Those sneaky spring holidays
by Kenneth J. Doka, PhD, MDiv

When grieving, the arrival of spring can seem like a relief. The days are getting longer rather than shorter. More sunlight may affect everyone’s mood, especially those who suffer from seasonal affective disorder, brought on by long winter days. As the days get warmer, we spend more time outside, allowing us more opportunities to divert our grief, either by being with others or by working in the garden or yard. There may even be fewer reminders—not as many cards or television specials that remind us of our loss. So it is easy to ignore the spring holidays. That is why our reactions can surprise us.

These holidays just sneak up on us with little forethought or warning. Despite the season, they can still be tough. Spring holidays, too, are full of memories. They are centering moments when families gather and the losses are all still keenly felt. Mother’s Day and Father’s Day may be especially painful if we are dealing with the loss of a parent or child. In the roller coaster ride of grief, the spring holidays can be those unexpected plunges—a wild part of the ride that we may never have expected.

We need to prepare for them as carefully as we should have prepared in the winter. Which holidays have the most significance? What are the ones where we will feel the absence most? Once we understand the challenges that each event presents, we can prepare.

We need to decide how we want to spend the holidays and with whom we wish to spend them. However difficult these holidays are, we must be careful not to isolate ourselves. Even spending a little time with others who care about us is useful. Yet it is appropriate, if we wish, to spend a little time alone. Jane does that. Her adult son, Ivan, died a number of years ago.

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“Grief is like the ocean - it comes on waves, ebbing and flowing. Sometimes the water is calm, and sometimes it is overwhelming. All we can do is learn to swim.”

— Author Vicki Harrison
Ten secrets to healing well from grief
by Judy Tatelbaum, MSW, LCSW

Although we would rather never have to confront life’s painful situations like loss, the death of a loved one, facing a life-threatening illness, or danger in the world, sometimes we must. Each of us needs as many tools as possible for dealing with difficult times. Following are ten secrets for facing painful events as best we can.

Don’t run away. It’s when we stay and face what’s happening that we cope best and heal most quickly. Facing pain empowers us and strengthens us.

Allow your feelings. We don’t want to feel what we feel—sadness, anger, resentment, regret, or fear—yet owning our feelings and expressing them aloud can free us from them.

Seek the help of other people. Life is harder when we force ourselves to cope with pain alone. The support of others adds to our strength, energy, and insight in facing distress.

Do not hold yourself a victim. Whenever we feel like a victim, we are powerless. Even when the circumstances were awful, acknowledge how terrible things were, but don’t add victim to the awfulness.

Have an “I can” attitude. Realize you can cope, even if you don’t know how. When we give ourselves positive reinforcement like “I will survive,” we empower ourselves and our future.

Know you are not the only one. Be inspired by the fact that other people make it through rough times like yours. Others recover and so can you.

Ask yourself—what can I learn from this? If we saw pain as a natural teacher, maybe then pain wouldn’t be our enemy. We can learn how to face something seemingly impossible. We can develop healing tools and a deeper understanding of life.

Ask yourself—how can I be powerful in the face of this trauma? We usually don’t think about what it means to have power over life until we feel powerless in the face of pain or loss. Traumatic experiences offer us a chance to learn to empower ourselves and overcome adversity.

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inconsistent sentiments? You could start by asking your daughter, “How do you feel about the upcoming graduation?” She might be so caught up in the event that she is not thinking about her grandfather at the time. Rather, she is trying to make sense of her own ambivalent feelings—her excitement about getting a college degree and the growing fear and uncertainty of confronting her future. That is only normal. Acknowledge her feelings, and share your own bittersweet emotions—your happiness as well as your heartbreak because your father won’t be present to celebrate.

If your daughter, too, is finding it difficult to face her graduation without her grandfather, you might say that while Grandpa is not physically present, you know his spirit will permeate the day because, in the words of King Solomon, “many waters cannot quench love, nor can the floods drown it ... for love is stronger than death.”

