



## Ask an Expert

### Question

It's almost time for the holidays and I'm dreading what to do. Our daughter died this year after a long and courageous battle with breast cancer. Her husband was a firefighter who died on September 11, 2001. She was a mother to three children who my husband and I are now raising. We are in our 70s, and although it is not easy, we are in good health and thankful that we can do this.

The holidays were always special, celebrated with family and friends. All of our children and grandchildren would come to our house for a few days and although it was exhausting I loved it. Now I'm beginning to dread December. I'm not sure I want to celebrate—I certainly don't feel like it. But I worry about the rest of the family. I'm feeling guilty because I don't want to spoil their holiday. Any suggestions?

### Answer

Thank you for your comments. I am sure that we have many readers who share your ambivalence about the winter holidays. Wanting to do "the right thing"

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## What will this holiday mean for me now?

by Kenneth J. Doka

Just like any part of grief, the holidays hit individuals differently. Some of us may still take pleasure from the holidays, even after our loss. For some, the holidays offer a welcome diversion—meaningful activities that fill time. The visits of friends and family may alleviate the ever-present loneliness of loss.

For others, holidays now may lose their sense of pleasure. The holidays become simply times on the roller coaster of grief. Like other days, some may be better, others worse, but overall they are no longer distinct.

Still for others of us, the holidays hit hard. The absence of that person seems more acute. There are so many reminders that the person is no longer there. There may be cards from more casual acquaintances that still bear the name of the person who died. As we shop we may see reminders—the last gift we gave or received or the gift we would still like to give. The chair at the holiday dinner that now seems so vacant and empty. In many parts of the country, the coldness and darkness of the season may mirror our grief. The television specials and constant cheers and best wishes may accentuate our own grief.

The holidays hit each of us differently. So our first step in handling them is to take

stock—to ask “What will this holiday mean for me now?” That is a critical question. Once we know what the holidays mean for us, we can begin to make plans—whom do I need to be with during these holidays? What do I wish to do?

We also need to remember that others who share our lives may face the holidays with different concerns and needs. Our ways of dealing with our loss may not necessarily be theirs. Grief is deeply personal. There is neither one right way to feel nor one correct way to grieve.

When Eva's husband died, she knew her young son and daughter still looked forward to visits with Eva's sister-in-law and

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*“Planes still landed, cars still drove, people still shopped and talked and worked. None of these things made any sense at all.”*

— Helen Macdonald, *H Is for Hawk*

# Peace and joy still possible

by Patti Anewalt

While the commercial world pushes good cheer everywhere you turn, when you are facing the holiday season without your loved one you may feel overwhelmed with an immense sense of loss. For grieving people, special occasions and holidays are difficult hurdles, particularly the first couple years after a loss. It is natural to feel sad, and trying to put up a “good front” in front of others can be exhausting. Think, however, about who you can trust to be honest with about your true feelings. Those who care for you worry about you and want to help, but they often don’t know quite what to say or do. The Swedish proverb “Shared joy is double joy, shared sorrow is half sorrow” rings true.

The anticipation of a holiday used to be almost as enjoyable as the day itself. After a loss, perhaps dread is now replacing that sense of anticipation—“How will I get through this?” is a common thought. If this thought resonates with you, what seems to help many people is to actually plan for that special day. By doing so, you are in control, aware of your choices, and making decisions, rather than feeling overwhelmed by everything that seems to be happening to you. Yet, even if you do make a plan, be flexible.



For example, you may agree to attend the same party you have always gone to in the past, but, once there, you may decide to only stay a little while. That’s okay. You know that’s what is best for you. Be gentle with yourself. Grief is not easy, and coping with the holidays makes it all the more challenging to get through.

Try to stay open to the possibility that there can still be peace, and perhaps even some joy, amidst your grief. Avoid high expectations of yourself or others. Everyone copes with loss differently, which is why hospices in your area probably offer holiday support groups. Look and see what might be available in your community, and consider trying some of these suggestions.

**Plan ahead and prioritize.**

Whether it is writing out greeting cards, holiday baking, decorating, or having a big family dinner, ask yourself the following questions before making any decisions or trying to go on as you always have: “Is this a task that someone else would be willing to do?” or “Would it still be a holiday without it?” Plan one small goal for each day and include those you care about in the planning.

**Live in the moment.** Anticipating a particular day can often be much worse than the actual day itself. Take

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yet feeling drained and exhausted. Oscillating between wanting to be alone yet feeling guilty for not continuing long-standing family traditions. Even when someone was not the primary caregiver, a sometimes long and protracted illness can add layers to our grief. Frequently, families talk about the physical exhaustion they feel after the death, yet are surprised by the emotional exhaustion or spiritual questioning of their beliefs that may come afterward.

