

November
December
2008

Seasons

Brattleboro Area Hospice
Bereavement Newsletter



~ Handling the Holidays ~

How to handle the holidays can be challenging after the death of a loved one. Because holidays are often family times, this time of year can particularly underscore your loved one's absence. Recognize that what you decide for this year can be changed next year; you can move on to something new or back to the old way. Decide what is right for you and your family *now*. Ask yourself and your loved ones what is important for you to make your holidays meaningful and bearable. Then, through compromise and negotiation, see if everyone can get some of what he or she wants and needs. Give-and-take is important here.

Discuss holiday [and everyday] tasks and responsibilities that need attention: preparing meals, shopping, decorating the house. Consider whether they should be continued, reassigned, shared, or eliminated. Break down your goals into small, manageable pieces that can be accomplished one at a time. Don't be forced into doing things you don't want to do or don't feel up to solely to keep others happy. Look at your plans and ask what they indicate. Are you doing what you want or are you placating others? Are you isolating yourself from support or are you tapping into your resources?

Recognize that the holidays are filled with unrealistic expectations for intimacy, closeness, relaxation, and joy for all people—not just for the bereaved. Be aware that pressures, demands, depression, increased alcohol intake, and fatigue can come with the holidays. As a bereaved person, your resources for dealing with these challenges are limited. So, especially during this time, remember to care for yourself with kindness.

Think about including rituals that symbolize your memory of your loved one. A candle burning at Thanksgiving dinner or on New Year's Day may help you, your family, and friends commemorate your deceased loved one in a meaningful way while celebrating the holidays together. You may also find yourself reminiscing about other holidays you shared with this person you're missing. This is normal. Let the memories come. Talk about them. Facing family holidays in your loved one's absence are normal mourning experiences and part of the healing process.

Let your tears and sadness come and go throughout the day if necessary. Unexpressed tears and emotions can be destructive to you. [Conversely] having some fun at the holidays does not mean you don't miss your loved one. It is not a betrayal. You must give yourself permission to have joy when you can just like you must give yourself permission to mourn when you have the need.

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Facing Challenges in the Holiday Season

For Ginny and David and their son Zeb, the winter holidays have never been the same – not since 1989, when ten-year-old Sara Jane died a few days before Thanksgiving of injuries from an automobile accident. Ginny tried to make Christmas “normal” for Zeb, who was thirteen, but as Christmas day approached, she and David knew they could not celebrate in their usual manner. Putting up stockings, for example, was too painful. How could they put up three stockings instead of four? And Ginny could not handle sitting down to Christmas dinner without Sara Jane so she asked a friend to include them in their dinner, where Sara Jane’s absence and presence were named in their expressions of gratitude and blessing. They retained their traditions for Christmas morning, which always began with a champagne toast. That year, however, and in years hence, the toast included a blessing and words of remembrance for Sara Jane.

Modifying holiday traditions is one way to mark a milestone of loss, for it says that things are different – this holiday cannot be observed in the same way. What is important is not whether you keep or change the traditions but rather that you reflect on the meaning of your holiday traditions and articulate how they are different because someone is no longer there to share what they mean. Although people have individual needs, it is wise to resist the impulse to avoid a holiday altogether.

To face the first holidays after a death is to face your pain. It is to feel the deep empty ache of absence and loss. Whether you change your traditions or retain them and name your loss is not important. What matters is that you are present with yourself and one another in the pain and invite the healing power of memory into your midst.

Sometimes that healing power is in the holiday itself, for the predominant religious holidays of Western culture are about hope. Passover celebrates liberation from bondage and compassion for all who are oppressed. Easter affirms life that comes through death. The Jewish High Holy Days invite confession, purification, reconciliation, and atonement in the context of community. Thanksgiving is just that – a day set aside to give thanks. While it does not belong to any religious tradition, it honors the sacred. In the words of an ancient sage, Philo Judaeus, “The grateful soul of the wise person is the true altar of God.” Gratitude heals a wounded soul. The lights of Hanukkah illuminate the dimmed recesses of the human spirit with miracles wrought by faith and love. Christmas, beneath its tinsel trimmings and commercial overlay, invites us to be present to one another and to receive the humble gift of a child of peace and love.

As grief renders the holidays more painful, the holidays can render grief less potent.

~From *Remembering Well: Rituals for Celebrating Life and Mourning Death* by Sarah York



Hospice Lending Library

Our library includes over 650 books, tapes and videos, for all ages, including the titles cited in these pages. New releases are added often. Please visit our library, located in the Hospice office at 191 Canal Street, anytime we are open (weekdays, 8:30-4:30).

