



Ask an Expert

Question

This is my first Hanukkah in 46 years without my beloved father. We want to remember him fondly but don't want to turn the holiday into a sad, funeral-like observance. Do you have any recommendations for meaningful family observances?

Answer

The power and comfort of personal rituals can be therapeutic gifts. Of course, each family must decide how best to commemorate their loss as they celebrate the holidays. The following are suggestions of how some bereaved people have mingled their tinsel with tears.

"We start with a moment of silence or someone offers a toast or prayer if appropriate."

"Grandma loved flowers so we place a single rose on the festival table in her memory."

"Putting a special ornament on the tree symbolizes Dad's favorite hobby."

"In memory of our child, we
...continued on p. 2

Old and new rituals

by Charles A. Corr, PhD

Within our communities, as members of families, and as individuals, we often have developed long-established rituals that guide us in what we usually do and expect to do at holiday and other special times. For example, we may be familiar with certain patterns of gift-giving at Christmas, Hanukkah, or Kwanza, or with special meals at Thanksgiving.

Rituals bring us together with those we love to act in ways we recognize, know, and cherish.

When a person who we love dies, that event may impact these familiar rituals in unfamiliar ways. Some bereaved people may cling tightly to their old rituals as ways of finding solace in a time of confusion and pain.

For other, however, it may be difficult to sustain such rituals. The absence of the loved one, the fact that others seem to be blissfully happy, and many other factors may make it hard to engage in the rituals that once were so meaningful.

It is important to set boundaries as a bereaved person so that you do not give into the wishes of others who may insist that you join in activities that require too much of you.

Setting boundaries in this way can give yourself time to find your way forward in the aftermath of a significant loss in your life.

Another approach that may help is to seek out and develop new rituals that can become new sources of strength and gratification. When a ritual is "broken," it is perfectly appropriate to develop new rituals to take its place, whether on a temporary or permanent basis.

For example, instead of going to a "special place" that you formerly shared with your loved one, you may want to seek out a new "special place" for yourself. Perhaps it is at the graveside, alongside a body of

...continued on p. 4



IN THIS ISSUE:

The three C's of coping with the holidays..... 2

Holiday survival strategies 3

Ways to spend the holidays..... 3

"Grief is like a long valley, a winding valley where any bend may reveal a totally new landscape."

— C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*

The three C's of coping with the holidays

by Kenneth J. Doka, PhD, MDiv

With the roller coaster emotions of grief, the holidays can be an especially tough time

We remember the Hanukkah when there was a snowstorm, the Christmas we received a bike, the Thanksgiving when the turkey was undercooked. These memories remind us of our loss.

Other reminders such as cards addressed to the person who died, finding gifts they would have loved, or holiday movies can make us feel out of sorts with the season. Everyone else seems so happy and joyful.

The holidays are a tough time to grieve. Acknowledging they will be tough does not make them any easier, but it may help us understand our reactions, and tap into the things we can do to help ourselves cope.

Choose. During the holidays it is easy to drift into activities that increase our pain. But we do have choices. We can decide what activities we wish to participate in, who we want to be with, what we want to do. After her husband died, June was invited to join her sister-in-law for the holidays. She decided that she would retain the freedom to choose where she wanted to be on Christmas until that morning. "I never know how much energy I'll have

or how I'll feel until that day," she explained. On Christmas morning, she decided to have dinner with friends she had met in a local widow's support group. She chose to go to her sister-in-law's house for dessert.

One of the choices we may want to consider is how to mark the loss during the holidays. During the holidays we feel that person's absence. Finding ways to recognize and acknowledge that individual can bring a positive focus to our grief. Lighting a candle, creating a ritual, placing a memento on a tree, a moment of silence or a holiday toast are simple ways to acknowledge the loss that we feel so acutely this time of year.

Communicate. It is important that we discuss our choices with others, especially those who are affected by them. They have needs as well. Their ways of dealing with grief may be different. June, for example, talked with her sister-in-law, explained her feelings and asked if she could make a decision that day. Once her sister-in-law understood June's feelings and needs, she was willing to be flexible.



...continued on p. 3

Ask an expert ...continued from page 1

dedicate the 'shammes' from which the other Hanukkah candles are lit."

"We write special notes to my mother, put them in her Christmas stocking and then read them aloud during dinner."

"I ask, 'What leaps into your mind when I mention Uncle Bill?' We go around the table, starting with the children. It's a spontaneous stream of stories that bring enjoyment, laughter, and pleasure." (A tape recorder may be placed near each speaker to save all the memories.)

