

Coping with Grief During the Holidays

You are not alone.



Family of Four Parishes

**Old St. Mary, Our Lady of Divine Providence,
SS Peter & Paul, and Three Holy Women Parishes**

The image of the labyrinth is a wonderful metaphor for the journey through grief. A labyrinth is not a maze as there are no dead ends and no wrong turnings. There is only one way — forward. So it is with grief. The only way through is forward, with many turns and going back and forth over what seems like the same territory. We journey to the center of our grief, to the center of ourselves, and then slowly return to the re-enter the world.



Each person’s experience on the journey of grief will be different. This is a reflection of our personal style, our relationship with the person who died, our internal and social resources, and our past history of coping. As you journey through your own grief process, there will likely be unexpected turns and insights.

GRIEF: SPECIAL DAYS AND HOLIDAYS

After someone dies, you may find that your grief surfaces again and again. Often this seems to happen ‘out of the blue’ and it may feel like an unwelcome intrusion. You may have been enjoying yourself one moment and then be in tears the next. You may also notice that certain days, holidays or public events are more likely than others to cause your grief to increase or return.

If feelings of grief return or increase - perhaps even years later - you may feel surprised or concerned. It may help to know that the experience of heightened feelings at particular times is a common and normal aspect of the grieving process.

It’s also possible that your grief will seem strangely missing on one or more of these occasions. You may wonder why you aren’t feeling something and become concerned that this is not normal. At these times, the absence of your grief may leave you feeling guilty, confused or distress.

If your feelings on a special day aren’t what you (or other people) expected, don’t be alarmed. Grief has a timing of its own, sometimes appearing - or disappearing - when we least expect it. This flow of feelings is very natural and is a sign of healthy coping.

Some of these ‘special’ days are personal or family events, such as birthdays, anniversaries, graduations, reunions or funerals. Other special days may include public holidays or celebrations, such as Christmas, Mother’s Day, Father’s Day or Valentine’s Day. In addition, there may be other public events, such as a celebrity’s funeral or a tragic accident, that tap into your own grief.

Notes: _____

Here are some of the feelings you may notice on special days:

- **Confusion**
- **Sadness**
- **Longing**
- **Irritability**
- **Worry**
- **Frustration**

For a period of time you may also experience:

- **Loss of appetite**
- **Difficulty sleeping**
- **Upset stomach**
- **Repeating thoughts or memories**
- **Frequent sighing or need to catch your breath**
- **Disinterest in usual activities**

When we are grieving, it is natural to deeply feel the absence of the person who has died. At special times during the year, this felt absence is often intensified. Remember there is no “right” or “wrong” when it comes to mourning - there is only what works for you, and figuring this out takes practice.

Personal and Family Events

- **Weddings, funerals, christenings**
- **Religious and cultural holidays**
- **Reunions, graduations**
- **Birthdays, wedding anniversaries**
- **Other anniversaries**

You may find yourself especially lonely on special occasions when the person who died would have accompanied you. You may feel at a loss when considering invitations to other people’s celebrations or get-togethers. Whether or not you choose to attend, consider reaching out to a supportive friend or family member who will respect your choices and be there for you.

There may be special days when you most miss the person who has died because he or she was the only other person who shared or celebrated an event with you (such as a first date or a shared trip). The anniversary of the person’s death is also likely to be a significant day for you. Although these days can be trying you may find them easier if **you make plans ahead of time**. How might you spend the day? Are there people you would like to ask to spend time with you? Is there a particular place you’d like to be — or avoid?

Symbolic gestures allow us to acknowledge how loved one remain a part of our lives even in their absence. They can enrich our celebrations with those who live and survive with us.