Good Grief Program for Children and Teens

BAH makes six to eight-week support groups available, whenever 4 - 6 close-in-age, grieving children or teens request it. We use a range of activities – drawing, sculpture, collage, photography, writing, movement and music – to explore feelings, share memories, and design and create mementos. Facilitated by Elizabeth Ungerleider. Call Elizabeth Pittman at 257-0775 x104 for information.



Bereavement Support Activities

Bereavement Support Groups offer a safe, mutually supportive environment in which to share stories and experiences and explore the impact grief and loss has on our lives. Groups are free of charge and meet at our 191 Canal Street office. **Individual and family support is also available** with trained bereavement volunteers and staff. If you would like to register for a group, make an appointment, ask questions or if you just need a listening ear, please call Elizabeth, Jennifer, or Melissa at 257-0775.

Bereaved Parents Support Group meets 6:30-8 pm, the 1st & 3rd Thursdays of each month, November 6 & 20 and December 4 & 18. Facilitated by Lynn Martin.

Coping with the Holidays Support Meetings, open to any adult who has experienced a death loss, meets 5:30 - 7 pm, the second Monday of the next two months, November 10 and December 8. Facilitated by Cheryl Richards.

Spouse/Partner Loss Support Group, meets from 4:30-6:00 pm, the 1st & 3rd Wednesdays of each month, November 5 & 19 and December 3 & 17. Facilitated by Cheryl Richards.

Individual and family support is also available with trained bereavement volunteers and staff. Please call Elizabeth or Melissa for more information, an appointment, or just a listening ear.

"Second Saturdays" For All Ages, 10 am to 12 noon, November 8 & December 13, The second Saturday of each month at the Hospice office, 191 Canal Street

The Second Saturdays' program provides an opportunity to socialize over an art activity with other individuals and families who have experienced the death of a loved one. You, your friends and family members of all ages are invited to join us for these informal gatherings. Drawing, collage and other materials are provided; Elizabeth Ungerleider and Elizabeth Pittman will facilitate.

November 8. Remembering with Gratitude. You may **Decoupage Glass Candle Holders** to put on your Thanksgiving table. Materials will be provided; bring copies of your loved one's picture or handwriting if you like. For those who wish to do so, you may also write messages that we will burn outside at the end of the session, releasing our words and perhaps some of our feelings.

December 13. Memory Boxes and Ornaments. Boxes and a range of materials will be provided but you may want to bring mementoes or copies of your loved one's picture or handwriting to put on or in the box you're creating.

For further information or to register, call Elizabeth Pittman, 257-0775 x 104. **Drop-ins are welcomed. Refreshments will be served.** Reading or writing in our library is always an option during this time.

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Consider doing something for someone else. Although you may feel deprived because of the loss of your loved one, reaching out to another can bring some measure of fulfillment. Give a donation in your loved one's name; invite a guest to share your festivities; give food to a needy family.

Recognize that your loved one's absence will cause pain no matter what you do. This is only natural and right. After all, you are mourning because you love and miss this person. Try to mix this with your love for those you still have and your positive memories of the past. "Bittersweet" is a good word to describe this. You can feel the sweetness of the holiday but also the bitterness of your loved one's absence. Together they can give you a feeling marked with love for those present and for those gone that you will never forget.

Edited excerpt from *How To Go On Living When Someone You Love Dies* by Therese A. Rando, PhD

Brattleboro Area Hospice
Bereavement Program
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We are grateful for the gifts of love from those who have lived among us and have died, but whose light continues to shine in our hearts and memories. ~Michael Gray



Ten Tips for Getting through the Holidays when You're Grieving a Loss

1. Eat well. Drink plenty of water. Cut back on sweets, alcohol, and caffeine.
2. Exercise. It reduces stress and reduced stress generates a feeling of control.
3. If you accept invitations to parties and dinners, ask permission to be tentative. You're grieving and some days are better than others.
4. Either observe holiday traditions or ignore them. The choice is yours. If you observe them, realize they will be different this year. If you ignore them, realize it's not forever.
5. Give gifts or don't give gifts. Good friends and loving relatives will understand. If you do give gifts, make it easy on yourself: use mail-order, buy gift certificates, or give food.
6. Decorate or skip it this year. It's one less chore in January.
7. Accept help. Tell people you could use some help writing cards, buying gifts, or cooking.
8. Memorialize your loved one. Light a candle, make a decoration, hang a special ornament, bring a wreath to the cemetery.
9. Help others. Volunteer at a soup kitchen or visit the lonely.
10. Plan a January celebration. Reward yourself for getting through the holidays. Buy tickets to a play, plan a trip, or visit a friend. It will give you something to look forward to.

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