

## Facing the Holidays without Them

Holidays, traditionally a time for joy, may instead create stress and even trigger depression as we face this time without our love ones and friends. Perhaps you are like me and find yourself visiting the funeral homes more often than in the past. This past year I have visited the funeral homes and attended more funerals than any year of my life. As I look back over 2006 I'm reminded of the folks who died and their relationship with me and what they meant to my life and realize their absence this holiday season.

Some of these dear folks were my former classmates and lifelong friends, some longtime Friends of 4-H and 4-H Leaders. Some were parents of my 4-H members, others were members of our church, and some were relatives.

Holidays are very stressful, and they are particularly so because it's a time that's steeped in such tradition and filled with so many memories. For people who have lost a loved one through death, every aspect of holiday celebration is likely to bring tears along with the memories. Trying to celebrate in the traditional way may be impossible in such situations.

When an older person dies, survivors must cope with the loss of history as well as the loss of the loved one. You may not have anyone else with whom you shared the memories you had with that person, and that's a real loss, too.

And when someone you love, of whatever age, dies, you lose not only the past history you had together, but also the chance for making future memories. Their time with you is over and death is final. That's why grief is inevitable and celebrating is difficult.

A few years ago a young man I knew died in an automobile accident a few weeks before Christmas. His family started a new holiday traditions. They select and buy holiday and birthday gifts for their son, then gives them in memory of him.

Don't try to pretend that you're not thinking about the person who's no longer a part of your celebration. Instead, incorporate remembrance of them into your activities.

Include photograph of your loved ones at family gatherings. And on special days light a candle to honor their memory. One of the holiday traditions at our family Christmas Eve dinner is to light a candle and quietly give thanks for the life and time we had with our departed love ones.

In today's fast paced world, we have less and less time to be quiet with our thoughts and to work through our grief. Frequently no one wants you to talk about the person who died. Instead, they want you to pretend that everything is okay, and that you're full of holiday cheer.

Being cheerful may not happen this year and I recommend you find someone who's comfortable with conversations about loss and grief. We work through things by going over them, in our minds as well as our words. You've got to find some way to process all of the emotions you're having after a death and talking about them is one of the best things you can do."

Those who can't discuss their loss with a friend or family member may decide to talk with a counselor, minister, rabbi, or priest. Hospice of the Panhandle host grief groups, which are open not just to those whose loved ones, were on hospice care, but to anyone who is grieving.

A grief support group is an important on-going way for many individuals to adjust to a death and it can be especially helpful in coping with the pressures of the holiday season.

Losses other than death also can trigger problems with the holidays. The break-up of a relationship, the end of a friendship, moving to a new neighborhood, the death or loss of a pet, and many other life events can cause stress and grief.

In such situations acknowledging, rather than denying that you are not in the "holiday spirit." may serve you best, and it's important not to take on too many obligations since energy levels may be low as emotions are high.

If you don't feel like celebrating because you're grieving, then don't force yourself or let a well-meaning friend or relative try to force you. It may be Christmas for others, but, unless you feel like celebrating, it doesn't have to be Christmas for you.

The most important thing to remember is that there's no right or wrong way for a grieving person to act during the holidays. You have to give yourself permission to experience whatever emotions you have and to honor your loved one's memory in the way that helps you best.

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