
COPING WITH GRIEF DURING THE HOLIDAYS

Thanksgiving, Christmas, Chanukah, Ramadan, Kwanza and New Year's Day are annual holidays that can be a very difficult time for people who have experienced the death of someone loved. Memories of good times and togetherness at the holiday season serve to remind us of our loss. Watching others who are feeling thankful and are celebrating when we feel overwhelmed, lonely or sad can be very painful. Holidays force us to realize how much our lives have been changed by the loss of our loved one. Particularly in the first year, many bereaved are left with having to develop new holiday rituals and traditions.

The first step in coping with grief at the holidays is to acknowledge that the first holiday season is difficult and then to prepare for it in advance by making specific plans and obtaining the support that you need. Remember too, that sometimes anticipation of a holiday can be more difficult than the day itself.

Some Tips for Coping with Grief at the Holidays

Set realistic expectations for yourself. Remind yourself that this year is different. Decide if you can still handle the responsibilities you've had in the past. Examine the tasks and events of celebrating and ask yourself if you want to continue them. Take others up on offers to cook, shop, decorate, etc. Consider shopping by phone, Internet or catalogs this year.

Surround yourself with people who love and support you. Share your plans with family and friends and let them know of any intended changes in holiday routine. Memories can sometimes be a source of comfort to the bereaved. Share your memories with others of holidays spent with your loved one by telling stories and looking at photo albums.

Try to avoid "canceling" the holiday despite the temptation. It is OK to avoid some circumstances that you don't feel ready to handle, but don't isolate yourself. Allow yourself some time for solitude, remembering and grieving, but balance it with planned activities with others.

Allow yourself to feel joy, sadness, anger – allow yourself to grieve. It is important to recognize that every family member has his/her own unique grief experience and may have different needs related to celebrating the holidays. No one way is right or wrong. Experiencing joy and laughter does not mean you have forgotten your loved one.

Draw comfort from doing for others. Consider giving a donation or gift in memory of you loved one. Invite a guest who might otherwise be alone for the holidays. Adopt a needy family during the holiday season.

Take care of yourself. Avoid using alcohol to self-medicate your mood. Try to avoid the hustle and bustle of the holiday season. Physical exercise is often an antidote for depression. Writing in a journal can be a good outlet for your grief. Buy yourself something frivolous that you always wanted but never allowed yourself to indulge in.

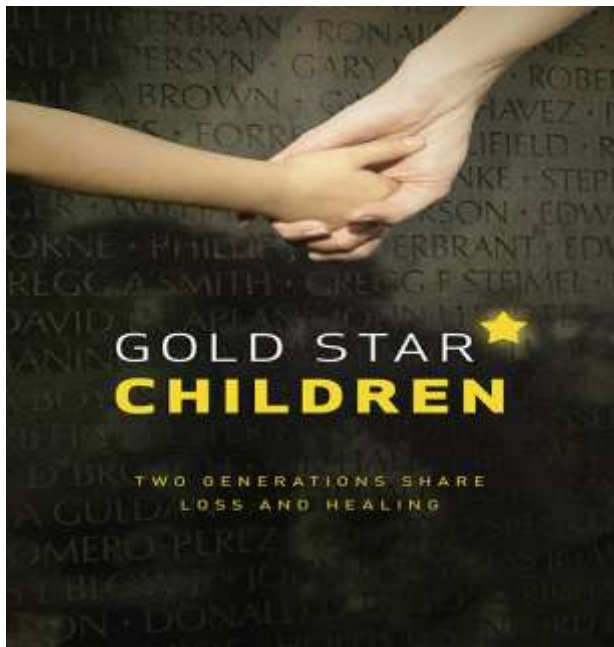
Create a new tradition or ritual that accommodates your current situation. Some people find comfort in the old traditions. Others find them unbearably painful. Discuss with your family the activities you want to include or exclude this year. Some examples of new rituals and traditions include:

- Announce beforehand that someone different will carve the turkey.
- Create a memory box. You could fill it with photos of your loved one or written memory notes from family members and friends. Young children could include their drawings in the memory box.
- Make a decorative quilt using favorite colors, symbols or images that remind you of the person who died.

- Light a candle in honor of your absent loved one.
- Put a bouquet of flowers on your holiday table in memory of your loved one.
- Visit the cemetery and decorate the memorial site with holiday decorations.
- Have a moment of silence during a holiday toast to honor your loved one.
- Place a commemorative ornament on the Christmas tree.
- Dedicate one of the Chanukah candles in memory of your loved one.
- Write a poem about your loved one and read it during a holiday ritual.
- Play your loved one's favorite music or favorite game.
- Plan a meal with your loved ones' favorite foods.



The most important thing to remember is there is no right or wrong way to celebrate the holiday season after the death of a loved one, and that the best way to cope with that first holiday season is to plan ahead, get support from others and take it easy.



Gold Star Children is a documentary feature film that takes an intimate look at American children who've lost a parent to war. The film follows the parallel journeys of two generations of grieving children; recent war orphans who've lost military parents serving in Iraq, Afghanistan, Bosnia and here at home, learn to heal alongside the now adult-child survivors of the Vietnam War. The film brings together voices of today with historical context, giving meaning and shape to how America understands those who sacrifice in service to their country and the children and families they leave behind. Please contact Sue Mullen if you would like to receive a copy (609) 562-3797.

Resources

Military One Source

(800) 342-9647

www.militaryonesource.com

Tragedy Assistance for Survivors

(800) 959-8277 (TAPS)

www.taps.org

Social Security Administration

(800) 772-1213

www.socialsecurity.gov

Department of Veterans Affairs

(800) 827-1000

www.vba.va.gov/survivors

Tri Care –North

(800) 877-2273

www.tricare.mil/mybenefit

Gold Star Mothers

(212) 265-099/ (856) 809-0790

www.goldstarmoms.com/dept/nj

Gold Star Wives

(888) 751-6350

www.goldstarwives.org

Legal Services of NJ

(888) 576-5529

www.lsnjlaw.org

National Suicide Prevention Hotline

(800) TALK 8255

www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org