

Dealing With Grief During the Holiday Season

Try these 9 things to help you get through this difficult time

By Amy Goyer, AARP

Grieving the loss of a loved one is a deep and difficult challenge at any time. The holiday season can magnify our sense of loss and sorrow. Seasonal events can be painful reminders of the absence of loved ones. At the same time, they can also be comforting rituals where we connect with family and friends, focusing on good memories and trying to recapture our sense of joy.

If you are mourning the loss of loved ones this season, keep these things in mind.

1. Only do what feels right

It's up to you which activities, traditions or events you can handle. You are not obligated to participate in anything that doesn't feel doable. Create realistic expectations for yourself and others, but above all, be gentle with yourself.

On the other hand, if holiday activities are good distractions that bring joyful feelings and good memories, enjoy a few holiday things that are comforting. Or go all out! Get out every decoration and bask in happy memories. Immerse yourself in holiday movies that always have happy endings. Allow yourself a break and socialize at holiday parties.

It's all OK — there is no one right way to do this. All you need to do is get through the day, week or season in a healthy way that is comfortable for you. Try not to focus much further ahead than that.

2. Accept your feelings

Everyone takes his or her own path in grief and mourning. Some may try to avoid sad feelings; others will be bathed in tears. Some feel bad that they aren't up to enjoying a holiday; others feel guilty because they are feeling joy. You may cycle through these feelings throughout each day.

Accept whatever you are feeling, as well as the inevitable ups and downs. You may feel peaceful one moment and gut-wrenchingly sad the next. All emotions are OK. If you stay in tune with your own needs, you'll know how to get through the holidays without judging yourself or others.

3. Get support

Talk with loved ones about your emotions and mental health needs. Be honest about how you'd like to do things this year — if you want to talk about those who have died, then do so, and let others know it's OK. If you participate in a holiday activity, let people know you may bow out quickly if it's too much for you, and, if possible, have a friend on standby for support.

Be aware if you are sinking into depression, anxiety or complicated grief (a psychological condition that involves prolonged, very intense grief that interferes with daily functioning). Seek professional help from a physician, therapist or counselor via telehealth.

You can also look into virtual support groups or other services available through your workplace or house of worship, or connect with friends or others who are grieving via online communities such as AARP's Grief & Loss community and Family Caregivers Discussion Group on Facebook, where we have an ongoing community "grief chat."

4. Focus on the kids

Many holiday activities place special attention on children, and it may be helpful to focus on them at this time. Realize that your choices around getting through the holidays may affect the children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews in your family. If you withdraw, they may not understand why you don't want to join family festivities. Perhaps you can allow yourself to feel their joy by participating in activities that are important to them and excuse yourself when you reach your limit.

5. Plan activities

Sometimes the anticipation is worse than the actual holiday. Plan comforting activities ahead of time so you have something to look forward to, rather than building up dread of the pain that the holiday could bring.

At times, new activities — without specific memories tied to lost loved ones — might be easier. At other times, familiar traditions might be comforting as well.

6. Give

In times of grief and loss, when we may feel paralyzed by intense emotions like sadness, anger or resentment, sometimes relief can be found by giving to others. Focusing outside ourselves

and taking action that makes a difference for a person or community may help widen our perspectives.

You can honor a loved one you've lost by making a donation in her name to a charity or a cause she cherished. Or you can buy something that symbolizes the person, or what you shared together, to donate to a needy family. For example, my mom always donated toys for the holiday Toys for Tots drives, so I do that in her memory now. I started a scholarship fund for a children's theater where my parents were founders, and on holidays I make a donation in their name.

Also, try channeling negative energies in positive ways that create good in the world. Give of your time and talents. Volunteer to help people in a way that relates to what caused your anguish. Some examples:

If you've lost someone to suicide, volunteer for a depression or suicide hotline.

If a loved one succumbed to COVID-19 or another disease, give money to a hospital or participate in a clinical trial.

If a hospital or nursing home took good care of your loved one, bring holiday goodies and cards for the staff.

If you were a caregiver for your loved one who died, you know how hard it is to be caregiving during the holidays. Consider supporting a caregiver you know with a gift or some help.

7. Acknowledge and honor those who have died

It can be helpful to participate in holiday rituals in memory of someone you've lost, especially if it relates directly to his or her interests. Here are some ideas.

Light candles.

Talk, write about, or post on social media about the person.

Donate children's toys or books.

Dedicate a prayer or religious service to the loved one's memory, such as a Catholic Mass or Jewish kaddish.

Plant a tree in memory of the deceased, in your own yard or in a forest (through a group like the Arbor Day Foundation).

Make a card or write a holiday letter with the person's picture.

Place the deceased's photo or a significant item of his on your Christmas tree or among holiday decorations. (I place my sister's reindeer antlers, ornaments with my parents' names and an angel ornament for my niece on our Christmas tree every year since they died.)

8. Do something different

Losing loved ones with whom you've long celebrated can make it feel as if these annual celebrations will never be the same again. In a way, they won't, and accepting this will help you manage expectations. But remember that different doesn't have to mean bad.

If you can, embrace the difference. Plan novel activities (especially helpful the first holiday season after a loss) that create new memories. Hold a virtual family gathering, change the holiday menu, or have a meal delivered from a grocery store or restaurant.

Many families return to their usual rituals in subsequent years, but some enjoy incorporating these fresh experiences into holiday routines permanently.

9. Skip it

If you feel that it will be too much for you and you'd like to simply opt out of participation in a holiday, let family and friends know. But plan comforting alternative activities for yourself and let someone know what you will be doing. It's a good idea to make sure someone checks in with you regularly, especially on the actual holiday.

The bottom line: Grieving is a very individual and personal journey. No one can tell you how to grieve or how long it will take. I've lived through the loss of Mom and Dad, my niece Shaelee and my sister Karen, all around the holidays. I've survived by taking my time, doing what feels right to me, seeking support, living in the moment, and honoring my loved ones.

Life may never be the same, but you will get through this, and joy will surprise you when it bubbles up again — I promise. Someday, you'll think of holiday memories with your loved ones, and your first instinct will be to smile..