

The Holidays:
Remembrances,
Taking Care of
Yourself
and
Making
New Memories



Realize how you might feel...

Holidays are sometimes extremely difficult for those of us who have lost a loved one, especially when we're confronting the special day for the first time without that person. You may wish you could just sleep through the holidays and get on with your life in January. But the only way to heal is to work through our grief one day, and holiday, at a time. There are no right or wrong ways to approach the holidays. Each person handles grief in their own way.



Christmas and Thanksgiving are perhaps the two holidays that are most difficult, with friends asking,

“What are you doing for the holidays?” and songs and television programs portraying happy times. It's easy to feel detached from the merriment around you.

However, the holidays do not have to be entirely sad. There are ways to be involved in the holidays and cope with your grief as you approach this first occasion without your loved one. Your friends at State of the Heart Hospice have put together the following tips to help you. Remember, you can reach your State of the Heart Bereavement Specialist at 800.417.7535.

1. Do what you're comfortable with

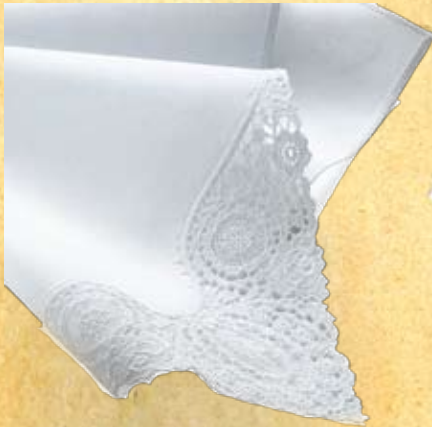
Accept that the holiday period is not going to be easy and be careful not to do something because you “should.” Do the things that are very important to you and your family and agree to do the best you can. If it's too difficult, you don't have to repeat it next year. Consider keeping a record of activities and how they make you feel so you can decide what to do and not do next year.

Here are some activities to think about:

- Shopping – If you want to shop, pick a time when the stores are not crowded, such as early in the morning. If you don't want to face it alone, ask someone to go with you. If going out to shop seems too difficult, try ordering things from the Internet, a catalogue, or a TV home shopping program. Keep in mind that the goal is not to isolate yourself, but to make things easier for you.
- Sending cards and letters – You can shorten your mailing list or even omit it this year. Either way, you can still enjoy the cards you receive.
- Decorating – Don't feel like you have to decorate. If you or someone else in your family wants to, take



- it slow and consider limiting your décor so you don't get overwhelmed. Ask for help.
- Preparing a holiday meal – If the thought of cooking and cleaning up a big meal has you stressed, ask a friend or family member to host it this year. Or you could go out to eat.
- Observing traditions – Traditions are difficult to deal with during the holidays. A death in the family may



mean that some traditions lose their joy or even end. Consider opening gifts on a different day or attending church at a different time. Don't feel bad about not observing a tradition. You can always revive it in the future. In the meantime, you can start new traditions.

Change in the routine can be beneficial during the holidays as it removes the focus from what is missing. Don't be afraid to make changes – just keep other grieving family members involved. Discuss activities together so everyone can express their feelings.

2. Plan ahead and prepare for the holidays

Bereaved individuals who encounter the most difficulty are those who have given little thought to the challenges they will face. As you make plans, remember the importance of taking care of yourself, guarding your

strength and energy. Be mindful of your health and over-extending yourself. It is okay to make decisions based on what is best for you and your well-being.

It's ok to be sad as you recall holidays in the past. Remember, the bereaved work overtime. Not only is life more complicated for those grieving, but all our energy is siphoned into mental and emotional resolution. Grieving is healthy and is nature's way of healing the mind and the heart from the greatest injury of all.

When friends and family get together for the holidays, social invitations can be emotionally conflicting. One minute you may want to go and the next, it just seems too difficult and demanding. Often, we don't know what we will want when the time comes. Explain to your hosts ahead of time that you may have to cancel at the last minute, or if you do attend, you may have to leave early.

Give yourself the gift of liberation from what others may expect from you and the courage to declare your own boundaries and limits with grace and dignity.

