



HELPING GRIEVING PEOPLE



**NEW HOPE**  
Grief Support Community  
Est. 2003

FIND HOPE AND HEALING



# A Practical Guide FOR GRIEVING DURING THE Holidays



**A**fter someone you love dies, life seems forever altered. In the weeks and months following a death it may seem difficult to make it through even the most mundane of days, let alone work up the strength to face special days and holidays.

It's often true that after someone important dies, the holidays are never the same again. Traditions, events, parties, songs, and movies – all the things you once enjoyed are now triggers for sadness and emotion.

If you're wondering how you will handle the upcoming holidays without your loved one, our recommendation is to create a plan. Regardless of what you do, there's no way to avoid having to deal with pain and sadness. But, by thinking about the elements that will be the hardest for you this holiday season, you can minimize stress and lessen the likelihood of being caught off guard by difficult situations.

Try to complete your plan with those you will be spending the holidays with. This will open the lines of communication and will allow for discussions about your particular worries, anxieties, expectations, hopes and needs.

# A Practical Plan for Dealing with the Holidays after a Loss:

## 1. Identify which individuals you will be spending the holidays with. Who will be present for events, traditions, and celebrations?

- Make a list of the individuals you want to plan with. Remember that these individuals may or may not also be grieving the same loss.
- If you will be spending the holidays alone or with people far removed from your loss, grab a notebook and complete the plan on your own.

## 2. If you decide to involve family and friends in making your holiday plan, call a family meeting.

- Plan the meeting date early enough so people have adequate time to put their thoughts together.
- Try to have a face-to-face meeting by gathering everyone in one place. If people can't be there in person, include them in the discussion by speakerphone or Skype.
- Start a Facebook group, private blog, or email chain for group conversations and updates if a face-to-face meeting won't work.
- Don't overlook the children. Even the youngest family members need a chance to express feelings and concerns. It's also good for children to feel heard.

### 3. Decide what to do about tradition.

- Identify the rituals and traditions you anticipate will be the hardest.
- Allow each member of the group to discuss what will be hardest about these identified events.
- Brainstorm ways to make these elements of the holidays easier. Discuss the ways you can support one another during these times. In the end you may decide to keep the event or tradition the same, change it or skip it until next year.

### 4. Discuss new roles and responsibilities.

- Your loved one may have held several roles and responsibilities during the holiday season. Make sure there aren't any roles, big or small, that will need to be filled or changed (i.e. Who will plan the holiday meal? Who will get the tree this year? Who will plan the holiday gift budget?)
- Some people may not feel comfortable stepping into their deceased loved ones shoes to fill these roles. Respect their feelings and don't push.
- Make sure new holiday roles and responsibilities don't fall too heavily on one person.

### 5. Finalize your plan.

- You may need some time to think about the plan, so schedule a follow-up time to finalize if needed.
- Brainstorm and discuss support needs you think you will have (i.e. I may need someone to help me decorate the tree), and also discuss how you can offer support to others (i.e. I will help you buy the grandchildren's gifts this year).
- Let others know the things you just can't muster up the energy to do this year, like shop for gifts or attend holiday parties. Small things can take a lot of energy when you are grieving, so give each other permission to opt out of things.
- Make a plan and follow up with those who aren't present at the meeting.

## 6. Communicate with children affected by the loss.

- The holidays are hard for children because although they are sad about the loss, they still may be excited for holiday celebrations. Let them know they don't need to feel guilty about enjoying themselves.
- Ask children to let you know if they start to feel sad.
- Make a special code word the children can use if they need a break or want to take some space.

## 7. Think about your own self-care during the holidays

- Make a plan for how you will cope when things get really tough. Will you go to a support group, call a friend, go to church, exercise, or write in a journal?
- Give yourself permission to cry, even in public. Don't feel bad when you find yourself sobbing in the middle of JC Penny because you saw a gift your loved one would have liked or you hear their favorite song.
- Set aside time for self-care. Preventatively schedule an hour here and there for mental health time.

## 8. Find ways to incorporate your loved one in the holidays.

You may want to find one or two ways to include your loved one in each tradition and event so they can continue to be part of your holiday. On the following pages is a list of tips for remembering your loved one during the holidays.



## 64 Tips for Surviving the Holidays

1. Acknowledge that holiday traditions may have to change.
2. Create a new tradition in memory of your loved one.
3. Decide where you want to spend the holidays. If it doesn't feel right to keep the holiday location the same, choose a new place.
4. **Plan ahead and communicate with the people you will spend the holiday with to make sure everyone is in agreement about traditions and plans.**
5. Make a new holiday photo album with pictures and memories from holidays past.
6. Get out the old home videos. Yes, you may get emotional, but it also might be comforting to see your loved one on the TV screen.
7. Remember that not everyone grieves the same way you are grieving.
8. Remember that others may have different ideas about how they want to spend the holidays.
9. Light a candle in your home in memory of the person you've lost.
10. Create a special place for people to write down memories. Put out a marker and paper or plain wooden ornaments. Friends and family can hang the ornaments or leave the memories in an old sock or empty gift box. When everyone is gathered together, read the memories aloud.
11. Invite your family and friends to a holiday potluck. Ask guests to make a dish that your loved one liked.
12. **Be honest. Tell people what you DO want and what you DON'T want to do.**
13. Don't feel guilty about your holiday-related decisions.