Identify ways to make his death more meaningful by perpetuating his memory. If he was active in particular charities and causes, perhaps contribute in honor of your daughter’s graduation. Write a letter or poem expressing all that is in your heart. Place some of his favorite photographs in special albums to display. Following the graduation, mention his name in a prayer or toast.

Most importantly, keep your eyes on the prize! I mention this because of a recent wedding I attended where the bridegroom’s father had died a month before. The minister was a wise one. He said that one might be tempted to speak exclusively about the man who had died, but this was not a funeral. Yes, they could shed tears, but this was also a time of celebration, the beginning of a new chapter in the book of life.

Remember, it is a natural response to shed tears during your daughter’s commencement. At the same time, feeling joy is not a betrayal. Rather, it is an acknowledgment that your father’s gifts now live in all of you, transforming and enriching a living family. Death is a moment. Love is forever.

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Ask yourself—what could be a great outcome? What if we considered who we might become because we are facing this loss? A great outcome might be to become more confident about your abilities or to help others with their pain.

Be willing to recover and go on with your life no matter what. This may be the toughest, but also the most important step you can take. It’s not unusual to want to quit because you hurt.

Personal power comes from having the courage to go on with life, even when someone or something important is missing.

- Judy Tatelbaum, MSW, LCSW is a psychotherapist, public speaker, and author.

Grief during Passover and Easter
by The Rev. Paul A. Metzler, DMin

Each year, the Jewish observance of Passover and the Christian celebration of Easter fall close to each other in the springtime. While each of these religious holidays has distinct practices within its unique faith tradition, they are similar in that they are celebrations of liberation and new life. It is important and helpful for those grieving to anticipate how emotionally complicated these observances can be so that expectations and plans can be realistic.

Same Seder, Not the Same. Sam, my rabbi colleague, says that since the Seder meal is at the heart of a family’s annual Pesach observance, it likely will bring forward powerful memories of past Seders shared with the person who died. Just as Elijah is spiritually expected to enter to partake of the Seder, there will be strong longing for the family member no longer present. Since even otherwise non-observant Jews are likely to attend or host a Seder, this celebratory meal is a profound occasion within the family and community to reminisce about what is the same and what has changed since the last Seder.

The absence of a loved one may be one of the most dominant realities of the Seder, even if the griever keeps this awareness internalized and private. Also, the Yizkor service at the end of Passover, with its memorial prayers in synagogue and Yahrzeit candle at home will also be a mixture of solace and sad remembrance for observant Jews in the midst of a holy time.

The Easter Blues. The liturgical color for Easter is brilliant white, since it is a joyful celebration of resurrection and new life in Jesus. Yet the actively grieving Christian may find their emotional color to actually be quite “blue” with sadness overriding the themes of joy that characterize the Easter message.

Further, the 40-day period of Lent that precedes Easter has a strong focus on events leading to the death of Jesus, especially during the final week known as Holy Week.

These powerful stories and images can be challenging to someone actively coping with a recent death of their own. Easter Sunday is typically a time, even for those who do not go to church services, for a festive family meal. For those in mourning, such traditional gatherings can be very difficult.

Those who are grieving need to treat themselves tenderly. Seeking guidance from a rabbi, priest, or minister can help decide what observances to maintain or modify. Those in mourning may need to only do some of what is typical; participate in a gathering only for a short time, or go to services only when they feel emotionally strong enough. This type of planning can help everyone be realistic about the religious holiday.

Finally, one of the blessings of a “holy day” is the opportunity to reach out to others. Many bereaved are surprised to find their greatest solace comes in thinking of others who are also dealing with loss and sadness. Eaching out by sending a note, making a phone call or arranging a visit may be a way to act that will bring a real sense of holiday blessing.

- The Rev. Paul A. Metzler, DMin, an Episcopal priest and psychotherapist, is semi-retired following over 40 years of service as a clergy, therapist and hospice-based grief counselor.