3. Remember your loved one

Memorializing your loved one keeps them a part of the holidays and shows how important they were to you. This can become one of your new traditions, and putting your mind to this task has a healing, therapeutic effect: You're confronting your grief in a healthy and

expressive way.

The special ways of remembrance are endless, but here are a few ideas to get you started:

- Light a special candle to celebrate your loved one's life.
- Take notes, holiday decorations, or flowers to the cemetery.
- Plant a memorial tree or flower bed.
- Hang a special Christmas ornament in memory of your loved one.
- Hang your loved one's stocking and fill it with notes instead of gifts.
- Give money to a charity in your loved one's name, in the amount you would have spent on gifts.



- Have a special family time to share holiday memories of your loved one.
- Offer a dinner prayer or toast to your loved one.
- Volunteer your time or buy something your loved one

might have liked and give it to someone in need.

4. Help children with their grief

If you have children in your family, remember they are also feeling their own grief. Let them express

themselves and be prepared for any type of response, especially from teenagers. Losing a loved one during this stage of their life is very difficult. Be patient, even if they are being hurtful or mean.

Some kids may take on more responsibilities to help a grieving parent. Don't rely on them too much. They need to grieve too. On the holiday itself, don't expect them to spend the entire day with you and the rest of the family. They may want to visit a friend, something that will give them support and security.

Setting up a special activity for the children to participate in has helped many families. This can comfort the child and give them something meaningful to hold onto. You can help guide the activity, but let the kids decide what they want to do.

Here are some ideas you could suggest:

- Bake cookies for a nursing home or a group that was special to your loved one.
- If you're donating to a charity, encourage the child to write a note explaining the gift is a memorial for your loved one.
- Plant a tree in the backyard and pick out a special stone or figurine to go with it.
- Draw a picture, write a letter, or make a gift for your loved one. Take it to the cemetery or attach it to a balloon and let it fly up to the sky.

5. Express your feelings

It is important to talk about the holidays and the emptiness you might feel. It's ok to cry. It's therapeutic, relieving stress and calming anxiety. Crying doesn't make you weak – it helps you release the painful emotions you have inside. If you keep these feelings bottled up, your grief will be magnified.

It's ok to speak your loved one's name

and remember happy memories of holidays past. Don't be afraid to laugh and feel good. Keep in mind as you go through the holidays that gratitude is the point from which healing begins. Instead of focusing on what you lost, focus on the many blessings that remain.



Understand that your family and friends

can't fix your pain. Their love and support can help, but we all have to work through our own grief. Happiness doesn't occur overnight, replacing all the pain while we sleep. Healing takes time and we have to work on it. In the end, it's worth the effort.

6. Ask for help

Let others know what you need and ask for help when you need it. Give family and friends the tools to help you through the holidays. Be specific about your preferences and desires and let them know when your needs change.

Find a good listener to talk to – someone who doesn't feel they have to solve your problems. You need someone who will let you say the words that are bottled up inside you, even if it's over and over again. This could be a family member, friend, member of the clergy, professional counselor, or bereavement specialist. A support group can also help. Sometimes it's easier to talk about our grief with people who are going through the same thing. It also gives us a chance to help someone else when we start healing.

Keep in mind that you know what is best for you, and your needs may legitimately change from day to day. Accept the fluctuations and learn to take each moment as it comes.

During the holidays, try to attach positive meaning to the symbols surrounding you. For example, candles and Christmas lights could remind you of hope and that darkness always turns into light.

Remember your loved one, focus on what is still good in your life, and take care of yourself. The holidays won't be terrible forever. Each year makes us stronger and brings us closer to healing.

We hope this information will be helpful to you. Remember, we all grieve differently, so do what works for you.

For more resources, visit our website at <http://www.stateoftheheartcare.org/grief/resources> or call our Bereavement Specialist at 800.417.7535.



Darke County Office
1350 N. Broadway
Greenville, OH 45331
937.548.2999 or 800.417.7535

Mercer County Office
230 W. Main
Coldwater, OH 45828
419.678.4808 or 800.584.9853

Jay County Office
1237 W. State Road 67
Portland, IN 47372
260.726.3220 or 800.527.0514