

Coping with Holidays When You Are Grieving

On holidays and landmark days, it is common for people whose loved ones have died to experience a resurgence of grief. The holidays that are most difficult for you will be unique, but may include the anniversary of the death, birthdays, Valentine's Day, Mother's and Father's Day, Christmas, Hanukkah, etc. Also, milestones, such as graduations, weddings, or births, can be poignant times. You know best what is right for you to do on these days, but the following suggestions may also be useful.

- **There is no right or wrong way to celebrate.** The important thing is to discover what feels appropriate for you. Some people find traditions comforting. Others make changes, and some decide not to celebrate at all because it is too painful – especially at first. Some people prefer to structure their time on a holiday to enhance a sense of control. Most importantly, be sensitive to your needs, and don't let others prescribe what you should or should not do.
- **Acknowledge your limits.** When you are grieving, you may have less energy and less tolerance for stress. You may be more vulnerable emotionally and feel less like celebrating than previously. Give yourself permission to change your mind about attending an event, or leave early if you get frustrated or tired. Be gentle, and don't judge yourself for what you can't do.
- **Spend time with people who are supportive and comforting.** Seek out those who accept you no matter what you think or feel. Let others know if you need to talk, or not talk, about your loss. This may be the year for you to just receive, rather than give.
- **Honor the person who died.** You may want to look at pictures of your loved one from former celebrations and share memories about that person. Some people set a place at the table for the person who died or say a toast to acknowledge their importance. Others visit the cemetery to leave messages, flowers, or to talk to their loved one. Other options include planting trees or bulbs, making a donation in the person's name, or volunteering for a cause that was meaningful to the person who died.
- **Allow others to grieve in their own ways.** Your family and friends are also feeling the loss of your loved one on holidays and milestone days. Each will be coping in their own way. Try to be aware of and honor others' needs, which may be different than yours.
- **Stay connected to your loved one on special days.** Carry a significant object from your loved one or keep his or her picture nearby. Speak to the person in the privacy of your heart. Share the ongoing story of your life. One young man wore his late father's suit on the day he got married as a way to feel his presence.
- **Take care of your body.** Get some exercise to help with the extra tension that you may feel on a holiday. Take naps, if needed. Avoid overeating and drinking, which can increase stress. Get plenty of hugs from people you love.