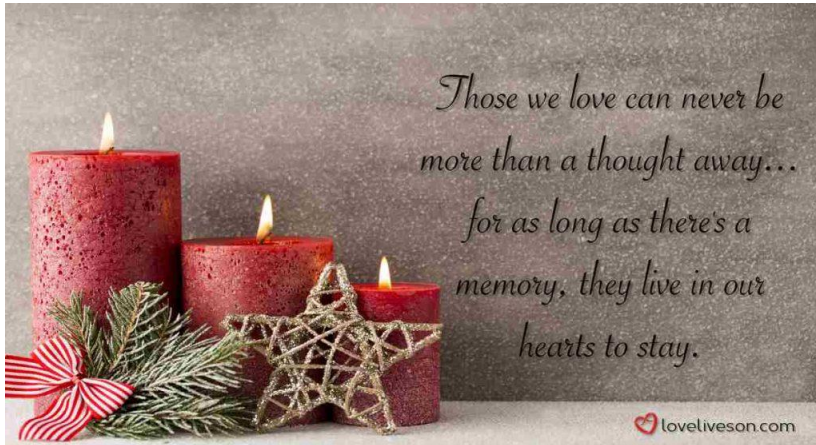
For those in grief, winter can provide unique challenges that may require thoughtful planning, especially during the holidays. This edition of the newsletter offers insights and suggestions for "Navigating the Holidays." Though each person will choose different ways to cope, what is most important is to find what works best for you.

Jill Bellacicco



"When someone you love becomes a memory, the memory becomes a treasure." "If tears could build a stairway, and memories a lane, I'd walk right up to Heaven and bring you home again." "Although it's difficult today to see beyond the sorrow, May looking back in memory help comfort you tomorrow."

What Worked for Me by Christine Nguyen



'Tis the season to be jolly, but what if I'm not? How do I drink and be merry when it feels like there's a gaping hole in my chest? What if the only birds I want from the "12 Days of Christmas" are flipping the two on my hands in rebellious despair?

These were some of the questions I asked myself the first two holiday seasons without my dad, Steve. He died of cancer at the age of 64 in August 2022. Thanksgiving and Christmas have obviously been different since then and will be again this year having just lost my father-in-law, Brian, to a heart attack three months ago. Some

days I wish the Universe would take back my "Loss Punch Card", but c'est la vie. Every holiday season will continue to be different going forward and learning to accept instead of resisting this truth has given me back so much more energy. And many of us know energy is at a premium in grief.

The captain of a ship doesn't try to control the seas, nor does a pilot in the sky. They equip themselves with tools, perhaps a co-pilot and crew, in order to navigate through to the best of their abilities. So that's exactly what my family and I have done together the past two years; we've navigated this ocean of grief by adapting, compromising and simplifying.

My husband, Hunter, and I continued to host Thanksgiving at our home, but with a simplified menu; select favorites from the classic American spread and a few Vietnamese dishes. Same portion sizes though, because my mom had not (still hasn't) adjusted to cooking for a smaller group. My father-in-law was the turkey carver and that role was dutifully picked up by Hunter, who has not missed a beat. We still set the table for five as a simple and meaningful way to say, "We miss you and there will always be a seat for you here."

We kept the traditions that didn't feel too tender to hold and paused others. I say "paused" because we wanted the opportunity to revisit them later. Spoiler alert: we have! My parents typically hosted Christmas Eve dinner at their home and that has morphed into a family restaurant outing. Christmas Day brunch at our house continued with a simplified menu and mostly catered food. The first year everyone agreed to skip gift giving and decorating Christmas trees but the following year we thought ready to bring those traditions back. My parents used to go to the "Holiday Pops: Songs of the Season" orchestra concert at George Mason University, but paused after my dad got sick. Once I noticed the mention of it brought a twinkle to my mom's eye, instead of a twinge of sadness, I bought us tickets to go again. We also added to the mix a new mother-daughter experience and took a holiday sweets baking class together.

On days when any and all traditions just felt like too much, when it was too merry and bright, I simplified by stepping away. I created boundaries, not to keep others out, but to tend to the embers I had left within me. I went on quiet hikes, solo or with my dogs. I traded blue light from electronics for more time in natural light. I realized the dopamine hit of social media scrolling was not the nourishing support I needed and took a break. I channeled a lot of my bubbling holiday emotions into creating art. The first year I was very resentful of everyone getting to celebrate while I was suffering. So I tapped into collage art, watercolor paints, and journaling to release the colors of my emotions.

