

Grief and the Holidays

The holiday season is primarily a time of happiness and celebration. However, when families are mourning the death of a loved one, it can be a difficult time. Whether you lost a loved one or are helping a friend navigate the loss of someone, there is no clear path to getting through the holidays without that special person – especially if this is the first holiday season without them.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), on average, more than 2.5 million Americans die each year from a whole range of factors. This is not including the more than 370,000 Americans who have died in 2021 from COVID-19 alone. These numbers are staggering – and the losses leave millions of Americans with an empty spot at the holiday dinner table. Marybeth Evans, an OSF HealthCare licensed clinical social worker, discusses coping with the holidays after the loss of a loved one – and how to support your family and friends.

Marybeth Evans, Licensed Clinical Social Worker, OSF HealthCare

“The holidays can be especially hard to negotiate the first year around and I think family members should approach the person and ask, ‘what would you like us to do, and how do you feel we can support you?’” (:13)

The Hospice Foundation of America offers three C’s for holiday grief: Choose, Communicate, and Compromise. For those grieving someone this year, choosing what holiday traditions are important to you and how you want to spend your holiday season is a good starting point. If you have a loved one who is struggling this holiday season, find out what they would like to do. That may include wanting to participate in some holiday festivities, but perhaps not at the same full-scale level as in previous years.

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“Maybe having something like a small Christmas tree might help them, or something you can offer to acknowledge the season but not necessarily surround them at that time with the joyful celebrations that we usually have.” (:13)

The holidays can already be a stressful time for many. From the shopping and cooking to the busy schedules and everything in between, this time of year can already be hard. If you have lost a loved one, this time of year can seem daunting. Perhaps you can make it easier on your friend by offering to help them with their holiday task list or shopping if they choose to participate in those things.

Additionally, according to the American Psychological Association (APA), many people often make the mistake of deliberately not mentioning the name of the person who died, out of concern that it may upset the grieving friend. However, that is typically not the case. Evans advises friends and family of someone who is mourning a loved one to not beat around the bush; bringing up happy or funny memories can be a positive thing – and checking in on your friend sporadically throughout the season can go a long way in lifting their spirits.

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“Sometimes people who have lost somebody just want to be remembered. Give them a call to let them know you are thinking about them. There is really no magical thing to say except that you care about them and love them – that you are thinking about them on this day and hope everything is OK and ask if there is anything you can do.” (:17)

Evans also recommends giving back this holiday season. Whether you are grieving the loss of someone or are helping a friend or family member navigate a holiday season without their loved one, giving back can help boost your mood while also bringing joy to others.

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“A lot of times, people find joy in giving – so doing things like volunteering at Christmas time, delivering meals, going caroling. Do something that really brings up the spirit of someone else.” (:16)

If you are grieving the loss of a loved one this holiday season, allow yourself to do things just for you. Each person grieves in their own way, and it is important to do things you find meaningful and beneficial to you.

For those who may find they need extra support this holiday season, [OSF SilverCloud](#) is a secure, anonymous and interactive online platform to help manage the feelings and causes of depression, anxiety, or stress.