

Grief and the Holidays

By Stillwaters Counselor, Larry Uglow, M.S., LPC

“People just don’t seem to know what to do for me. I’m worried that I will ruin everyone else’s holiday because I’m such a downer. Last holiday season, people were very understanding of my grief, but I’m sure not going to expect the pampering I got last year this year.” Have you found yourself saying or feeling the same? If you’ve lost a loved one in recent years, my guess is that you have felt this way. I’m hoping I might lend you some ideas for coping that I’ve learned from others.

Thinking there is a simple solution or sure-fire ritual to get you through the holidays will only disappoint you. You need to realize the holiday season will have some sad times associated with it no matter what you do. Using coping mechanisms that worked before may help you take a break when the intensity or duration of your grief seems too great. Letting others know how to help is also worth a try. This may be a time when you will need to take charge to see that your needs are met. Are you expending what little energy you have trying to avoid your loss? When others fail to mention your loved one, why don’t you? This requires less energy than avoidance and may make you feel considerably better.

Here are some additional, pro-active ideas:

- Attend a grief group in your area. Others are eager to share ideas that have helped them deal with the holidays.
- Light a candle or buy an ornament to help you bring your loved one into your home for the holidays.
- Save energy – do the things that you feel are most important for you and your family.
- Buy a gift for your loved one and donate it where it will be appreciated.
- Share memories.
- Attend a religious service if you care to. Keep in mind that it would be OK to leave.
- Leave town. Some find getting away for some time helps them.
- Donate some time by volunteering where needed.
- Be silly. Start a snowball fight with the neighbor kids.

There are certainly many more ways to get through the holiday season. Try things that worked in the past and, if they don’t work now, try something different. If you find something that brings you joy, make sure to do it again. Joy seems to be one of the most difficult emotions for those who have lost a loved one. People question: “how can I enjoy myself after what has happened?” or “what will others think of me?” Just as sadness, guilt, and anger are part of one’s grief, so is joy. To move on, you must experience it. As far as what others might think of you, remember you can’t please everyone anyway, so align yourself with those who wouldn’t rob you of a moment of joy.

Remember, the holiday itself is typically only a day or two. The weeks preceding are often-times worse if for no other reason than more time is involved. You have survived other times when you thought you wouldn’t and you will survive again!