

GRIEF AND THE HOLIDAYS

A MINI COURSE DESIGNED TO HELP THOSE WHO ARE GRIEVING TO HAVE A MEANINGFUL HOLIDAY EXPERIENCE AND COPE WITH THE CHALLENGES OF GRIEF

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The information I used to present this material is from the book *How to Go On Living When Someone You Love Dies*, by Therese A. Rando, Ph.D. and the website and resources by Eleanor Haley and Litza Williams at <https://whatsyourgrief.com/>.



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INTRODUCTION: GRIEF AND THE HOLIDAYS

The holiday season is a time that can be filled with joy and love, where families and friends spend time together and remember each other during the celebrations. Holidays can also be very stressful and overwhelming for many; this is especially true for those who are grieving.

Bereaved individuals will often worry about the upcoming holidays and if they can cope with everything. After all, many people who are grieving are struggling to just manage the normal life stressors. This is especially difficult for those who have recently experienced a loss. It's good to keep in mind that *the anticipation of feeling pain from your loss is worse than what you will experience on the holiday itself.*

There are many things that will likely trigger your grief during the holidays. Some examples are foods, songs, decorations, and other things that will remind you of your loved one. Realizing this is normal and being compassionate with yourself will help when you experience unexpected grief triggers.

A few points to keep in mind, first, what you decide to do this year can be changed for other holidays in the future. Second, it is normal to struggle with grief during the holiday season, be compassionate with yourself when you are having a hard time. Third, because the holiday season can be stressful, those who are grieving will likely be more stressed and tired because of the toll grief is having on their bodies and minds. Self-care is especially important during the holiday season.

The holidays can be bittersweet, as you spend time with loved ones who are present and remember those who have passed away. You don't need to feel guilty if you are enjoying yourself while grieving.

The following information will help you to have more control of your holiday experience, manage grief triggers that arise, decide what you value most about the holidays, and make a plan for what you want your holidays to be like this year.

This is written for those who have lost a loved one through death, but many of the concepts can apply when other types of loss have occurred.



PART 1: HOLIDAYS PAST

Although it may be painful to look at holidays from the past, it will help you to heal as you examine what you have lost with the passing of your loved one. This reflection will also help you identify what you value and enable you to make changes in holiday traditions if desired.

An example to help illustrate the need for looking at what you lost is a natural disaster. It is important to repair damage, but you can't do this without taking inventory of what has been damaged. This is true with grief as well. Many people feel that they should be strong and try to move on, but there are healing benefits in considering what has been lost, and one place to do this is with your feelings and memories of holidays with your loved one.

Here are some questions to ask yourself as you reflect on holidays past:

1. When will I miss my loved one the most?

2. Do I worry about getting emotional during the holidays? What event am I most concerned about?

3. What traditions do I need or want to change?

4. What is my biggest fear about the holiday season?



PART 2: HOLIDAYS PRESENT

Part 2 is about dealing with the daily struggles leading up to the holidays. Holiday traditions and rituals help to bind families and friends together. When you have lost your loved one, many of the reminders of the traditions and rituals can suddenly remind you of your loss. These grief triggers can come upon you unexpectedly, other times the grief triggers may be anticipated. These holiday reminders can also be a time for sweet remembrances, you may have some mixed bittersweet feelings.

After our son passed away, one of the more difficult times for me was when we were decorating our Christmas tree. We have several ornaments that our son had made over the years. Also, the mortuary sent us a special gift that year, it was a glass angel ornament with our son's name on it. I remember feeling some overwhelming feelings of grief as we were decorating the tree. Over time, these feelings have softened, and I still miss my son when decorating the tree, but now I cherish the memories and feel closer to him.

One strategy for coping with grief is to plan for the triggers that remind you of your loved one that you expect to encounter. It is very possible you will have grief triggers that are unexpected, you can prepare for how you will cope with these unexpected moments as well. For example, maybe you would want to carry some sunglasses in your bag in case you start to cry while shopping.

When you feel waves of grief, it is helpful to remember that they will subside when you let yourself feel them. Trying to stuff feelings inside will just suppress them and come out later. Doing things to calm your body such as taking some deep breaths can be helpful.

