

Will I always feel this bad during the Holiday Season?

There is Hope

by Debbie Pausig, LMFT, CT

It is easy to understand why grief during the holiday season and special occasions is so hard. You are grieving a relationship that has died **and** the loss of a shared holiday with a special person. **How** you celebrate is forever changed.

The sights and sounds of the coming holidays are a constant reminder of your life changed. At times, “**griefbursts**”, a power surge of grief, may come out of nowhere. You may feel a **disconnection** from people, places and the happenings of the season. Even in the midst of a crowd you may feel more **isolated & lonely**, as if floating alone on your own island of grief. You may **reflect longingly** to the past yearning for the return to the way it was, not in the reality of what is. Your world and its traditions, holidays and life are changed forever. What can you do in this world that’s called a “new normal”?

Here is a list of 22 practical tips to help make the holiday season a little easier on you and perhaps more meaningful. These are just some ideas to guide you at this difficult time of the year. In time, you may add or remove items or perhaps develop your own list of things that have worked for you. This list is a compilation of my personal grief experiences and professional resources.

1. **TALK About Your Loved One:** Get rid of that “*Giant PINK Elephant*” in the room. So many people are afraid to speak their loved one’s name for fear of upsetting someone. Ask friends and family to share memories of your loved one in photos, stories and mementos. Talking about them honors the relationship and the love that was shared. Talking about them means that they are not forgotten.
2. **K.I.S.S. (Keep It Small & Simple):** Find easier ways of tending to others by reducing your expectations. Limit or postpone decorating, baking & dinner preparations.
3. **Shopping:** If you must shop, avoid the crowded times. Ask a friend to accompany you for support and distraction. Shop from a catalog or online. Purchase gift certificates. Stop & Shop’s Pea Pod and other supermarket delivery programs have become a great convenience. They are a time & energy saver for many.
4. **Sending Cards & Letters:** Shorten your list or omit the task this year.
5. **Accepting Invitations:** Be kind to yourself and ease the demands and expectations of the party season. You may not want to accept, attend or participate in all activities. Try to push yourself to attend or participate in a few. Let family members know your plans. Go with a plan, such as arrive late & leave early. Drive yourself. Have an “exit plan” if you become over whelmed. Host your own gathering, it allows you to stay in “your” territory and “you” are in control of the social event.
6. **Traditions: Old & New:** Traditions are one of the most difficult things to face during the holiday season. Try exchanging the “old” for something “new”. Making changes can make things less painful. Let the children decorate; Change the menu; Change who hosts; Eat out; Attend religious services at a different time, or different church or synagogue; Open gifts at a different location or time; Going away on a short trip may be a welcome & refreshing change of environment.
7. **Be patient:** Be kind and gentle with yourself. “Let Go” of the “oughts” & “shoulds”, the “anticipations” & “expectations”, the “guilts” & “resentments”, of the season. Learn to compromise. You just may feel lighter.
8. **Be realistic:** Seeing the “empty chair” at the table will hurt. Be ready for the tough moments. Allow yourself to feel them. “Let Go” of the tears and let them flow. You will probably feel better. Decorate your surroundings with boxes of tissues for the tears.
9. **Plan, Plan, Plan Ahead:** Grief makes the ability to concentrate more difficult. Make a “list” and prioritize what is important to you!

10. **Listen, To Yourself:** Be aware of your needs and ask for help from friends and family. Know who are your “listeners” when you need to talk and “doers” when you need something to get done. You are grieving and it’s okay to need and receive caring from others.
11. **Take Care of Yourself:** Take part in regular exercise, or be a spectator! Eat right; Drink water; Get plenty of rest, grieving is exhausting! Take a nap; Listen to soothing music; meditate; read a light book; take a walk; stare into the night sky; color in a coloring book; paint, spend time with a pet, etc.
12. **Give Yourself Joy:** Treat yourself to things that you enjoy. Be responsible in the creation of your own joy. Look at things through a childlike lens where wonder is found everywhere!
13. **Create Memories Gifts:** Your loved one left “gifts” of memories such as photos, sayings, recipes, stories, companionship, laughter, love, etc. Put these “gifts” in a special box.
14. **Do Something Your Loved One Did:** Honor your loved one by doing something special they did. It may take years to master their recipe, storytelling, etc. It creates a new set of memories of you trying.
15. **How to respond to “Happy Holidays”:** You may choose to say, “I’ll try” or “Best Wishes to you”.
16. **Plans CAN Change:** Nothing you do this year is etched in stone. Next year may be the same or different. Whatever works for you is okay. Whatever makes you comfortable is okay.
17. **Share Yourself and Your Love with Others:** Volunteering or helping the needs of others can be very healing. Bring a meal to a homebound person or elderly neighbor. Collect toys or food for those in need. Helping others helps ourselves.
18. **Pay Attention to Your Inner Clock:** Time will lessen pain not your connection with your loved one. Others may want you to “move on” because they are uncomfortable seeing you in pain. It takes time to move through grief. There are no shortcuts or detours around it to avoid it. Take this time to look inward, reflect, and evaluate your meaning and purpose in life.
19. **Light a Special Candle:** Light a candle during the holiday season. This special lighting honors the love and life you shared. Remind yourself that you carry the light of that love within you always.
20. **Pain & Fear Management:** We feel the pain of our lost loved ones. Doing what is best for you, is the best way to manage the painful symptoms of grief. What is best is different for everyone. Remember this sentence, “I can control what is most comfortable for me”. The anxiety of holiday anticipation is usually worse than the “day” itself. A goal is to “*Lose the Pain*”, not the “*Memory of the Person*”.
21. **LOVE = Medicine for “Dis-ease” & “Dis-comfort”:** I sometimes describe grief as a “Dis-ease” of the heart. This “Dis-ease” disrupts the natural state of ease and balance that my loved one provided. Grief may also cause fear or “Dis-comfort”, the absence of comfort. Remembering our loved one, receiving love and comfort from others can help remove the “Dis”, allowing ease and comfort back into our hearts and lives. Embrace the love from others who care. You are not alone.
22. **Something to Ponder:** Many others may be carrying the weight of grief as well. They hide their sadness behind forced smiles, especially during the Holiday Season. Understand that we can & will get through these days, one moment at a time and one day at a time. We too, like a child, must learn to crawl before we stand and toddle before we walk, again. And, we will fall, and we will get up, again. Our **Hope** is to run and maybe even skip..... again. And, keep moving through this thing called grief.

Please share this tip list with others grieving during this and any holiday season. Sharing knowledge and tips are gifts of love from one to another. Through sharing we help in our own healing and we learn that we are not alone on this journey.

Peace,
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