Coping with grief and loneliness over the holidays

How will I get through the next few weeks?

What is happening to me? I have always loved this time of year; now I’m miserable.

Would I be better off ignoring the holidays this year?

How long am I going to feel this way?

Should I just try to act normal so I don’t ruin the holidays for anyone else?

Should we change our holiday traditions?

And the list of questions you have goes on . . .

This year, your holidays will be different, but they can still be meaningful. In the midst of your pain, you can experience hope.

Here are a few things to remember:

You don’t have to pretend that this year will be like others. The energy you would spend evading the issue can be used more wisely to plan for a different kind of holiday.

In reality, few holidays are as picture perfect as those portrayed on TV. So give yourself permission to feel what you feel. You will be advised to cheer up, join the festivities, get with the program. That’s pretty hard to do when you feel sad, depressed, anxious, fatigued, angry, apathetic, guilty, or confused.

These feelings are normal. They’re a sign you have cared deeply about someone. Acknowledging your feelings is one thing, but expressing them in healthy ways is an important next step to take.

Do what works best for you. It might be a long hard cry, taking a walk in the woods, talking to someone about your loved one, or starting a new tradition in their honor. Overeating and over-indulging in alcohol may seem like helpful escapes during a season of parties, but they won’t help.

Perhaps the most practical advice we can offer is to plan ahead. Think about what the most difficult situations will be and prepare for them. What concerns you most? What do you want others to understand about how you are feeling? What can other people do to help you? What can they refrain from doing? What can you do to help others? Give yourself the freedom to change plans, but don’t be blindsided by situations you’ve tried to avoid.

Take advantage of opportunities for support. Coastal Hospice offers some important opportunities to help you prepare for the holiday season. In November and December, our support groups will, among other issues, discuss coping with the holidays. We will provide practical tips within a group of supportive people who are on the same grief journey.

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It takes strength to make your way through grief, to grab hold of life and let it pull you forward.

-Patti Davis
Choose to honor what feels right for you. There are no rules.

After my Mom died, I chose to honor the traditions of my family while adding some new. Honoring the traditions of my childhood after my Mom died felt comforting and in some ways empowering knowing that I was carrying on our family traditions in strength, in memory, in sorrow, in love, in the powerful knowing that my memories of holidays past would guide me to create more memories, different memories, new memories as I continue to live and celebrate life. I make an annual donation to Hospice in my Mom's memory and in honor of the compassionate care they provided during her last days. I also light a candle that burns for 24 hours, a yahrzeit candle, and say a prayer of remembrance and love on holidays. My brothers and I honor our Mom with her favorite key lime pie at family holidays, milestones and celebrations which always makes me smile.

If the thought of preparing Mom's turkey or Dad's stuffing is just too painful choose to make something different. There are no rules, if you want breakfast for Thanksgiving dinner so be it. Get creative. Bring to the holidays this year what creates space, what makes you feel emboldened, able to come to the table with family or friends and honor the light in you that continues to shine even in the darkness of grief.

If you choose not to join family and friends this holiday season consider volunteering. Share the love that you are missing with others who may have never had it.

If leaving your home feels like too much perhaps you will choose to engage in an act of loving kindness by making a donation in your loved one’s name. Donate to the Humane Society if your loved one was an animal lover, to the Foodbank if your loved one was a foodie, to the library if your loved one was an avid reader, and so on.

Choose to give yourself the gift of extreme self care this holiday season. Holidays can be intensely emotional. If you feel the need to cry, cry. If you feel the need to scream, scream. Feel your feelings and nurture yourself in the most loving and compassionate of ways. Surround yourself in comfort by engaging your five senses in self care. Rest if you feel like resting. Dance if you feel like dancing. Go for a walk. Take a long hot bath or shower. Breathe. Breathe in strength and healing, breathe out pain and suffering. Know that all feelings are okay. Grieving is hard work. Grieving during the holidays can be especially difficult. There is not one way or a right way to grieve.

There are so many things in life we do not get to choose but we can choose how we endure pain. We can choose how we care for ourselves, honor ourselves, and encourage ourselves to continue on. We can choose to honor our loved ones by living our lives with deeper meaning, connection, and awareness of just how lucky we are to have loved and been loved, and that we can love and be loved still. Choose to honor yourself. Choose to give yourself the gift of choice this holiday season.

Remember your loved one:
• Share stories.
• Go through pictures of treasured memories.
• Make ornaments with photographs of your loved one.
• Light candles and say a prayer in their honor.
• Make their favorite foods.
• Listen to their favorite music.
• Create a memory box: have each family member write down a memory on a piece of paper, read it out loud and then put it in the box. Each year you can add more memories while sharing memories from the years before.

