



Happy
Holidays!

Coping with Holidays and Special Days



Holidays and celebration days, like Christmas, New Year, birthdays, reunions, special events or anniversaries, can be very difficult to face if you're going through times of big change, loss and grief. Such days can remind you of how *much* things have changed and of the people or things you're missing. The memories can be both wonderful...and painful.



Meanwhile, around you, other people can seem so happy and light hearted. It's easy to feel expected to join in and to get into the spirit of things when you just don't want to. You may even feel that others are ignoring you and disregarding your personal circumstances and pain, while they have a good time. You may feel isolated and lonely. You may feel washed over by emotions that won't let up or you may feel numb and without any emotion at all. It can be a very unpredictable time and everyone's reactions are so different.



Because you can expect holiday and celebration times might trigger thoughts, memories and feelings that you may find difficult to deal with, it's a good idea to think about how to help yourself, and your family, to get through these times as well as possible.



Here are some ideas suggested by people who have found ways to manage their grief through holidays and special times.



GRIEF HAS NO RULES

There are no rules about how humans react to loss. There's no set road map, and different thoughts and feelings can come and go without warning at both predictable and unpredictable times. Choose to be flexible and patient with yourself, and with others who may also be grieving around you.



ANTICIPATION

It's common to want to avoid thinking about upcoming holidays or special events. But planning ahead can make a positive difference to how things turn out.



- Some people say that anticipating holidays is far worse than the holidays themselves! In fact most find that the holidays turn out far better than they thought they would.
- Find a trusted friend, family member or counsellor to work through any concerns you have about the up-coming days – talking about it can help.
- Before the holidays plan and make time to do some things that you really enjoy, or that relax you. Scale back on activities and things that might increase your stress load.
- Many find that making ambitious plans at holiday time makes everything much harder. Keeping plans simple may help.



MAKE YOUR OWN CHOICES AHEAD OF TIME

- Decide ahead of time what you'd like to be involved in, or what you'd prefer to not be a part of. Take some time to think it through. You may wish to let people know you'll just choose what you'll do, or not, on the actual day. Ask them to be flexible for you, if they can be.
- Consult with your family members about how they think things could be organised. Often others' suggestions can be helpful.
- Choose if you want to keep up traditions or perhaps do something new and different to celebrate special days. Perhaps do something different this year and then follow more traditional holiday traditions another year, when things feel more settled in your life.
- Decide who you'd like to have with you at events you do choose to be a part of.
- Choose if there may be times you want to be on your own, rather than with others. Maybe know who you can phone or visit with on the day, if you feel you do want some company.

KEEP IN TOUCH

When you make choices, it's important to keep in touch with family or friends who may be affected by your plans. This allows you to be honest about where you're at and what you need, and about why you have made the choices you have at this time. Staying in touch will help avoid confusion. Confusion can just cause more stress – which you don't need.

COMPROMISE

Because everyone is different, it's likely that families and friends may have differing views about how things should be done for holidays and special times. This can lead to tensions at times. Try to respect each other's needs by agreeing to find ways to compromise. Give and take is important in healthy relationships. What are you happy to compromise on? What things are so important to you that you don't want to compromise on them?

REMEMBER IN YOUR OWN WAY

Choose to find a way to mark your change or loss that suits you. This may be helpful because it acknowledges how things are for you, and can also feel a positive action to take.

For example...

- light a candle
- visit a special place
- look through photo albums, view video clips, or look at books or boxes of memories
- plant a tree
- have a small ceremony or prayer
- play special music
- have a holiday toast or share a special meal
- release balloons
- make time to share stories and memories with those close to you.

These actions or rituals can be done on your own, or with others – whatever works best for you and your family or friends.

ENJOYING YOURSELF IS OKAY

Some people worry that enjoying the holidays is somehow disrespectful, or makes them look like they've stopped caring about what's happened. In fact, pushing all joy from your life isn't a positive step. Rather, taking opportunities to celebrate life is what people who care about you would want for you.

Grief is a mixture of so many different feelings and thoughts and reactions. Feeling good in the middle of it all is as much a part of the grief experience as anything else.

