

## Coping with Grief during the Holidays

*All things happen for a reason, and if you just wade through the darkness, you will find a better day ahead. jcv*

Halloween barely passes before stores stock their shelves with holiday decorations. Christmas carols echo through shopping malls, and the first of the holiday commercials hits the airwaves. If you've lost a loved one, these can be stark reminders that the holidays won't be the same.

Whether your loved one died recently or decades ago, the holidays bring forth powerful memories that may trigger your grief. If the person died on or near a holiday, the two events are forever linked and may be particularly painful, especially if you have unresolved feelings about the lost relationship.

When trying to cope with grief, it's important to understand that grief is cumulative. We don't experience a loss, move through predetermined emotional stages, then emerge on the other side. Steve Moeller, director of community services and grief recovery outreach program at Floral Haven Funeral Home and Memorial Gardens in Broken Arrow, Okla., says grief is more like adding rocks into a backpack. Each loss, be it a death, divorce or a move away from family and friends, is packed in like another rock; some bigger than others. When grief is unresolved, one of these emotional rocks may come tumbling out of the backpack when we least expect it. And it may come out inappropriately, in the form of road rage, substance abuse or lashing out verbally or physically.

This holiday season, if the first Christmas card you open or the first "Happy Hanukkah!" you hear rips a rock from your backpack, use that opportunity to work through your feelings. Don't just shove it back in the pack. Here are some tips to help you cope.

### **DO:**

- Expect to have some pain. When the feelings come, let them.
- Accept a few invitations to be with close family or friends. Choose the ones that sound most appealing at the time and avoid the ones that feel more like obligation.
- Talk about your feelings. Let people know if you're having a tough day.
- Incorporate your loved one into the holidays:
- Share your favorite stories over dinner.
- Make a toast or light a candle in remembrance.

- Make a donation in his or her name.
- Help others:
  - Take a meal to a homebound couple.
  - Volunteer in a shelter or soup kitchen.
  - "Adopt" a family to buy presents or food for.
- Modify or make new traditions if it feels right. Just remember to include others who are grieving, especially children, in the decision.
- If the idea of holiday shopping overwhelms you, buy gifts online or through catalogs.
- Replace negative thoughts with positive ones. The National Funeral Directors Association suggests affirmations such as, "In spite of loss, I will try to enjoy this season."
- Prepare yourself for January. Sometimes the aftermath of the holidays can bring more sadness than the holidays themselves.

#### **DON'T:**

- Don't hide your feelings from children in an effort to be strong for them or protect them. You'll only be teaching them to deny their own feelings.
- Don't isolate yourself. Although you may not feel much like celebrating, accept a few invitations.
- Don't accept every invitation or throw yourself into work in an effort to keep busy. It may only add more stress.
- Don't expect to go through defined stages of grief. "Every person is different and every relationship is unique," says Moeller.
- Don't act as if your loved one never lived.
- Don't be afraid to cry. "Crying is like the valve on a pressure cooker. It lets the steam out," says Moeller.

#### **If someone you know is grieving:**

- Encourage him or her to talk about their feelings. Listen to them. According to Moeller, 98 percent of people who have recently lost someone want to talk about the person who died.
- Let them cry.
- Don't pretend their loved one didn't die - it's okay to say the deceased's name.
- Don't say things like:
  - "At least he's not suffering anymore"
  - "She's in a better place."
  - "I know you'll miss him."
  - "I know how you feel."