"The chair where my grandfather always sat is given to the youngest grandchild to designate the continuity of generations."

"My brother always munched on jelly beans, so we have a few

around and remember him and smile."

"Our sixteen-year-old son wrote a poem that he reads in his sister's memory."

"We all get together and cook our aunt's signature meal. It helps to continue her tradition."

For many, moments of reminiscence are one of the truest measurements of their enduring love. For as Solomon said in the Song of Songs: "Love is greater than death."

■ **Earl A. Grollman, DHL, DD**, was a rabbi, a pioneer in the study of death and dying, and the author of several books on crisis intervention. Rabbi Grollman died in 2021.

Holiday survival strategies

by Judy Tatelbaum, LCSW

Be kind to yourself. Holidays can be difficult for people who are grieving. Honoring yourself, your needs, and your feelings may be all you can manage right now. Do only as much as you can. Choose what's best for you: to be immersed in the holiday spirit or not.

Express your feelings. The surest road through grief is to feel it. Cry if you need to cry, rage if you need to rage. Allow the longings, loneliness, or whatever you feel.

Ask for what you need. Speak up! Others don't know what to say or do unless you tell them what would help you most. Say if you want to talk or want your privacy respected. Let it be known if you need companionship or if you want a shoulder to cry on.

Create support for yourself. Sharing your pain eases it. Supportive people and groups help. Most of us cope best with tough times with someone to walk with us in our pain.

Appreciate your other loved ones. It is natural to isolate yourself and feel alone in your grief but don't deprive your children, spouse, or other loved ones of your presence. They need your love, too. In return, their love can nourish you and help you begin to heal.

Help another person in need. Contributing to someone else gets your attention off yourself and can be a very effective way of healing after a loss. When you are immersed in someone else's needs, you can be free tempo-

rarily of your own pain.

Avoid the holidays. If celebrating seems too difficult, then you can choose to minimize the holidays. Get away somewhere—like skiing, a resort, or a different city. If you cannot afford to travel, then change the scenery; go to the zoo or the movies or some other distracting place. This may not erase your pain, but it may lessen it some.

Do something new and different. Often, the more we try to recreate the past, the more obvious is our loss. Changing traditions can be freeing and satisfying. If imagining a new holiday plan is difficult, then give the job to a creative friend or relative.

You will survive the holidays. The holidays may be the worst of your grief time. Eventually you will heal and your memories will persist without pain. It's okay not to have a good time. If you are hurting and unable to have your attention on anything else, let yourself be.

It is also okay to have a good time. While grieving, we often feel guilty about having fun. Don't deny yourself life because someone has died. If you can, enjoy the holidays. Death teaches us that every day of life is precious. The best gift we can give ourselves is to live wholeheartedly.

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

The three C's of coping ...continued from page 2

After the death of her child, Marcy's family had to have a considerable discussion over whether or not they would have a Christmas tree.

Compromise. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. When we communicate, we may find that our feelings and needs, the very ways that we cope, will differ. We need to find space for compromise. For example, some people in Marcy's family saw the Christmas tree as an important tribute to their late son and brother. Other family members saw it as disrespectful. They talked through each point of view, and decided that this year they would have a small tree—not in the central living room, but in the

family room. Those who wanted to help decorate could, but those who chose not to would also be respected. All could deal with their loss in their own way.

Nothing changes the fact that the holidays can be especially difficult while grieving. But as we choose our actions, communicate our choices with others, and find suitable compromises, we may find that they are bearable. And that gives us renewed strength and hope.

■ *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.*

Old and new rituals ...continued from page 1

water, or in a religious building or other structure that offers opportunities for reflection and meditation. What counts most is that this place helps you find solace and rejuvenation.

At times throughout the year when gift-giving is one of the principle rituals, you might want to purchase a gift like one that you would have given to your loved one and donate it to a charity. Establishing some form of memorial in the name of your loved one can be an act of true generosity and a way of keeping alive the legacy of the person who died.

The nature of the new ritual you select is not as significant as the fact that it serves your needs at this difficult time. Wearing his old flannel shirt, keeping her voice on the telephone answering machine, sleeping with your child's favorite toy—these and

many other activities can form the foundation of new rituals in your life.

In each case, what is most significant about any old or new ritual is that it should affirm the life and legacy of your loved one, express the joy and happiness you were privileged to share together, and bring some measure of consolation to you in your bereavement.

■ **Charles A. Corr, PhD**, is a volunteer with Suncoast Hospice and formerly chaired the International Work Group on Death, Dying, and Bereavement.



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