

Candle in the Dark

Dealing with Grief during the Holidays



Seasons of our Life

Living beyond our pain points

The leaves do not stop falling, the sun does not stop rising, and life does not pause for our season of grief. No matter how recent or long ago our loss was, there are always reminders of our loved one at special times of the year. We carry on and do our best, but there are those days when grief seems to creep past the barriers we've built and finds its way into the forefront of our minds.

We are torn between two worlds, the world before us and that one behind us. When the Holiday bells start ringing and decorations dress up the ordinary, how do we hold back the heavy tears that flood our hearts? How do we make it through this happiest time of year when we feel sad, alone and apathetic?

It was said of Eleanor Roosevelt she would “*rather light a candle than curse the darkness*”. This is the time of year where we wait, in the dark, for the light of the world to arrive. It is the season of hope, faith and belief. Let us light a candle in the darkness of our grief; a candle that reminds us of how bright their lives shown, a flame that represents the faith of their spirit living within us, a light against the dark, ever reminding us of the hope in our own future.

John 8:12 “I am the light of the world, whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life”.

“Stop the world, I want to get off” is a common sentiment among the grieving. Life seems to be swirling around us at a time we are barely catching our breath. The pain feels unbearable. Questions have no answers. Life suddenly doesn't make sense. We are forced to adjust to a “new normal” and all we want is to return to what we had or what we expected life to be.

We can be grieving the death or illness of a loved one, a divorce or separation or even a geographic relocation. The loss of what is familiar to us, that which grounded us,

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is disorienting. How do we find our resilience to do more than survive? For a time, survival is acceptable. Eventually, we will want more, our world can stay small for only so long. We have to get back into the game. In the meantime, we have to find the means to cope with the darkness.

Searching for Light - Coping with Darkness:

1) Comfort

Human nature has wired us to run from pain and seek pleasure. When we are feeling lost, confused, and heartbroken, looking for comfort is normal. Perhaps the person we lost was our comfort. In today's world searching for comfort comes in many forms; food, tv, internet, alcohol, buying, sleep, etc. During a time of grief, these things turn into nothing more than a distraction and perhaps a bad habit. Comfort soon turns to our own personal betrayal. Hiding under the covers may feel good at the moment but, eventually, we realize life is whizzing by.

In the darkness we must find comfort in those people and things that restore us. Living within our values is what keeps most of us on track. Small indulgences are okay for a day, but patterns that develop into routines will take us out of the game and derail our life.

Healthier comforts might be a cozy moment by a fireplace, a cup of coffee or tea, a good run, getting to bed early, a long talk with a close confidant or a session with a therapist. Our spirit is drained. Diligently, we pay attention to what fills our heart, mind and soul. Sometimes it feels like just going through the motions and that's okay. "Fake it till you make it". We must stay present in the moment and true to ourselves and not allow the pain of grief to lead us into a deeper darkness.

2) Faith:

The holidays are a time when we most focus our attention on spiritual matters, human charity, and the goodness of others. Relying on spiritual beliefs or a 12 step program can help to instill a sense of hope. But, it is not entirely uncommon to want to avoid practicing our faith. Some may experience confusion with "why" things happened or be angry with God, those around us, or the world in general.

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Participating in the traditions and rituals that we know and trust can help keep us grounded as we seek an understanding of how life is changing. All we need is a small seed of belief to carry us through. It's okay to express our doubts, fears and feelings to others. Grief has a way of shaking the deepest of foundations.

3) Participate:

Try to avoid "canceling" the holidays despite the temptation to side step it all. Having a 'plan A' and a 'plan B' gives us options to see how we are doing on that day. We can try to participate with family & friends, but if we find it too painful, we can exercise 'plan B' without expecting ourselves to be 'normal'. Life right now is anything but normal and we need to allow ourselves the option to be authentic.

It's okay to change things. Do the celebrations completely different if you need to. Breaking tradition can often help keep us from the many associations we have from the past. Taking a trip, going out to dinner, visiting with others outside our home may all be better choices for now.

There may be some festivities that we need to avoid knowing that it is just too much of an emotional trigger. Sometimes it is enough to 'just be around' others, even if we are feeling only 'halfway' there. Listening to our voice within will help us to judge what might be the better choice. For now, nothing may feel like the perfect choice. We do our best to trust our intuition and self.

Because grief is often unpredictable, we plan the best we can. If we really cannot participate, it's okay to have another option that is perhaps more low key. Balancing the need to grieve with some time interacting with others helps us to not totally isolate. We honor our time alone, but don't step out of activities entirely. Small doses of holiday cheer may be all we can bear. Or it can be just what we need to get over the next hurdle.

