



GRIEF
HOLIDAYS
CELEBRATIONS
& SPECIAL DAYS



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Others don't mention my loved one's name.
It is like he never existed



GRIEF: HOLIDAYS, CELEBRATIONS AND SPECIAL DAYS

After the death of someone close to you, you may find that sad feelings seem to happen out of the blue. You may be enjoying yourself one moment and then be in tears the next. These emotional ups and downs may be especially present at special times during the year – holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, and others.

Milestone days and events can be emotional triggers that bring us back to memories of where we were and what we did in previous years, intensifying our sadness by reminding us that the person who has died is not there this time. You may have difficulty sleeping, lose your appetite, become angry and irritable, or find that you are disinterested in your usual activities.

On the other hand, you may find that your grief is strangely missing on these occasions. You wonder and worry why you aren't feeling what you think you *should* be feeling. The absence of sad feelings may leave you feeling guilty or distressed.

This may help ...

- No matter what you're feeling, it may help to remember that experiencing sad, confusing, and intense feelings at special times is normal and a very common part of the grieving process.
- If your feelings on a particular special day are sadly unwelcome and catch you by surprise, or if they aren't what you (or other people) expect, don't be alarmed.

- Grief has a timing of its own, sometimes appearing – or disappearing – when we least expect it. This ebb and flow of feelings is very natural and is a sign that you're coping in a healthy way.
- Remember there is no right or wrong when it comes to mourning: there is only what works for you. Sometimes figuring out this takes time and practice, so be patient and gentle with yourself.

TIPS FOR COPING WITH SPECIAL DAYS AND HOLIDAYS

Personal and family events

- Weddings, funerals, christenings
- Religious and cultural holidays
- Reunions, graduations
- Birthdays, wedding anniversaries
- Other anniversaries

Although these days can be emotionally trying, it may help to see them as symbolic gestures that allow us to acknowledge how loved ones remain a part of our lives, even in their absence. The memory of our loved ones can enrich our celebrations with those who live and survive with us.

This may help...

- Make plans ahead of time – but make plans that can be changed.
- Ask yourself: who would I like to ask to spend time with? How will I spend the day?
- Tell friends and family what you need and ask for their support.

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- Include your loved ones in your thoughts, prayers, or meditation.
- Celebrate a special day by taking time to do something in memory of the person who died.
- Remind yourself that it's OK to laugh as well as cry.
- Look for ways to honour the person who died.
 - Light a special candle; plant a memorial garden; create a memorial space or scrapbook with photos and mementos; sponsor a memorial award or scholarship; make a donation to a charity.

Public holidays and celebrations

We are often tempted to isolate ourselves during holidays and celebrations and withdraw during these times. While you may – and will probably need – some time alone, you might be surprised when a social gathering is more pleasant than you expected. If friends and family are encouraging you to attend, tell them clearly what you need, enlist their support in respecting your choices, and ask them to be there for you.

This may help...

- Ask friends and family to understand that you may want to make plans that you can change according to your needs. It's OK to accept or decline invitations on a last-minute basis.
- Continue traditions that you enjoy and leave out those that you don't.
- If you have a faith community, use comforting rituals that support you in your grief.
- Give yourself (or someone else) flowers or another treat.
- Talk with other bereaved people, or with friends and family members who've experienced losses, to find out how they get through these special days and holidays.
- If ever there was a time to treat yourself like a cherished friend, this is it.
 - You may need to lower your own expectations.
 - If you cry, let that be OK.
 - Allow yourself to experience any sadness that may come.
 - Make room for your feelings, whatever they may be.

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The winter holiday season

For many people, December is the most difficult time of the year. Cold, dark days, together with memories of past celebrations with family members or friends who are no longer here, can magnify feelings of sadness and loss.

As the holidays approach, it can be helpful to share your concerns, feelings, and apprehensions with someone. Let people know what is difficult for you and accept offers of help.

This may help...

- Think carefully about past holiday traditions and honestly evaluate which ones you can manage.