Or don't.
If remembering your loved one feels like too much, if it is just too painful, then choose instead to focus on remembering yourself:
• Make your favorite foods.
• Listen to your favorite music.
• Watch your favorite movie or shows.
• Write holiday wishes for yourself about how you hope to feel next year at this time.
• Make resolutions for yourself, for your healing.
• Gift yourself faith in yourself, in your healing, in your ability to endure the deep pain of grief while nurturing and caring for yourself.
• Be kind to yourself.
“I Miss You ~ A First Look at Death”
by Pat Thomas

When a close friend or family member dies, it can be difficult for children to express their feelings. This book helps boys and girls understand that death is a natural complement to life, and that grief and a sense of loss are normal feelings for them to have following a loved one’s passing.

Titles in this sensitively presented series explore the dynamics of various relationships experienced by children of preschool through early school age. Children are encouraged to understand personal feelings and social problems as a first step in dealing with them.

Written by psychotherapist and counselor Pat Thomas, the book promotes positive interaction among children, parents, and teachers. The story lines are simple and direct, easily accessible to younger children. There are full-color illustrations on every page.

Recommended by Coastal Hospice Bereavement Counselors, this book is the perfect gift to share with young children in your family at the holidays.

12 things to remember when you have suffered a loss

1. The best way to handle your feelings is not to “handle” them but to feel them.
2. Only by giving your losses expression will you begin to heal.
3. Seldom is this loss only “this loss” for you.
4. There is one person who can take care of you better than anyone, and that’s you.
5. In allowing others to help you, you help everyone: them and you.
6. Try to show grace with those who try to give you care.
7. Sometimes it makes perfect sense to act a little crazy.
8. Your grieving, your timing, and your progress in healing are all uniquely yours, and that’s as it should be.
9. You have a choice in how you respond to your loss.
10. Your time of loss can be a time of soul-making unlike any other.
11. Not all your questions will have answers, but they’re worth asking anyway.
12. Your time of loss can become a time of discovery.
TO OPT OUT: You are likely receiving this publication following the death of a family member, friend or loved one who received care from Coastal Hospice. Grief support is a vital part of the hospice philosophy of care. This publication serves to share information you can use during this time and highlight upcoming events. If you do not wish to continue receiving this publication or have a change of address, please contact Melissa Dasher at 410-742-8732, ext. 621 or mdasher@coastalhospice.org.

UPCOMING GRIEF SUPPORT ACTIVITIES

Please note: Socials are “Dutch treat.”

Worcester County
Support Group – Ocean Pines Library, 11107 Cathell Rd., Ocean Pines
Every Thursday at 11 am. (Not meeting Nov. 28)
Information ~ Nicole Long 443-614-6142
Lunch Social Group – 3rd Thursday, 1 p.m.
Nov. 21 - Longboard Cafe, 67th St. Bayside, Ocean City
Dec. 19 - Hemingway’s At the Coral Reef, Holiday Inn, 1701 Atlantic Ave., Ocean City
Jan. 16 - Lighthouse Sound, 12723 St. Martin’s Neck Road, Bishopville
RSVP ~ Molly LeFaive 443-523-4899

Somerset County
Support Group – Somerset Co. Library, 100 Collins St., Crisfield
Every 1st and 3rd Tuesday, 11 a.m.
Information ~ Nicole Long 443-614-6142

Dorchester County
Support Group – Coastal Hospice Office 216 Dorchester Ave., Cambridge
2nd and 4th Mondays, 3 p.m. Information ~ Breaune Carbaugh 717-572-9709

Wicomico County
New to Grief Support Group – The MAC Center, 909 Progress Circle., Salisbury
Fridays, 11 a.m. – 12 noon • 6 sessions beginning Nov. 15
Information ~ Nicole Long 443-614-6142
Support Group – The MAC Center, 909 Progress Circle., Salisbury
Every Friday, 1 p.m. (Not meeting Nov. 29)
Information ~ Nicole Long 443-614-6142
Youth Support Group (Ages 10 - 14) – The YMCA, 715 S. Schumaker Dr., Salisbury
Wednesdays from 5:30-6:30 p.m. • 6 sessions beginning Nov. 6
Information ~ Melissa 410-742-8732 ext 621
Lunch Social Group – 2nd and 4th Wednesdays , 1 p.m.
Nov. 13 – Ruby Tuesday, 413 N Fruitland Blvd, Salisbury
Nov. 27 – Bob Evans, 2601 N Salisbury Blvd, Salisbury
Dec. 11 – Olive Garden, Centre at Salisbury, Salisbury
Jan. 8 – Denny’s, 100 East Cedar Lane, Fruitland
Jan. 22 – Red Lobster, The Centre at Salisbury, Salisbury
RSVP ~ Lynette Chase 410-901-2292

These groups provide a time of respite and a safe place to express feelings in the grieving process. Support groups are free to any adult who has experienced the death of a loved one, even if they were not a patient of Coastal Hospice. Lunch socials are Dutch treat. For information, call 410-742-8732.