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4) Expectations:

At the holidays everyone puts extra pressure on themselves to do more and to show up with extra sparkle. For many, even without loss, this time of year sets up the “perfect family picture” of what a happy holiday “should” look like. TV ads and societal messages have contributed to this ideal for years. During grief, acknowledging that things will be different, and perhaps difficult, helps adjust our mindset to a more realistic standard.

Setting realistic expectations for ourselves and setting clear boundaries with others will help to protect us during this vulnerable time. Our energy and focus may not be the same. We need to beware of not taking on more than we can bear. We also must resist the temptation to try meeting the demands of others. Others may be disappointed that we are doing things differently, but we have to accept where we are. This is a temporary change. We are coping. Communicating our needs, wishes and limits about what we think we are able to do or not able to do will help others understand where we are and how we feel. We need to resist all of the “shoulds” from ourselves and others and focus on what we can do.

It’s okay for this year to be different. We are in transition. This year will not set the tone for the future. Grief takes time. We need the space to regroup, to catch our breath, and make sense of this new world into which we bravely step.

5) Supports:

We are hurting. Surrounding ourselves with loving supportive people will help us heal. We can say yes to help and allow others to receive the gift of giving. This is a time to be highly selective about who we allow into our inner circle. This is a time when we can be cared for and receive, even if that feels foreign to us.

Many people are awkward around grief. We have to be patient with those around us. People often do not know how to support those who are grieving or transitioning. Awkward statements or attempts may not feel the most supportive, but trust that others are trying their best.

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Keep in mind that everyone grieves differently. Don't predetermine how you should grieve, how long it should take and don't try to meet the expectations of what others think you should be doing. And don't allow others to put timelines on your grief. Fast, or slow, it takes what it takes.

6) Allow Feelings:

Grief is the 'way "out of the pain'. We cannot avoid the grief and expect to heal. We must give ourselves permission to step into the darkness. We will not be in the darkness of grief forever. This journey is temporary, but necessary. Stay fluid. When we try to block feelings, we only end up stuck or frozen. We have to keep moving to get through it.

Grief is like frequent "tidal waves" and discomfoting feelings can strike anywhere and at any time. We need to be prepared for these waves of emotion at unexpected moments. The first year is the hardest as we move through all the seasons, holidays, birthdays and special events without them. We slowly acclimate to their absence, find acceptance, and the pain lessens.

There will be an empty spot that cannot be filled. Allow that. Our loved one was an intimate part of life. Adjusting to their absence requires a shift in thoughts, behavior and spiritual perspective.

7) Meaning, Purpose and Contribution:

What traditions do we want to keep and which will we release? It's important to honor their memory in a way that has meaning. Be creative. It could be something very little. We decide if we want it to be public or private in our changes.

Loneliness can be engulfing. To bridge the distance, it can be therapeutic to focus on bringing joy to another person. Simple acts of kindness can bring a sense of goodness back into our world. We can find joy in an act of service to someone else. Social interaction helps to alleviate grief and the false comfort of isolation.

8) Remembrance:

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Finding ways to incorporate our loved one into the holidays is honoring to us and them. When we light a candle, tell a story, find an ornament or symbol, start a new tree or new menorah, write in a journal, start a new photo album, or donate to a charity in their name, we honor their memory and the good they brought into lives of others. Celebrating the holiday in their memory helps to feel that we have not left them behind. There is a sense of their presence with us.

If our loss is due to distance or divorce, we can try to release bitter feelings and resentments by switching the focus to what we have now and not what we have lost. We may not yet know where we are going, but time will make the path clear. It may feel like there are many voids. Nature abhors a vacuum, so if we are not intentional, something will fill that space. By selecting what is important and meaningful we stay involved in creating our journey.

9) Laughter is okay

It can feel odd or disloyal to feel any joy, happiness or laughter in the wake of loss. We must consider that our loved one would want us to continue to live life and would wish us every happiness. Enjoying a moment does not mean that grief is not real or we are disloyal to their memory. Welcome the laughter through tears. It heals our heart.

10) Self Care

We need to be attentive to taking care of ourselves at a time when daily routines might feel like arduous tasks. Eating, sleeping, and keeping routines are an important part of living well. Often, these routines are the first to get interrupted. We may lose our appetite, have sleepless nights, or find it difficult to get off the couch. Basic self-care is part of our survival kit. Little by little, one foot in front of the other, we find ways to keep ourselves going in a healthy direction.

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Summary

So, this holiday season, let us choose neither to curse the darkness nor hide in it. Let us light a candle of hope, and love, and remembrance for those we miss and times now past. For those of us who believe, this separation from our loved one is temporary and we will, one day, be connected again.

For now, ask for the courage and strength to carry on in a manner that honors their life and brings the renewal that allows our hearts to open again.

The future is ours. We pack up our courage and step into the unknown. We find new doors opening and a meaning and purpose that brings peace and comfort and a closure to loss and sadness.

We will always remember. We will always honor them. And our love will always remain.



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