- Try to simplify gift giving: it may help to shop early, to shop by telephone, the Internet or catalogue, or to take along an understanding friend on your shopping trip.
 - You may also decide to go “shopless” this year and instead, make a charitable donation in the name of the person who has died.
- Consider making new traditions: going away on a trip, eating out at a restaurant, attending a concert, or buying gift cards instead of wrapping gifts.
- Create a special decoration and give it a place of honour in your home.
- Think about how you will respond to others when people offer holiday good wishes. You can simply say “Thank you” or “Best wishes to you.”
- Remember that you can always do things differently next year.



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The New Year

The arrival of a new calendar year may bring unexpected feelings. Having made it through difficult times, you might be anticipating the relief, healing, and improved well-being that a fresh start can bring. However, the arrival of a new year doesn't always live up to expectations, and you may find yourself feeling anxious, apprehensive, or let down. Try to let go of any expectations that you may have, and instead trust in yourself and the grieving process.

This may help...

- Review the past year – the ups, downs, accomplishments, challenges and gifts. Consider new approaches if old ones aren't working.
- Treat yourself with patience and kindness. Try not to compare your grief to that of others.
- Buy a gift for yourself that your loved one might have bought for you.
- If you feel that friends and family are now less available to support you, consider joining a bereavement support group.
- Acknowledge that you are doing the best you can.
- Allow a place in your life for your grief. Plan time for healing, alone or with supportive others.
- Remind yourself that grief does not suddenly disappear. Grief is a journey with its own timeline, and the journey takes time and energy.
- Give yourself permission to not have to be your usual self. Take time off from being "on." Allow yourself to do things differently – or not at all.

Caring for your family

While all members of your family may be grieving the same person's death, each of you had a unique relationship with the person who died and so your experiences of grief may be quite different. As well, everyone grieves in their own way and at their own pace.

Special days, holidays, and special occasions can be particularly stressful for grieving families, as they can magnify the differences in how family members grieve and cope.

This may help...

- Honest communication and patience will help reduce family tensions.
- Consider talking with your family members in advance of special days and holidays, so that you can prepare and strategize ahead of time.
- Be flexible and make room for compromise. Talk honestly about needs and wishes.
- Acknowledge and anticipate difficulties. For example, you might want to discuss how you want to handle the changes to family duties, routines, and roles.
- Adjust your expectations. Recognize that family members may not be able to support one another as they have in the past.
- Try to find a balance between who and what is missing and what remains.
- When planning family gatherings, explore whether or how to include memories of the person who has died.

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Caring for yourself

Holidays are usually filled with memories; you may feel especially tender and vulnerable during these times. You may notice that you have been ignoring your own health or don't care very much about yourself, or you may even believe that you don't deserve self-care.

Remember that grieving, at any time, is tiring and challenging and requires a lot of energy. Be gentle, patient, and tolerant with yourself.

This may help... (Tips from other bereaved people)

- Exercise. Stretch. Breathe deeply.
- Rest. Slow down or stop.



- Balance time alone and time with others.
- Eat foods and drink fluids that are healthy.
- Trust yourself. Be guided by your own instincts.
- Spend time in nature or take a walk around the block.
- Connect with a new or old friend for lunch, a movie, or a walk.
- Simplify daily life and responsibilities whenever and wherever you can.
- See your doctor for a complete physical and be sure to let him or her know that someone important to you has died.
- Most importantly:
 - Take it one step at a time. Expect your feelings to change, perhaps without much warning. It's OK to feel sad, angry, frustrated, and lonely – and it's also OK to experience joy and laughter.



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- Remind yourself that this is part of the healing process. Try to make room for your feelings, whatever they may be.
- Consider this: caring for yourself can be another way of honouring the person who died. As part of new holiday traditions, try to make time for you and your emotions.



Many different bereavement services and supports are offered throughout the region. These include counselling; a variety of bereavement support groups, such as drop-in and walking groups; education; and referrals to other local resources and services.

For more information, contact the Champlain Hospice Palliative Care Program at 613-683-3779 or visit our website at www.champlainpalliative.ca.

You can also visit the Champlain Health Services directory at <http://www.champlainhealthline.ca/>

Content courtesy of Victoria Hospice Society

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“Sometimes-you-will-never-know-the-value-of-a-moment-until-it-becomes-a-memory” - *Dr. Seuss*