IT'S OKAY TO SAY NO

- You don't need to do things that you feel might make you uncomfortable just because you think they are expected of you. Give yourself permission to say "No", or perhaps to walk out of a room, or to leave early from something, when you need to.
- If you get social invitations you don't want to accept, it's okay to decline. Just thank them for the invitation and say something like "Let's try to get together at another time." Most people will understand.
- Try not to allow yourself to be isolated from others for a long time. Some have found that if they do, it then becomes more difficult to fit back into the community circles they were part of. Some people say making the effort, even when they dreaded being with others, actually paid off - and they had a better time than they expected to.

ACCEPT AND ASK FOR SUPPORT

- Contact others when you feel you need company, distraction or support.
- Often those who care about you are grateful to have some way of offering the kind of support you need. They appreciate being asked to help in ways they know you will value e.g. providing transport or company for an event.
- If you don't have friends or family close by, there are many different community agencies committed to supporting people through tough times. Contact them. The front of your phone book or your local Citizen's Advice Bureau can give you contacts.
- Don't hesitate to ask for professional help if you feel overwhelmed or paralysed by your emotions, or if you're having extreme reactions that are frightening you. Contact your GP or practice nurse, a counsellor, your local mental health team, a local family support agency or perhaps a telephone help line, such as Lifeline, Samaritans or Youthline.

BE UNDERSTANDING OF OTHERS

How people react to loss and change is a *very* individual process. Remembering this might help you to better understand others who are grieving around you, and their reactions. Especially if they are very different from your own! Many say that even when they're facing tough times, something positive can happen when they can offer others a bit of help and support. Some of our other Skylight information sheets can help you think about how to help different people through tough times. See www.skylight.org.nz or phone **0800 299 100**.

Sometimes people are well intentioned but they can still say or do dumb things. If you understand that this may happen, maybe you'll be more able to deal with it calmly if it ever does. You could even have some things ready to say, like: *I'd rather not talk about it right now thanks* or *It's a very personal thing for me and I need to deal with it in my own way.*

MAKE ROOM FOR EMOTION

- Give yourself time to express emotions as you need to - bottling them up takes huge energy and may make things worse, especially in the long run. Find out how you best express or release your feelings – it can make a huge difference. Better out than in, as they say. For example, by walking or getting active, writing, talking with someone you trust, getting creative, doing something productive, deep breathing... Everyone has their own way and their own style. If you're not sure, try different things and see what helps. (*See Skylight's information sheet – Express Yourself.*)
- Tears are positive. They can make you feel better. Just let them flow when they need to. If you can't cry, that's okay too. Tears can be unpredictable. They can arrive at inconvenient times.

ACCEPT HOW YOU FEEL

- It's normal to have many mixed emotions during the grief process and especially in the holidays or celebration days. Some people find they can feel completely numb and without emotion sometimes – which can be confusing. Accept how you feel. Expect it to be very changeable. Don't try to live up to others expectations of how you "should" feel. Just be yourself. Grief is a process, remember. Go with it. If you ever have very dark, intense thoughts and feelings that are too overwhelming to cope with, ask for help and support. Keep asking till you get the support you need. This intense season of grief *will* ease up, but by bit. You won't always feel this way. Just take a day, or even just an hour, at a time.

LOOK AFTER YOURSELF WELL

- What does looking after yourself mean for you? This is a time to make sure you care for yourself - eat sensibly, drink water, get some exercise, get enough sleep and rest, spend time with supportive people...
- Get out into nature, if you can. It has a unique way of calming us and relaxing us. Many people find it a good place to think - or to blank out and have a 'thinking holiday' for a short while.
- Avoid using alcohol or drugs, or over eating, over spending, gambling or other kinds of risk taking to cope with your difficult emotions. Find some other ways to release feelings. This intense season *will* pass.
- Consider exploring any faith beliefs you may have. Many find these can be reassuring and encouraging.

Holidays and special times do certainly present unique challenges for those travelling through tough times, but by taking time to think and plan, and by tuning into your needs, you'll be able to get through these times okay. You may even find some positive experiences for both yourself, and your family and friends. Go well.