TIPS for Coping with Personal and Family Events

- Make plans that can be changed
- Tell friends and family what you need, and ask for their support.
- Include the person in your thoughts, prayers and meditation
- Celebrate a special day by taking time to do something in memory of the person who died.
- Remind yourself that it's okay to laugh as well as to cry.
- Look for ways to honor the person who died. Light a special candle; make a memorial planting in a garden: create a memorial space or scrapbook with photos and mementos; sponsor a memorial award or scholarship; make a donation to a meaningful charity.



Public Holidays and Celebrations

- **Easter, Thanksgiving, Halloween**
- **Mother's Day, Father's Day, Valentine's Day**
- **Christmas and the winter holiday season**

Whether you are in the midst of celebrating your own traditions with family and friends or surrounded by the festivities of others, your grief may reappear as you are reminded of the person and how deeply the loss of that relationship has impacted you. This may be true for you even if the relationship was difficult or troublesome.

If ever there was a time to treat yourself like a cherished friend, this is it. You may need to lower your own **expectations** as well as talk to others about what you need. If you cry, let that be okay. Allow yourself to experience any sadness that may come. Make room for your feelings, whatever they may be.

TIPS for Coping with Special Days and Holidays

- Ask friend and family to support you in making plans that you can change according to your needs. You may need to accept or decline invitations on a 'last minute' basis.
- Continue traditions that you enjoy and leave out those you don't.
- If you have a faith community, use rituals that support you in your grief.
- Give yourself (or someone else) flowers or another treat.
- Talk with other bereaved people. Or with friends and family members who've experienced losses to find out how they get through these special days and holidays.

Christmas and the Winter Holiday Season

For many people December is the most difficult time of the year. Memories of past celebrations with family members or friends who are no longer here can magnify feelings of loss, and you may want to avoid reminders of celebration and togetherness. As the holidays approach, it can be helpful to share your concerns, feelings and apprehensions with someone. Let people know what is difficult for you, and accept help from others.

TIPS for Coping with the Holiday Season

- Think about how you will respond to others when they offer holiday good wishes. You can simply say “Thank you” or “Best wishes to you.”
- Consider cutting back on your holiday traditions by not sending cards, or by enlisting the help of other people with meals and decorating.
- If you find Christmas shopping upsetting, it can help to shop early, to shop by the internet, to take along an understanding friend. Family may be willing to shop for you if they realize how difficult this is for you. You may also decide to go “shopless” this year and make a charitable donation in the name of the person who has died.
- Consider alternatives such as developing new traditions, going away, eating at restaurants or buying gift cards.
- Create a special decoration and give it a place of honor. Remember that you can always do things differently new year.

The New Year

Whether you are facing the start of a new calendar year or the beginning of your second year of bereavement, the “New Year” may bring unexpected feelings. You might have been looking forward, anticipating the relief, ‘healing’ and improved well being you were going to feel at having made it through the difficult times. Sometimes the New Year doesn’t live up to expectations, and you may find yourself feeling anxious, apprehensive or let down.

Remind yourself that grief does not suddenly disappear. It is a journey with its own timeline. It takes time and energy, and it can be hard to see just where you are at times. You may wonder if you are getting anywhere at all. Try to let go of any expectations that you or anyone else has, and instead trust in yourself and the process. Let yourself be supported by people who allow you to be who and where you are.

Notes: _____

TIPS for the New Year

- Review the past year - the ups, downs, accomplishments, challenges and 'gifts'. Consider new approaches if old ones aren't working.
- Don't compare your grief to that of others. Treat **yourself** with **patience** and **kindness**.
- Purchase a gift for yourself that your loved one might have bought for you.
- If you feel that friends and family are now less willing or able to support you, consider joining a bereavement support group.
- Give yourself permission to **not** be your 'usual self' or to take 'time off'. Allow yourself to do things differently - or not at all. Acknowledge that you are doing the best you can.
- Allow a **place in your life** for **your grief**. Amidst the activities and demands of everyday life, plan restorative time alone or with the support of others.

