



Dread of holidays

by Judy Tatelbaum

After the death of a loved one, it is not unusual to dread approaching birthdays, anniversaries, or other major celebrations that will underline the fact that your loved one is absent. Important events can often trigger our grief.

My client Jean, who lost her husband to cancer, taught me a lot about facing that dread. Jean was overwhelmed with what seemed like a cascade of upcoming events.

First was Thanksgiving. Then Christmas, New Year's Eve, her husband's birthday, her January wedding anniversary, and topping things off, Valentine's Day in February.

Jean needed a way to survive these events. "Either that," she said, "or I'll have to stay in bed for months."

We worked together on how she might approach each of these occasions individually. The key was to keep her from clumping them together and overwhelming herself. She made a specific plan for how and where she would spend key days. Planning ahead made the difference.

She began by deciding to avoid a big family dinner at Thanksgiving. Her husband's death was too fresh. She wasn't up to traveling or socializing. Instead, she had Thanksgiving dinner with neighbors. She said it was "short, sweet and easy."

After that she felt more willing to travel for a brief Christmas visit with her family. Then she promised herself that she could spend New Year's Eve in bed reading. Because she took control, her plans worked well.

She appreciated not having to celebrate New Year's Eve. Giving herself this freedom left her more

comfortable facing her wedding anniversary and her husband's birthday. She asked a friend to be with her on her anniversary and went alone to the cemetery to be with her husband on his birthday.

She and her husband had always celebrated Valentine's Day with flourish. He brought her candy and flowers and took her out to a beautiful dinner. Originally she thought she might spend that day in bed so she wouldn't see others celebrating. At the last minute she bought herself candy and flowers in her husband's memory.

After all the celebrations had passed, she congratulated herself for surviving what she originally had felt was impossible. Managing these events so well made her feel stronger and more able to face living without her husband. Newly confident, she joined a grief support group. She and a friend began hiking and traveling together. She committed to making a life for herself after her loss.

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