

When coping with loss, know your limits

During the holidays, societal norms expect us to be sociable and cheerful. But it can be difficult for people dealing with the loss of a loved one. A normal shopping trip may turn blue when you hear the song you used to dance to. Or the Christmas tradition of baking cookies just seems empty without your friend there.

There's no "one size fits all" approach to coping with loss during this time of year, says Rita Manning, a pastoral care professional and bereavement coordinator for [OSF Hospice](#). But among the long list of coping suggestions, one may help the most: know your physical and mental limits in holiday social situations and set expectations accordingly.

"People need to know it's OK if they leave for a moment to see if they can get themselves collected," Manning says. "If not, say 'I'm going to bid my farewells and go home.'"

For some, that may mean you won't be the life of the party this holiday season. You're balancing a desire to be present but also take care of yourself. Set that expectation for you and the people around you.

A useful script from Manning, for example, when someone invites you to lunch: "I'm not up to that today, but please don't stop calling and checking in on me."

Other ways to help manage loss for yourself and others around the holidays:

- Give yourself permission to grieve. Manning says we live in a "get over it" society, but it's never that easy.

"Death does not kill the love you have for the departed person," Manning says. "That's the struggle, the process we're in. Learning to live with this loss. That doesn't happen overnight."

That grace should come from the grieving person's friends and family, too. Manning says if someone says, "I don't think I can make it through Christmas without her!" or tells a story of the departed loved one for the 10th time, don't roll your eyes or tell them to change the subject. Instead, listen and support them.

- Don't be afraid to bring up the lost loved one.

"If we don't talk about it, it's like the elephant in the room," Manning says. "Often, grieving people like to hear stories and memories. It helps to know you had that relationship and you're missing them too."

- Watch out for this cliché phrase: "How are you doing?"

Manning says the bereaved person often just says "Fine" instead of pouring out the real answer.

Instead, try this: "How is your day treating you?"

- Manning says it's not unheard of to be firm in your support. For example, tell the person, "I'm bringing you dinner tonight." or "I'm shoveling your driveway."

"The bereaved are going to be in a fog for a while and not know exactly what they need," Manning points out.

- Adult children should avoid telling a surviving parent to stay busy all the time and not think about the lost loved one.

"Balance their time," instead, Manning says. "Find time to have those moments of grief but also time to be busy."

If your grief reaches a crisis (for example, you have specific plans for self-harm), seek help right away. Talk to a trusted friend or family member, call the [9-8-8 National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) or call your primary care provider. Your provider can link you with grief counseling resources and diagnose any physical ailments that may be contributing to the situation.

Loved ones should keep an eye on the grieving person for signs of a bigger issue. Someone may start eating or sleeping too much or too little. Also, watch for changes in their appearance. If someone is known for festive holiday outfits and suddenly is in sweatpants and a T-shirt every day, it's time for a talk.