Grieving Families

Special occasions can be particularly stressful for grieving family members. Although your family members may be grieving the same person's death, each of you had a unique relationship with the person who died and so your experiences of grief may be quite different. In addition, everyone grieves in their own way and at their own pace. Some people openly share and express grief while others do not.

Differences may also be seen in how people cope with special days and holidays. When coming together for special days and holidays. It may help to be flexible and work toward compromise. Consider meeting with your family members prior to special days and holidays so that you can prepare and strategize ahead of time. Good communication and patience will help to reduce family tensions.

TIPS for Talking with Family Members

- Make room for differences. Talk honestly about needs and wishes
- Acknowledge difficulties. Discuss how you want to handle the changes to family duties, routines and roles.
- Adjust your expectations. Family members may not be able to support one another as they have in the past.
- Try to find a balance between who and what is missing, and what remains.
- When planning family gatherings, explore whether or now to include memories of the person who has died.

Children and youth

May also experience changes in their grief during special days and holidays - but your child may not have difficulty with the same days that you do and may not share your reaction or feelings. Ask about his or her thoughts and feelings. Find out what is most important and remember to include your child when making any plans.

TIPS for Talking with Children and Youth—Questions to ask

- What part of this day/event is most important to you?
- What about this day/event do you think might be hard for you?
- How would you like to remember the person who died on this occasion?
- Is there any part of this day that you don't want to participate in?

Understand that this may be time of heightened emotions and low energy for you and your family. Aim to be **kind** and **patient with yourself** and **each other**. Remind yourself that these special days will be different now, and that your family is just beginning to learn how to cope with those differences.

Caring for Yourself

Holidays are usually times filled with memories, and you may feel especially tender and vulnerable. Consider making time for yourself and your memories as a part of new holiday traditions. Caring for yourself can be another way of **honoring the person** who dies.

Many times, the more we need to take care of ourselves, the less we do it. You may notice that you have been ignoring your own health or don't care very much about yourself; or you may believe that you don't deserve self-care. If you have a physical problem brought on by stress or an emotional reaction, try to pay attention to it.

Grief at any time is tiring and challenging. When special days and holidays approach, you may need to pay more attention to yourself and ask, "What do I most need now?"

Notes: _____

TIPS from Other Bereaved People

- Exercise, Stretch, Breath deeply.
- Rest, Slow down or stop. Grieving requires a lot of energy.
- Balance time alone and time with others.
- Eat foods and drink fluids that are healthy.
- Trust yourself. Be guided by your own instincts.
- Spend time in nature or take a walk around the block.
- Connect with a new or old friend for lunch, a movie or a walk.
- Simplify daily life and responsibilities whenever and wherever you can.
- See your doctor for a complete physical and be sure to let him or her know that someone important to you had died.
- Be gentle, patient and tolerant with yourself. Take it one step at a time.

Expect your feelings to change, perhaps without much warning. There may be times when you feel sad, angry or frustrated. You may feel loneliness or longing for the person who has died. At other times, you may experience joy and laughter or enjoy yourself for a few moments– and then feel guilty. Remind yourself that this is part of the healing process. Try to make room for your feelings, whatever they may be.

Serenity Prayer

**God, grant me the Serenity
To accept the things I cannot change.
Courage to change the things I can,
And Wisdom to know the difference.**

**Living one day at a time,
Enjoying one moment at a time,
Accepting hardship as the pathway to peace.
Taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is,
Not as I would have it.
Trusting that He will make all things right
if I surrender to His will.
That I may be reasonably happy in this life,
And supremely happy with Him forever in the next.**

Amen.

