

Coping with Grief during the Holidays: Tips from Hope House Hospice

Birthdays, anniversaries and holidays tend to be particularly challenging for the bereaved, painfully triggering memories and longings for times past.

Even in the best of times, the holiday season can tax physical, emotional and financial resources. It should come as no surprise when grieving people start to feel a sense of dread as they contemplate the first holidays after the death of a loved one. Unfortunately, withdrawing into a cave and hibernating with the bears until next spring is not a practical option. A helpful strategy is to prepare and plan for the challenges that the holiday season may bring.

“The holidays can bring unique challenges and opportunities to people who are grieving,” says Heidi Bonner, Executive Director of Hope House Community Hospice. “The challenge may be to live through a time of joy when you are in a time of sorrow. There is also an opportunity to live through the season however you and your loved ones choose.”

Hope House Community Hospice recommends the following tips to cope with grief during the holidays.

- Recognize your human tendency to expect and predict the worst. In fact, most bereaved veterans of “first holidays” will tell you that, although the holiday itself presented them with some painful memories, their anticipation was much worse than the experience.
- Seek out structured opportunities to acknowledge your loss and honor the memory of your loved one. Participation in remembrance events or one of the many advocacy group-sponsored events, such as Walk To Conquer Cancer or Walk to End ALS, can serve as meaningful opportunities for healing.
- Involve other family members in planning for the holidays. A family meeting can be an effective forum that encourages the renegotiation of holiday plans and individual responsibilities based on input from everyone.
- Scale back or eliminate decorating, shopping, baking, sending cards and making social obligations. Even in the best of years, we often find ourselves exhausted by trying to do it all. When grief is part of the mix, it becomes clear that “doing it all” is more than impossible.
- Consider altering, rather than discarding, important family traditions. While it might be too painful this year to gather around the dining room table for the traditional home-cooked dinner, a buffet meal that everyone contributes to or dinner out at a restaurant may be preferable alternatives.
- Create new rituals that incorporate your loved one's memory into the holiday. Placing flameless candles that glow throughout the season, lighting a memorial candle at mealtime, and decorating the gravesite with seasonal flowers or other items are all examples of small, meaningful rituals that acknowledge our continuing bonds.
- The custom of holiday gift giving is often a painful reminder of the gifts and people we are no longer shopping for. Many find that intentional gifts to lonely neighbours, residents in nursing homes, or individuals/families with material needs can be a meaningful way of honoring your loved ones.
- Intentional “random acts of kindness” during the holiday season can be highly therapeutic. Leaving a larger tip for a waiter or waitress, paying the bill for an unsuspecting diner, leaving a book in a waiting room with a note to enjoy, sending an anonymous gift to someone you know, or offering a kind word to a frazzled mother. The opportunities to look outside of ourselves are limitless.
- Nurture yourself. Take a nap. Sleep in, soak in the tub or get a massage.
- Ask yourself this question: “If I knew this holiday season were to be the last one that I would have with my remaining loved ones, how would I spend it?” Loss teaches us that the moments we are granted in life are incredibly fleeting and valuable.
- Seek out additional support. Attending a grief support group or talking to a grief counselor can be of immeasurable help in meeting the challenges of navigating the holiday season.

If you, or someone you know, needs support this holiday season, Hope House Community Hospice is here to help. For more information or to connect with our staff please visit www.hopehousehospice.com.