

Coping with Grief During the Holidays

How to get through the season when you're dealing with an illness or death

By Arricca Elin SanSone

The holidays mean joy, parties and family time. But that's not always the case if your family is confronting loss. Grieving isn't just about the death of a family member, friend or beloved pet. You may also grieve if a family member has dementia, or a loved one has been diagnosed or relapsed with a serious illness. "Grief is intensely painful any time of year, but it's particularly difficult at the holidays," says Janie Feldman, PsyD, a psychologist in private practice in Warren and president of the Somerset, Hunterdon and Warren County Psychological Association. "There's a lot of pressure to be happy and do what everyone else is doing this time of year."

Although there's no magic formula to make it better, here's what might help you and your kids this holiday season:

Go with the flow. Your emotions may be all over the place—and that's completely natural. Don't be surprised by sudden surges of grief. Just when you think you've got it together, sadness can crash over you, triggered by a song, the smell of freshly-baked gingerbread cookies or even a sappy holiday commercial. Or, you may feel numb, unable to focus or like staying in your PJs all day. "The rule is there's no rule with grief," says Feldman. "Not everyone follows the same path or has the same feelings in the same order, and there's no prescribed way you 'should' feel."

Be honest with your kids. Talk about how you feel, and let them see your emotions. It's fine to cry in front of them, says Feldman. Though you may want to protect them, it's more helpful to show them it's okay to be sad. Share your own memories, and ask your child to share his or hers. For instance, you can say something like, "I miss how Grandpa always loved putting the star on top of the tree, so let's talk about all the things he loved about Christmas."

If your family is dealing with illness, you can say something such as, "It's hard when Grandma doesn't feel good or doesn't remember us, but what do you think we can still do to spend time with her?" Let your child brainstorm ideas for connecting, such as watching holiday classics together, going through old photos or listening to holiday music.

Simplify your to-do list. "Be aware that you may not have

the energy to do everything you always have because grief is exhausting," says Mary L. Robinson, executive director and founder of Imagine, a free family grief support center in Mountainside and Newark. "Think about what the holidays mean to you and your kids, and focus on those activities." For example, if you usually spend hours in the kitchen but don't feel up to it, ask someone else to take up the tradition, says Robinson. Not doing something this year doesn't mean you'll never do it again; you may feel differently next year.

Create new traditions. It's fine to embrace things your family's always done during the holidays if that feels right. But it's okay to change things up, too, says Feldman. For example, if you've always hosted New Year's Eve but don't think you can face it, go to dinner and a movie with your kids instead, or stay in and play board games. There's no right or wrong way to spend the holidays—just what works for your family.

Celebrate the life of your family member. Pay tribute to your loved one on the actual holiday. Set a seat at the table in memory. Have a moment of silence during a toast or a prayer. Dedicate a candle. Give the kids license to be creative and express themselves through a drawing, painting or memory box. Sharing anecdotes and stories of your loved one can also be a bonding moment, says Robinson. Speak up, and don't wait for anyone else to start the conversation; they may avoid talking about your loved one for fear of upsetting you.

Be kind to yourself. Make sure you and your kids get enough sleep, exercise and healthy meals. Get outside with your kids for a walk; fresh air and nature can be very healing, says Robinson. Most importantly, surround yourself with nonjudgmental people who won't expect you to be in a good mood if you don't feel like it, or who won't get upset if you change plans at the last minute. And don't guilt yourself if you and the kids do enjoy the holidays; it doesn't mean you've forgotten your loved one. Laughing and finding little moments of joy together are steps towards healing.

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