

Coping With Sadness During the Holidays

By Rev. Gwendolyn Phillips Coates

The seasons are changing, there is a chill in the air, and the holidays are quickly approaching. For some this is the most wonderful time of the year. For others it is the saddest and loneliest time of the year. As we grow older our experiences with grief and loss crescendo as our losses become more common. Age and the life cycle while taking their natural course, leave many in a state of loneliness due to constant losses in their peer circle. These feelings are exasperated during the holiday season. The times changes, the weather patterns change, and the days are shorter leaving many in a state of sadness and depression.

The holidays are often a difficult time for those who are bereaved and coping with loss. A common question asked by those mourning a loved one or struggling to make sense of other losses is, "How can I get through the holidays?" There is no single answer of what one should or shouldn't do. Hospice Foundation of America offers one guiding principle: do what is comfortable.

The key to coping with grief during the holidays is to find the way that is right for you. Some people find it helpful to be with family and friends, emphasizing the familiar. Others may wish to avoid old traditions and try something different. Others will find new ways to acknowledge the season.

Kenneth Doka, PhD, HFA(Hospice Foundation of America) Senior Consultant, recounts a session with a group of widows. "One woman whose husband recently died asked, 'Who should sit at the head of the table?', taking her husband's place. The group was asked how they would handle it. One woman placed her youngest grandchild there to remind the family of its continuity. Another said her eldest son sat there. Another woman said that she sat there since she was now the family leader."

Which response was right? "They all were. Each response met the needs of the person, and each was a comfortable choice," explained Doka. This is the key to coping with the holidays: find the way that is right for you.

Some people find it helpful to be with family and friends, emphasizing the familiar. Others may wish to avoid old sights and sounds, perhaps even taking a trip. Others will find new ways to acknowledge the season.

Whatever your response, remember these points:

Plan ahead for approaching holidays. Be aware that this might be a difficult time for you. It's not uncommon to feel out of sorts with the celebratory tone of the season. The additional stress may affect you emotionally, cognitively, and physically; this is a normal reaction. It is important to be prepared for these feelings.

Recognize that holidays won't be the same. If you try to keep everything as it was, you'll be disappointed. Doing things a bit differently can acknowledge the change while preserving continuity with the past. Different menus, changing decorations, attending a different service, or even celebrating in a different location may provide that slight but significant shift. However, be aware that your feelings will still be there. If you decide on a change, be careful not to isolate yourself.

Holidays may affect other family members too. Talk over your plans. Respect their choices and needs, and compromise if necessary. Everyone (including you) should participate in ways that are comfortable.

Avoid any additional stress. Decide what you really want to do, and what can be avoided. Perhaps cards don't need to be sent, or shopping can be done by phone or catalog.

Do what feels right for you, what you need and want to do, and not what others think is right.