



Coping with Loss During the Holidays

The loss of a loved one is an excruciatingly painful life event. Many have likened loss to the waves of the ocean. At times our grief can feel like still waters, and at other times, a stormy sea. Often, just when we think the storm has passed, we are hit by a tidal wave. When we lose a loved one we are blind-sided with the reality that life, as we knew it, has changed and will never be quite the same. The holidays can be exceptionally painful as we face the realization that grief doesn't take a holiday. In fact, witnessing the rest of the world rejoicing may serve to heighten one's own feelings of isolation and despair. When it comes to grief and losing a loved one, all of the above experiences are normal. Each one of us is unique in our style of grieving and it can differ from one another depending on personality characteristics, as well as, cultural, religious, and ethnic backgrounds. There are several coping strategies that are useful to manage the intense emotions that often erupt during the holidays. These strategies are:

Acknowledging your loss. Attempting to ignore intense emotions requires enormous energy and is not a healthy way to heal grief. The holidays can be a special time to commemorate a loved one by lighting a special candle, visiting their grave, buying special flowers or planting a plant to represent your memories, writing a poem, or putting together a photo album or collage of photos you have been meaning to sort through. If this is your first holiday spent without your loved one, communicate openly and honestly with others how you are feeling. Also, it is okay to feel joy despite your loss. Don't feel guilty for any moments of joy you can experience.

Keeping a low profile: Remember that grief takes on energy of its own and you must stay healthy. Shopping at peak times, attending lots of gatherings, and attempting to "be happy" during the holidays may increase fatigue, sadness, and loneliness. This is an optimal time to keep gatherings to a minimum and spend quiet evenings at home. Take the time to nurture yourself. This is also an ideal time to get together with a friend who has also lost a loved one and share thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

Blending new traditions with the old: Past rituals may magnify the sense of loss. Think about what traditions you find comforting, which ones you don't, and make new traditions for your family. This is an important time to rely on others for support and delegate tasks to family members and friends

Listening to Your Inner Voice: Your instincts may tell you that today is not a good day to have your friend over for coffee, or to attend that big New Year's party. Pay attention to your inner voice, it's one of the best friends you have. Our intuition guides us and we feel this before we begin rationalizing or attempting to meet other's expectations.

Paying close attention to the children: Remember to appreciate surviving family members, especially the ones who may be experiencing their first significant loss. The death of a family member can be an opportunity to talk about the cycle of life and death. Don't exclude children from these discussions. In fact, encourage them to share their thoughts and feelings. Keep in mind that children younger than 13 grieve in more intermittent ways than adults. As a result, it makes it more possible for them to experience the excitement of the holidays. Children may be more interested in traditions and festivities than the adults. This is not a sign that they don't care about your grief, or are not still grieving themselves. Children can show it very differently than adults and still need our support and encouragement.



Eskimo Legend

Perhaps
They are not
Stars in the sky
But rather
Openings
Where our
Loved ones
Shine down to
Let us know
They are happy

More Tips on Coping With the Holidays

- ❖ Make or bake all your holiday gifts.
- ❖ Shop by catalog to avoid the holiday rush.
- ❖ Call the Salvation Army, a local church, synagogue, or a foster care agency and ask for the name of a needy family. Put together a holiday gift package or dinner basket and deliver it.
- ❖ Start a new tradition in memory of a loved one.
- ❖ Let someone do you a favor.
- ❖ Do someone a favor.
- ❖ Read about holiday traditions in other countries.
- ❖ Donate some time at a community service organization or senior center.
- ❖ Make a donation to a charity in memory of your loved one.
- ❖ Renew an old friendship.
- ❖ Find one thing each day to be thankful for.
- ❖ Take the time to admire a sunrise or sunset, and spend some time watching the stars in the evening.

Fast Facts About Grief

- ❖ Grief is experienced emotionally and physically
- ❖ Physical symptoms can consist of increased muscle tension, insomnia, nausea, fatigue, and gastrointestinal disturbances
- ❖ Good nutrition, enough rest and sleep, and adequate exercise will increase your ability to cope with grief.

About Kelly Tobey, L.C.S.W.

Kelly Tobey is a licensed clinical social worker who received her training and Master's of Social Welfare from the University of California, Los Angeles. She has provided psychotherapy for over 10 years in a variety of settings including the Valley Child Guidance Clinic in Lancaster, Ventura County Behavioral Health, and in her private practice in Simi Valley, all within California. She specializes in all forms of depression, anxiety, and grief and loss with an emphasis on mother-loss. Her practice is tailored to the unique issues that effect women, in particular, the life stages of adolescence and motherhood.

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