

Holiday time can be a very difficult period for those who are grieving, especially those who are just recently bereaved. Following a death, the first year of the holiday cycle can be particularly arduous as it is the first time that such events are being celebrated without the physical presence of our loved one. So many personal customs and intimate traditions within our circle of families and friends are forged over years of celebrating them together. With that relationship now severed by death, there is a definite void felt by those who are left.

These holidays may be ones associated with our religious faith such as: Christmas, Easter, Yom Kippur, Passover, Hanukkah, Dhiwali, Ramadan, or the Birth of a Prophet or Founder, to name but a few. Likewise, they might stem from secular observances: Valentine's Day, Mother's or Father's Day, Thanksgiving, Remembrance Day, New Years, Spring or Autumn Festival. They may be more personal ones like birthdays or various anniversaries: engagement, marriage, and death.

Whatever the celebration the same feelings and coping mechanisms apply. The main secret to participating and even enjoying such festivities is to plan ahead how you will handle each event and thus to exercise some measure of control; in short, to be proactive and not reactive. We should not try to deny, or flee from, or escape the holidays as much as embrace them in a positive way that incorporates them as part of our grief work.

Let us use Christmas as an example. The entire ambience of this holiday is so all pervasive that it is inescapable. If we go shopping we hear the music of Christmas songs: "'tis the season to be jolly". In church the carols ring out the "glad tidings of great joy". Cards, gifts, decorations, special foods and even smells compete for our attention. All of our senses are assaulted daily whether we wish it or not.

As well, family life goes on in spite of our grief. In a home where there are young children the routines of this season are absolutely inescapable. Memory after memory floods our mind as we recall the intimate, individual threads of our connection with someone who now is no longer by our side to share them with us again. Christmas for us does not hold the promise of being such a 'jolly' time.

If we are honest with ourselves, we realise that Christmas itself is not the real issue; rather our own loss and sorrow. Trying to run away from the festivities by not participating in them, or by being passively reactive to every memory that confronts us, are not the best options. Rather, it is in the positive embracing of the celebrations in a 'healthy way', that allows us not only to cope with the holidays but also to grow towards the eventual acceptance of our loss. Such a 'healthy way' deliberately provides for a definite time and means or ritual of expressing our remembrance of the deceased. It thus permits us to reaffirm that past relationship, while still entering into the present ones, and thus, fully participating in the celebrations of the season.

### What Can We Do?

First and foremost, a specific time and place have to be chosen beforehand, during which we privately revalidate the relationship that we had with our departed loved one before the holiday celebrations begin. In this way, we both recall and reconfirm the joy and meaning that they brought to our lives. Some people prefer to take a part of the day before a holiday for such a remembrance, while others elect to do so on the actual date. For some a fifteen minute period is sufficient while others wish up to an hour. The duration of time spent reminiscing is a personal choice and is less important than the actual act of doing so.

We may often have a focal point for our personal commemoration, such as a photo or a memento. Your favourite music or a lit candle can help to create the ambience you need and thus, to provide a comfortable and pleasant atmosphere. As well, a ritual or something familiar or intimate between you and your departed loved one, can be most evocative of memories that serve as a means of recollecting their presence to you. Perhaps an inspirational reading, a poem, a prayer or even just a conversation that you might have with them as if they were still there, can help you to express those feelings that lie within your heart. By touching bases first with our loss and revisiting the devotion that we had with our loved one, we are better equipped to invest ourselves in the people and celebrations that follow as part of the holiday tradition.

We also have choices that we can make around the celebrations, which permit us to exercise some control, and hence, to be realistic to our own needs and concerns. For example, the family dinner could still be held in the same place and way as in past years, as that is what the deceased would have wanted to have happen; or a new place and a new set of traditions could be opted for instead, if this helps the grieving to cope better with their loss. Some cultures have such traditions already in place, as the deliberate setting a place at table in memory of their departed one, especially during the first year of their passing. Likewise, you might put up a Christmas tree, as in years past in honour of those memories and customs that you shared together; or perhaps you might decide not to decorate with a tree this time also out of a similar sense of respect to their memory. Cards, concerts, baking, gift-giving and all the other Christmas observances could follow the same type of personal choice. It is important for everyone involved to understand and appreciate that there is no right or wrong way to decide these holiday issues; but rather that each person copes according to their own resources and their own place in their personal grief journey to acceptance.

Certainly reducing the stresses, pressures and expectations that you or others might place upon yourself, can allow you some measure of meeting your own needs and abilities, as well as participating in the anticipation of others. Again the best rule of thumb is simply to be proactive and not reactive, that is to act rather than react.

If you take charge of the strategy and decisions that will best get you through the holiday observances, you will ultimately feel better about the balance you are keeping between acknowledging the needs of the living still around you while permitting the expression of your grief in a healthy and validating way. In this way the past is honoured,

the present celebrated, and the future anticipated positively. There is harmony and peace within your heart, and more than enough love to go around to everyone who remembers and celebrates with you. Happy Holidays!

### **Community Resources**

Depending on your locale, some support sources may not be present. A family doctor, mental health centre, hospital, social worker, counsellor, clergy or your funeral director can assist you with an appropriate referral in these cases.

C.O.P.E.S. - Community of people extending support to the bereaved. Offers spiritual direction and referral.

HOSPICE - Supports the dying person and their family, before, during and after a death.

### **Suggested Reading**

There are many books available on this topics. The following are a few that I recommend.

Carroli, D. Living with dying: A loving guide for family and close friends, McGraw Hill, 1985.

Freese, A., Living through grief and growing with it, Barnes & Noble Books.

Grollman, Earl A. Time Remembered: A Journal for Survivors. Boston: Beacon Press, 1987.

Kushner, Harold. When Bad Things Happen to Good People. New York: Schocken, 1981.

Singer, L., Sirot, M., Rodd, S. Beyond Loss: A practical guide through grief to a meaningful life, Dutton, 1988.

Temes, R., Living with an Empty Chair, Irvington, 1984.