

FAQ – Grief Over the Holidays

The holiday season is known for traditions and togetherness with family and friends. However, it can be a challenging time of year if you are dealing with the death of someone close to you. Whether it was a recent loss or one that occurred years ago, feelings of grief can be amplified and may seem overwhelming during the holiday season. Grief is a complicated emotion, so understanding how it can affect you, or others experiencing a loss, is important while navigating the holidays.

What is grief and how does it manifest itself?

Grief is a natural reaction to loss, and the experience of grief is unique to each person. While feelings of grief tend to be most commonly associated with the death of a loved one, other losses can also induce grief, such as the ending of an important relationship, job loss or the loss of independence through disability¹.

Symptoms of grief can be mental, emotional, and physical. Grief shares many symptoms associated with common mental health conditions, such as anxiety and depression, and can worsen symptoms for those with existing mental health disorders. Grief can trigger strong emotions including anger, anxiety, helplessness, sadness, and hopelessness. These symptoms can also have direct physical impacts on your body such as insomnia or hypersomnia, fatigue, headaches, appetite, and weight changes or chronic pain². All these symptoms can intensify during the holidays when dealing with a significant loss.

What can I do to help manage grief over the holidays³?

Set boundaries: While there may be pressure to attend a holiday party or family gathering, remember to participate in what feels right for you. It may be helpful to remind yourself that you can leave at any time, or that it's okay to opt-out of certain things altogether. Try to find a balance between engaging and not pushing yourself too far.

Acknowledge emotions: As feelings of grief can intensify during the holidays, it is important to acknowledge your feelings instead of avoiding them. Remember that it is normal to experience both positive and negative emotions over the holidays. For example, you can miss someone you have lost *and* enjoy the holidays at the same time.

Identify coping mechanisms: Prior to the holidays, create a list of coping skills that work for you and that you can employ at home or during holiday events. Some examples might include deep breathing, taking a walk or listening to music.

Honour old traditions and/or create new ones: Some may find it helpful to continue with old traditions to honour loved ones who are no longer here. However, creating new traditions can also be healing for those who are grieving. Acknowledge, validate, and challenge any feelings of guilt that may arise in the process, remembering that new memories do not erase old ones.

Ask for help: It is important to remember you're not alone. Seek out support from friends, family, or a health care provider if you feel that you are becoming overwhelmed.

How can you help a loved one manage grief over the holidays⁴?

Allow for grief: Everyone grieves in different ways and at different paces. Give friends and family the space to grieve in their own way and do not try to rush the process. If someone decides that they don't feel up for a holiday gathering, try not to take it personally and respect their decision.

Offer to help: The holidays can be busy with shopping, cooking, hosting or traveling. Offer to help with whatever you can to alleviate the additional stresses that your loved one may be experiencing.

Talk to friends and family about their loss: Listen without judgment and resist giving advice. Let them share happy holiday memories or lend a shoulder to cry on when feelings of sadness come to the surface. Understand that grief can come and go in waves of varying intensity and frequency for a sustained period of time, and it is through talking and listening that we all gradually begin to heal.

Be aware of warning signs: If you notice that your loved one is not eating, not getting enough sleep, or is having trouble functioning at home or at work, don't ignore it. These are signs that they may be experiencing a major depressive episode. Check in on them regularly and talk to them about the importance of getting professional help if needed.

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