



GRIEF AND THE HOLIDAYS

Helping Family and Friends Cope with Their Grief & Loss During Holiday Seasons

Love Does Not End With Death

Since love does not end with death, holidays may result in a renewed sense of personal grief- a feeling of loss unlike that experienced in the routine of daily living. You may want to encourage your friend or loved ones to join in the holiday spirit, but all around you the sounds, sights and smells of the holidays may trigger memories of the one they love who has died.

Encourage them to Talk about Their Grief

During the holiday season, don't be afraid to let your friend or loved one express their feelings of grief. Ignoring their grief won't make the pain go away and talking about it openly makes them feel better. Give them as many opportunities as possible to share, and let them know that you are listening – without judging them. You can help them to feel understood and not quite so isolated.

Be Tolerant of Their Physical or Psychological Limits

Feelings of loss can leave one fatigued. The emotional stress may be exhausting. This low energy level may naturally slow your friend or loved one down. Encourage them to listen to what their body and mind are telling them. Encourage them to take care of themselves – physically and emotionally. Be aware of their lowered physical and emotional capabilities during the holiday season, and offer to assist them with any tasks they may not be able to complete.

Eliminate Unnecessary Stress

Encourage your friend or loved one not to overextend themselves. Recognize that they may need some time for to themselves, but let them know that you are willing to listen without judgment when they are. Understand also that merely “keeping busy” will not really distract them from their grief, but may actually increase stress and postpone the real need to talk out thoughts and feelings related to their grief.

Be a Comforting Source of Support

Understand that the holiday season can increase your friend or loved one's sense of loss. Allow them to talk openly about their feelings by encourage your friend or loved one to be themselves and accept all of their feelings.

Talk About The Person Who Has Died

If your friend or loved one is able to talk openly, include the person who has died in your conversations during the holidays. Recognize your friend or loved one's need to remember their loved one who has died and be willing to talk about them.

Allow them to Do What Feels Right For Them During The Holidays

Though your intent may be well-meaning, don't prescribe what is good for your friend or loved one during the holidays. Even if it doesn't go along with your plans, encourage them to focus on what they want to do. Discuss their wishes with them, and help them clarify what it is they need and want to do during the holidays.

Plan ahead for Family Gatherings

Let your friend or loved one decide which family traditions they want to continue this year and encourage them to consider beginning new rituals and traditions. Allow them to structure their holiday time. This will help them to anticipate activities, rather than just reacting to whatever happens. Getting caught off guard may create feelings of panic, fear and anxiety during a time when their feelings of grief are already heightened. As you make your plans, however, leave room to change them if your friend or loved one feels the need to do so.

Allow Them to Embrace Their Memories

Memories are one of the best legacies we have after the death of a loved one and holidays always remind us of times past. Instead of ignoring these memories, allow your friend or loved one to share them with you and their family and friends. Know that their memories may be woven with many feelings – including happiness and sadness. Their memories may bring laughter and they may bring tears – each of these is a real and honest emotion that deserves to be expressed. Memories of the person who died were made in love and need to be honored and treasured and affirmed.

Allow them to Express Their Spiritual Beliefs

During the holidays, your friend or loved one may find a renewed sense of spirituality or faith or even discover a new set of beliefs. Understand and respect their need to talk about these beliefs. They may find it comforting to attend a holiday service or special religious ceremony with you.

Adapted from Alan Wolfelt Center for Loss & Life Transition