



Coping with Grief and The Holidays



GRIEF TRAINING CENTER
OF WISCONSIN

Holiday Values Worksheet

1. What do you enjoy most about the holidays? What makes the holidays special for you?
2. What about the holidays has been the most stressful?
3. What are your expectations for the holidays since your loved one has died?
4. What do you need from others to help you meet these expectations for the holidays?
5. What might they need from you?

Simplify the Holidays Worksheet

Even though the holidays are meant to be a time of celebration, reflection and peace, they can also be a time of stress and conflict. A good plan can help reduce overwhelming feelings of creating the perfect holiday.

Focus on what brings joy to you, and those you care about, rather than having unrealistic expectations and demands for yourself and others. The holidays do not need to be perfect, nor do they need to be just like past years. As families change and grow, traditions and rituals often change as well. Choose a few to hold on to and be open to creating new ones.

Holiday Tradition	Must Do	Modify	Maybe Next Year	If Time Allows
Christmas Cards		shorten list do not include letter ask for help		
Decorations		decrease decorations ask for help		
Shopping		shop early shop online give gift cards/cash limit gift exchanges ask for help		
Holiday Gatherings		limit holiday parties ask for help		
Christmas Eve		quiet time with family modify traditions ask for help		
Christmas Dinner		quiet time with family modify traditions ask for help		
Baking		decrease baking ask for help		
Religious Services		attend Christmas eve attend Christmas day		
Other:				



Honoring, Remembering, and Including Our Loved Ones During the Holidays

The holidays can be a special time to honor, remember and pay tribute to our loved ones who have died. Below are some ideas of honoring past traditions, creating new ones, and embracing memories.

- Grief rituals are actions we perform for the purpose of honoring our grief and our loved ones. They are something that we do to give words to how we are feeling. They engage us physically, cognitively, emotionally and spiritually. Rituals can be performed by oneself or collectively with a group.
- Purchase a candle and create a ritual as you light it and reflect on or share stories about your loved one.
- Create a memorial fund in your loved one's name. Use the funds to benefit causes that were important to them.
- Volunteer your time for an organization whose mission was important and of value to your loved one.
- Watch a home video or look at pictures of your loved one.
- Using your loved one's clothing, create a pillow, quilt or purse.
- Buy a gift that your loved one would enjoy and give it to someone who would have otherwise be without a gift.
- Hang a stocking or decorate a basket and ask family and friends to write a special memory of your loved on a piece of paper and place them in the stocking/basket. Read the memories together or later alone.
- Decorate the gravesite with holiday decorations or an evergreen wreath.
- Create a memory tree. Decorate a small tree with ornament that you ask family and friends to make or purchase that remind them of your loved one.
- Purchase or make ornaments that you can give to your family and friends that remind you of your loved one.
- Prepare a dish using your loved one's favorite recipe. Make recipe cards to give to others.
- Offer a dinner prayer or toast to your loved one. Invite others to share a special memory.

How to Support Those Grieving During the Holidays

It is not uncommon for us to feel inadequate and uncomfortable when it comes to supporting a family member or a friend while they are grieving a significant loss. Especially during the holidays, we often desire to take away the sorrow and fix the ‘problem’. We quickly become overwhelmed by feelings of helplessness since we cannot take away someone’s grief. What we can do, is simply *be with them*. Offering our presence is harder than it sounds. Below are a few suggestions to help guide us as we support the bereaved during the holidays.

- **Respect and validate all the emotions and feelings they are sharing.**

Recognize that sometimes our primary role isn’t necessarily *doing* something but *being* there for them. Let go of the pressure of believing we have to say the right words to minimize their pain. Rather, respect and validate all the emotions and feelings they are sharing. The holidays are typically a time of joy and celebration. They may not be feeling very festive and we can support them by giving them permission to grieve and not feel guilty that they are not in the holiday spirit.

- **Listen.**

We tend to underestimate the kindness and helpfulness of a listening ear. The bereaved have a great need to share their story, process unfamiliar thoughts and feelings along with making decisions. Be a sounding board for them and offer validation and helpful suggestions. Remember to avoid giving advice and using statements such as “you should do this, or you must do that”.

- **Offer to help with specific tasks.**

Rather than saying “call me if you need anything”, be specific about what you can do for them. Such as, “I am going to the store, is there anything I can get for you”. Offering to help out with holiday decorating, baking, gift shopping, addressing envelopes, or making a meal. Help them write a to do list and brainstorm different ways and people that can help accomplish the tasks.

- **Offer our effort to cooperate with their wishes.**

Typically, a significant loss changes a person. They view the world and life differently. They may have had interest that they no longer care about. Their values and priorities look different. What they need from us is to respect these changes and be patient with them. We can let them know that we are committed to help them through this difficult time.

- **Encourage self-care.**

Self-care for the bereaved is easily neglected but greatly needed. Encourage them to eat well, get enough rest, exercise and stay connected with others. At times they will need their privacy and we need to honor and respect that while monitoring too much isolation.

- **Support the reality they may have limitations.**

It is important that the bereaved recognize their limitations and anticipate holiday activities that may be too overwhelming for them. We can help them identify those potential challenges and create a plan that leaves room for them to adjust based on how they are feeling at the time. One of the most helpful ways we can support a loved one is to give them permission to authentically grieve and mourn their loss. No judgement.