14. Donate to a cause in your loved one's name. Try and choose a charity your loved one would have supported.
15. Buy a gift you would have given to your loved one, and either donate to a local charity or gift it to a friend or family member.
16. If the budget allows for it, adopt a family in memory of your loved one. This can be done through a church, Salvation Army or Good Will.
17. See a counselor. Maybe you've been putting it off. The holidays are especially tough, so this may be the time to talk to someone.
18. Pick a few special items that belonged to your loved one and gift them to friends or family that will appreciate them.
19. Make a memorial ornament, wreath, or other decoration in honor of your loved one.
20. If you have been having a hard time parting with your loved one's clothing, use the holidays as an opportunity to donate some items to a homeless shelter or other charity.
21. Send a holiday card to someone from your loved one's past whom they may have lost touch with.
22. Visit your loved one's gravesite and leave a grave blanket, wreath, poinsettia, or other meaningful holiday item.
23. Play your loved one's favorite holiday music.
24. If your loved one hated holiday music, play whatever music they loved.
25. Journal when you are having an especially bad day.
26. Skip holiday events if you are in holiday overload.
27. Use your loved one's old recipe to make holiday cookies.
28. **Don't get trapped. When you go to holiday events, drive yourself so you can leave if it gets to be too much.**
29. Pull out old photo albums and spend some time on the holiday looking at photos.

30. Talk to kids about the holidays – it can be confusing for kids that the holidays can be both happy and sad after a death. Let them know it is okay to enjoy the holiday, and it is okay to be sad.
31. **Make a dish your loved one used to make. Don't get discouraged if it doesn't turn out perfectly.**
32. Leave an empty seat at the holiday table in memory of your loved one.
33. If leaving an empty seat is too sad, invite a special guest to your holiday dinner.
34. Don't send holiday cards this year if it is too sad or overwhelming.
35. Skip or minimize gifts. After a death, material things can seem less meaningful and the mall can seem especially stressful. Talk as a family and decide whether you truly want to exchange gifts this year.
36. Do your shopping online.
37. Go to a grief group. When everyone looks so gosh-darn filled with holiday cheer, sometimes it is helpful to talk with others who are struggling.
38. Skip (or minimize) the decorations if they are too much this year. Don't worry – you'll see plenty of decorations outside your house.
39. Remember that crying is okay. The holidays are everywhere, and who knows what may trigger a cry-fest.
40. Volunteer in your loved one's memory.
41. Let your perfectionism go. If you always have the perfect tree, perfectly wrapped gifts, and perfect table, accept that this year may not be perfect, and that's okay.
42. Ignore people who want to tell you what you "should" do for the holiday. Listen to yourself, thrust yourself, communicate with your family, and do what works for you.



43. Seek gratitude. Try to find one thing to be grateful for each day throughout the holiday season. Write it down or photograph it.
44. Watch the food. Don't deprive yourself, but be careful that you don't let food become your holiday comfort.
45. Watch the booze. Alcohol can become a fast friend when you're grieving. If that holiday party is getting to be too much, head home instead of to the open bar.
46. If you are stressed about making the holiday dinner, ask someone else to cook or buy premade food.
47. Splurge on a gift for you.
48. Say yes to help. Your family and friends may want to help, so take them up on their offers.
49. Ask for help. This can be hard if it isn't your style, but it is important. Asking others to help with cooking, shopping, or decorating can be a big relief.
50. Have a moment of silence during your holiday prayer, or toast in memory of your loved one.
51. Donate a holiday meal to a family in need through a local church, Salvation Army, or the Department of Social Services.
52. Proactively identify your support system leading up to the holidays, and have them on speed dial.
53. **Make some quiet time for yourself. The holidays can be hectic. Try journaling, meditating, or listening to music.**
54. Practice self-care.
55. Support kids by doing a memorial grief activity together.
56. Donate altar flowers or other holiday decorations at your place of worship in memory of your loved one.

57. Have a movie marathon with your loved one's favorite holiday movies.
58. **Give a framed photo of your loved one to people who also miss them.**
59. Prioritize and don't over-commit. When the holidays are filled with so many parties, dinners, and events, save your energy for those that are most important. Look at everything you have to do, and rank the activities in order of importance. Plan for the most important and skip the rest.
60. Make a list, and check it twice. Grief makes it harder for us to concentrate and remember things. When you have a lot going on at the holidays, make a list even if you aren't usually a list-maker, and write things on the calendar.
61. Skip it. Really. If you just can't face the holiday, it is okay to take a break this year. Before you get to this extreme, though, first consider if you could just simplify your holiday. If you do skip the holiday, still make a plan. Decide if you will still see friends or family, go see a new movie, or make another plan.
62. Enjoy yourself! The holidays will be tough, but there will also be love and joy.
63. Plan a mini-vacation after the holidays to unwind and de-stress.
64. **Remember, it is okay to be happy. Happiness doesn't diminish how much you love and miss your deceased loved ones. Don't feel guilty for feeling joy this holiday season.**

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*Our mission is to help grieving people  
find hope and healing after a loved one dies.*

Many people struggle daily with grief after a loved one dies, but New Hope is there for them. We help grieving individuals and families achieve their *new normal* by use of grief support groups, family camps, workshops and training of volunteers. We are a powerful community joined by a shared commitment to nurturing grieving people in their time of need and beyond.

We meet with people wherever they are in their grief journey and provide the support, encouragement and tools needed to move towards their *new normal*. Through New Hope's programs we have seen people's life directions restored, shattered families recovered and the burden of grief lifted resulting in enormous human flourishing.

New Hope Grief Support Community  
is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization.

To learn more about New Hope please visit:

[www.newhopegrief.org](http://www.newhopegrief.org)

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