Here are some questions to help you decide how to cope with your unique grief triggers:

1. What grief triggers do you expect to encounter? What can you do to prepare for this trigger? Write down the trigger and the plan next to it in the spaces below.

- a. Trigger and plan:

- b. Trigger and plan:



c. Trigger and plan:

d. Trigger and plan:

e. Trigger and plan:

2. What resources or people can you turn to for help with managing your triggers?

3. What strategies can you use when you find yourself unexpectedly overwhelmed with feelings of grief? Will it bother you if others see that you are emotional? Would you like to have an exit strategy in place?

4. Our bodies experience an overload of stress while grieving. There are symptoms that you will have that are from this stress. Practicing self-care is very important during the holidays, which are stressful for most people without grief. What self-care practices would you like to incorporate during the holiday season?



PART 3: HOLIDAYS FUTURE

This section is for planning how you want to celebrate the day of the holiday as well as any traditions or rituals you would like to do preceding or following the holidays. The plan you make this year can be changed in upcoming years.

Also, I advise people to have a Plan A, which is what you would like to do, plus a Plan B, which is a simpler plan in case you don't feel you can handle Plan A. Maybe you would even want to have a Plan C in case Plan B is too overwhelming. It's important to exercise self-compassion when you decide your plan is too much and switch to another plan. Some people may find that celebrating any of the holidays is too difficult the first year after a loss. Again, remember to be compassionate with yourself. Talking to your family and friends about how you feel about the holidays is also important. Maybe others can take care of some of the things you are struggling with.

Here are some questions to help you decide what your holiday plan will look like:

1. What are your holiday values? What is really the most important and meaningful things for you to do? Are my past traditions reflecting what I value? (If you look at your answers in Part 1, you may find some helpful insights regarding what you value most):

2. Are there children that you should think about when you are making holiday plans? It can be helpful to focus on the children when you are planning and help them to know that it is okay to enjoy the holidays without their loved one:

3. Would you like to incorporate some traditions that will honor your deceased loved one? Here are some ideas that you may want to try or adapt:



- a) *Serve a favorite dish or dessert of your loved one each year at a holiday meal*
 - b) *Serve your loved one's favorite breakfast foods on the morning of the holiday with immediate family for a more intimate way to remember your loved one*
 - c) *Use a cookie recipe from your loved one when you make holiday cookies*
 - d) *Sing or play holiday music that was one of your loved one's favorites*
 - e) *Create a memory tablecloth where your dinner guests can write memories they have of your loved one*
 - f) *In the evening of a holiday, you could have a candle ceremony where all participants are given an unlit candle. The first person lights their candle and shares a memory of the person who has passed away, then they light the next person's candle who then shares a memory, and so on around the room. After all the candles are lit, you could sing a song or say a prayer*
 - g) *Each year you can make a charitable contribution in your loved one's honor, or spend time in charitable service*
 - h) *Go somewhere where you feel close to your loved one, if you set aside a date and time (such as morning, evening, etc.) it will help this to become a tradition*
 - i) *Share a holiday story about your loved one or a holiday when they were alive, this could be a bedtime story for children, a story to be told before a meal or other ways*
 - j) *Add an extra plate to your table during holiday meals to symbolize the presence of your loved one*
 - k) *Create a memory box to have family and friends write their memories and add to the box. This could be adapted with a holiday stocking, tree, or other sort of holiday symbol for whatever holiday you are celebrating*
 - l) *One thing that can be especially difficult with grief is feelings such as regret and guilt. You can build a fire and list your regrets on pieces of paper and burn them, this will symbolize a fresh start and a way to let go of regrets and other negative feelings*
4. What traditions or rituals would you want to try to remind you of your loved one?



HOLIDAY PLAN:

Compile and refine your answers from above to create a holiday plan.

MY HOLIDAY VALUES:

TRADITION OR EVENT:

Plan A:

Plan B:

TRADITION OR EVENT:

Plan A:

Plan B:

TRADITION OR EVENT:

Plan A:

Plan B:

TRADITION OR EVENT:

Plan A:

Plan B:

RESOURCES

Haley, E. & Williams, L. (n.d.). Holidays and special days. Retrieved from:
<https://whatsyourgrief.com/holidays-and-special-days/>

Rando, T. A. (1991). *How to go on living when someone you love dies*. New York, NY: Bantam Books