Anyone who has had a significant loss may be ambivalent as to what to do about holidays. Continuing past and familiar rituals may be comforting to some; others may feel that the pain of remembering and continuing these traditions may be too painful, especially in the first year following a death. As with many issues in grief, there are no right or wrong answers. Figuring out what will be the most

comforting to you and your family is essential. Recognizing that your grandchildren are young, would not having a family holiday deprive them of being with their cousins? It might be helpful to have a family discussion with your children and discuss different options. For example, would it be beneficial for another family member to host the holiday? Instead of having you cook the marathon dinner, could you consider a pot luck dinner or a buffet?

Whatever you decide, I hope that the holidays are gentle for you and your family, that you are aware of the stress and demands placed upon you, and are able to monitor and engage in self care.

■ **Sherry R. Schachter, PhD, FT, RN**, is the director of bereavement services for Calvary Hospital/Hospice.

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one moment at a time and try not to look too far ahead. The season feels different because you are different—seek ways to help you get through each day. Take time to rest, refresh and renew.

**Create rituals.** Rituals affirm the connection between your life and others. They honor the memory and help you remember. Though your loved one is not present physically, that person remains in your heart and mind. Look for ways to remember them. Buy a gift in their memory, light a special candle at mealtime, or donate to a

charitable organization that would be meaningful to your loved one. Actions such as these incorporate the memory of your loved one in new ways this holiday season.

**Look forward.** The past year was life-changing for you. As you look ahead, consider what you plan to leave behind and what you want to carry forward. Perhaps set yourself a goal going forward. Decide what direction you want to move in as you look ahead to the coming year.

■ **Patti Anewalt, PhD, LPC, FT,** is Director of the Pathways Center for Grief & Loss with Hospice & Community Care.

## Clinging to winter grief

by Paul A. Metzler

**A** grieving mother whose daughter had died suddenly in early September told me the following January that she already dreaded the return of spring. She did not want warmth to return or see little green shoots of plants again, especially not upon her daughter's grave.

She would have been glad if the snow and ice stayed indefinitely. Winter perfectly mirrored her inner sense of darkness and despair.

Other bereaved persons have also found the bleakness of winter to be oddly satisfying. The dreary landscape often matches their inner emotional state of desolation and broken dreams.

Many poets have expressed this mood about winter's bleakness. John Updike, in his poem, *January*, wrote in part:

*The days are short,  
The sun a spark,  
Hung thin between  
The dark and dark...*

Each grief experience is unique and not every griever feels like they can barely see a spark of sun, but for many this dark sadness is common. I think that for many these feelings are a necessary part of grief, even if they live in an area where there is little winter weather. These deep reactions make it possible for all of the dimensions to the season of grief to be experienced and expressed.

In *Attachment and Loss*, John Bowlby wrote about the inevitable emotions that accompany loss. His writings have been influential in helping bereavement profession-

als understand and support bereaved persons through the four phases he found were common; numbing, yearning, disorganization, and reorganization.

A griever usually goes through intense shock and numbness initially. Deep longing for the lost loved one follows. The yearning can last a long time, as does the difficulty of re-ordering a life turned upside down by a death. But when reorganization starts to emerge, it includes finding new meaning and hopeful direction for life following a loss.

What can you do to help yourself if you are in deep winter grief? I think both periods of solitude and times of communication with others are important to experience. The combination makes it possible to enter into but also to pass through the challenging feelings and thoughts that accompany loss.

The solitude allows you to have your thoughts and explore your feelings privately, without the pressure of communicating. However, you also need opportunities to talk with others to express your feelings and ideas out loud. If the emotions and thoughts are kept within, grief is less likely to be resolved. Many have observed that grief shared is grief that is relieved.

If you find that the “winter-like” emotions have stayed beyond their season, consider talking with a grief counselor at a local hospice or with other helping professional to guide you in your journey.

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

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extended family. Eva knew she really did not have the energy for an extended visit and a long car ride in this first year without her husband. Talking it over with her sister-in-law she decided to fly there. She left Friday while her children stayed through the weekend. She had the privacy she needed while her children reveled in the connection with relatives, in the gifts, and in a security that even with the death of their dad, their ties with his family remained strong.

The most important gift we can share with others is the gift to freely communicate our needs even as we listen in nonjudgmental ways to the needs of those around us. Our different ways of dealing with loss are just that—differences in how we cope—not measures of how much we love.

■ **Kenneth J. Doka, PhD, MDiv**, is Senior Bereavement Consultant to HFA and recipient of the 2019 Lifetime Achievement Award from the Association for Death Education and Counseling.



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