

## **How can we help ourselves cope with and work through our grief, especially during the holidays?**

Each person's grief is unique. Our personal situations differ; our challenges, problems, families, religious beliefs, and relationships differ as well. We have different strengths and weaknesses. Also, quite frequently, the deaths of our loved ones are different, and the relationships we had with the deceased are different: conflicted, mutually supportive, ambivalent, etc.

When a loved one dies because of addiction the grief felt by friends and family is often complicated by the conflicted relationship they had with the deceased. Outsiders may find it difficult to understand how we can simultaneously both love and be angry with the deceased. When an addict dies we mourn the loss of our dreams and hopes for a better future, the future that might have been. We may also mourn the loss of the hope of being able to repair our conflicted relationship with the deceased.

The manner in which a person died can also cause additional pain and trauma. Unfortunately, in addiction the circumstances of the death may be difficult and challenging. In addiction related deaths there may also be social stigma, many people are uncomfortable talking or hearing about the person's life style choices; family and friends may feel they have no outlet to talk about their loved one. Sometimes, as may be the case with suicide for example, it may feel socially unacceptable to talk about the circumstances of the death.

Grief is both a necessity and a privilege; it comes from giving and receiving love. In addiction the very reason the relationship was conflicted is because of love. The death of a loved one, no matter how conflicted and chaotic the relationship, is a shattering experience. As a result of the death your life is under reconstruction. A broad range of emotions and thoughts are a normal part of grieving. Feelings such as: anger, sorrow, loneliness, feeling guilty and wondering "what if", feeling restless or fatigued, loss of appetite, and difficulty sleeping. Tears are also a normal part of grieving. If you are wondering if what you are feeling is normal, most likely it is. There are many resources available in the community and on line to talk to others about what you are experiencing. Many people who are grieving find professional counseling and support groups to be very helpful.

For someone who is grieving, the holidays can be particularly painful as everyone around them, the stores, television, people on the street, etc. are preparing to celebrate while they are still in mourning. What traditionally is a time of family togetherness, sharing, and thanksgiving may instead be a time of increased sorrow, loss, loneliness, and emptiness.

During the holiday season, even if the loss occurred many years ago, the grief and pain can resurface and become sharp again. It is very normal to find that thoughts of the deceased, missing the deceased anew, and actively mourning the deceased again occur during the holidays.

Below are some suggestions for helping yourself cope with grief during the holiday season. As mentioned earlier each person's grief is different, pick and choose the suggestions that seem right for you:

- Try to be patient and compassionate with yourself. Take good care of yourself (even if you don't feel like it). Find time to exercise, relax, eat regularly, and get good rest. Feelings of loss often leave people feeling fatigued. Having lower energy may slow you down. Respect what your body is telling you. You may need to change your expectations about what you are able to participate in during the holiday season. Do what is right for you during the holidays. Friends, co-workers, and family members, while well-meaning, often try to prescribe what is good for you during the holidays which may or may not be what you need.
- Plan ahead for family gatherings and structure your time. Often grief causes fatigue. If you do not feel up to participating in a family/holiday tradition this year give yourself permission to "sit out." Spending time at a holiday celebration with family and friends may be easier to cope with if specific time frames are set. For example: "I will be able to come to dinner at 6 but I will need to leave by 8." As you make your plans leave space to change them if you feel it is appropriate. It is important to be able to have time to yourself but try not to become too isolated.
- During the holidays it may be tempting be overly busy to distract yourself and not allow yourself to experience your grief. Being too busy may help you avoid painful memories and feelings for a while but it does not allow you to work through the grief and move forward towards healing. Grief cannot be "skipped over" it must be worked through. Keeping busy to avoid experiencing grief may actually complicate and prolong the grieving process. Try to find a balance between being overly busy vs. avoiding tasks and isolating yourself. Proper self-care involves a healthy balance of activities and personal time.
- Talk about your grief. Find people who are good listeners. If they get tired of listening find others to talk to, whether friends, family members, or a professional counselor. It is helpful to be able to talk about memories, good, bad or indifferent, of the deceased. It is part of the grieving process. Do not be afraid to express your thoughts and feelings. Ignoring your grief will not make it go away. Talking about your grief may decrease the intensity of the grief, facilitate the healing process, calm your mind, and clarify your thinking. Talking may help you feel more in control.
- Holidays can be for remembering and talking about the legacies of our deceased family members. If it feels comfortable to you, give yourself permission to talk about your loved one at holiday functions with family members and friends.
- Holidays can also be a time of discovering new beliefs or renewing one's faith. Holidays may also be a time to reflect on one's own life, and to make resolutions about the future.

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