The commercial side of the holiday season pushes buying, spending, gift giving, and indulging. But in grief I've discovered that oftentimes less is more. It's slowing down and getting curious about what actually feels nourishing now, in this season. For me, it's giving myself permission to do less. To just be and observe. To dare to slow down while everyone pushes for more, bigger, and fanfare. To maybe deck the halls with fewer boughs of holly this year and know that's plenty good enough.

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Make Changes or Adjustments

Your circumstances have changed. Expect to make alterations in holiday plans to accommodate those changes. Consider changing your surroundings, rituals, or traditions to diminish stress and soften your pain. Explain to family and friends that this year things may be different. Know that it is all right if you don't please everyone. Consider honoring the person who has died in some of your activities.

Make it Simple and Trim Down

Grief consumes most of your available energy no matter what the season. The holidays place additional demands on your time and emotions. Make commitments based on your available physical and emotional energy. It is okay to reevaluate your priorities and forego activities and obligations you do not feel up to participating in.

Ask for and Accept Help

Accept offers for assistance with holiday shopping, decorating, cleaning, and cooking. Chances are that your family and friends are looking for ways to help you during this time. Allowing those who care to offer support can become a gift that is mutually beneficial.

Be Flexible

There is no exact formula for dealing with your loss. You have permission to change your mind. You are the best person to know what is best for you and your needs may change from day to day. If earlier decisions don't feel right as the time approaches, don't follow through. Listen to your heart. Accept the fluctuations and learn to take each moment as it comes.

The chart below can be helpful to segment aspects of the holiday season and take a closer look at how we felt about each activity prior to the death of our loved one, then asking ourselves if we are up to doing each activity the same this year, or if we'd prefer it with changes (and if so, what changes). Be honest with yourself about what you have enjoyed (or not) in the past and what you best feel you can handle this year:

HOLIDAY ACTIVITIES	Did you enjoy doing this before?	Are you up to doing it the same this year?	Would you like to do it but with changes?	What type of changes?
1. Decorating inside the house				
2. Decorating outside the house				
3. Decorating the tree				
4. Baking (cookies, etc.)				
5. Exchanging cookies				
6. Shopping for presents				
7. Having a holiday party or dinner				
8. Going to a party or event				
9. Exchanging gifts with family				
10. Exchanging gifts with friends				
11. Sending cards				
12. Attending religious service				
13. Listening to holiday music				
14. Visit family and friends				
15. Christmas Eve traditions				
16. Christmas Day traditions				
17. Other				



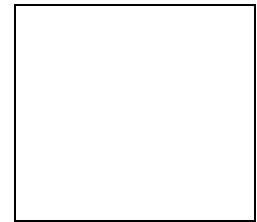
HOW HAVEN IS FUNDED

Haven is classified by the Internal Revenue Service as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. It is funded mainly by donations from individuals in the community who wish to support our work and by those who donate in memory of a loved one. Donations are tax deductible. If you are interested in making a donation, please contact Haven at (703) 941-7000 or at havenofnova@verizon.net

Haven of Northern Virginia, Inc.

4606 Ravensworth Road

Annandale, Virginia 22003



Winter Schedule

Parent Loss Workshop

Saturday, January 18, 2025 * 10:00 a.m. – 3:30 p.m.

Sibling Loss Workshop

Saturday, February 15, 2025 * 10:00 a.m. – 3:30 p.m.

Suicide Loss Workshop

Saturday, March 22, 2025 * 10:00 a.m. – 3:30 p.m.

Space is limited. Registration is required for workshops.
Please call or email Haven to register.

ZOOM Drop-in Suicide Loss Support Group

1st and 3rd Saturdays of each month

11:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

In-person Suicide Loss Support Group

2nd Saturdays of each month

11:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

Haven also offers individual support by phone and in person; please call to schedule an appointment. For immediate support without an appointment, volunteer is available on a walk-in basis Monday through Friday between 10:30 a.m. and 1:00 p.m.

Contact Information

Haven of Northern Virginia
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Annandale, Virginia 22003
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Hours of Operation

Monday through Friday

9:30 a.m. – 2:30 p.m.

www.havenofnova.org

Messages may be left on our
voicemail after hours