LEANING ON THE HEART OF GOD

Joyce Rupp

**I am leaning on the heart of God. I am resting
there in silence. All the turmoil that exhausts me
is brought to bear on this great love. No re-
sistance or complaint is heard as I lean upon
God's welcome. There is a gladness for my
coming. There is comfort for my pain.**

**I lean, and lean, and lean upon this heart that
hurts with me. Strength lifts the weight of my
distress. Courage wraps around my troubles.
No miracle of instant recovery. No taking away
of life's burdens. Yet there is a solace for my
soul, and refuge for my exiled tears.**

**It is enough for me to know the heart of God is
with me, full of mercy and compassion, tending
to the wounds I bear.**

Amen

Healing Thoughts

The Holidays are here and for those who are experiencing grieving during the holidays for the first time, this will be a new experience for you.

Anyone who has experienced the death of a special person has “special days” that are harder to live through than others. Some of these days would be meaningless to someone else, but special to you and your family.

I want to share information that I hope will be helpful and give each of us a new perspective on how to prepare ourselves and our families to experience this festive time of the year under new conditions.

1. Yes, your loved one died, but your love for him or her continues to live on. What can you or your family do to continue to make the loved one a part of your holiday? If the family can discuss this option and decided to do something special in memory of the person who died, it can be very comforting. Perhaps including a certain food item into the meal may help all to remember the person in a special way, especially if it is something non-traditional.
2. Can you even think of having fun, smiling or laughing without felling guilty? Think back on the fun times you shared together. A smile and tear may come, but a sense of gratitude will come along with it.
3. Something that is mentioned often is getting back to normal. What is the new normal? The old normal will not be able to be recreated, but the new normal may have its advantage. I am sure that if people are honest with themselves that they can

admit some of the things in the old normal are worth letting go of.

4. It takes a lot of energy to be on the grief journey. A lot of time is spent wondering how you are going to get through the holidays. Maybe spending time recreating the old holidays and doing things you always wanted to do will give you energy to try something new and enjoy it more.
5. Whatever you decide to do, remember there are no “shoulds” in grieving. Do whatever feels right. Include family and friends in on the planning and remain open to changing your plans as you go along.

I do not claim to have all the answers; but, hopefully some of these suggestions will be helpful in planning for the days ahead. My Christmas and New Year wish for each of you and your families is holiday blessings filled with peacefulness and gratitude for all that has been and is yet to come.



**Grief is like a snowflake,
because we all grieve in our own
unique way.**

Healing A Grieving Heart

It's important to remember to reach out to others as you journey through grief, but do not feel obligated to accept the unhelpful responses you may receive from some people. You are the one who is grieving, and as such, you have certain "rights" no one should try to take away from you. The following list is intended both to empower you to heal and to decide how others can and cannot help. This is not to discourage you from reaching out to others for help, but rather to assist you in distinguishing useful responses from hurtful ones.

1. **You have the right to experience your own unique grief.** No one else will grieve in exactly the same way you do. So, when you turn to others for help, don't allow them to tell you what you should or should not be feeling.
2. **You have the right to talk about your grief.** Talking about your grief will help you heal. Seek out others who will allow you to talk as much as you want, as often as you want, about your grief. If at times you don't feel like talking, you also have the right to be silent.
3. **You have the right to feel a multitude of emotions.** Confusion, numbness, disorientation, fear, guilt, and relief are just a few of the emotions you might feel as part of your grief journey. Others may try to tell you that feeling angry for example, is wrong. Don't take these judgmental responses to heart. Instead, find listeners who will accept your feelings without condition.
4. **You have the right to be tolerant of your physical and emotional limits.** Your feelings of loss and sadness will probably leave you feeling fatigued. Respect what your body and mind are telling you. Get daily rest! Eat balanced meals. And, don't allow others to push you into doing things you don't feel ready to do.
5. **You have the right to experience "griefbursts."** Sometimes, out of nowhere, a powerful surge of grief may overcome you. This can be frightening, but it is normal and natural. Find someone who understands and will let you talk it out.
6. **You have the right to make use of ritual.** The funeral ritual does more than acknowledge the death of someone loved. It helps provide you with the support of caring people. More importantly, the funeral is a way for you to mourn. If others tell you the funeral or other healing rituals such as these are silly or unnecessary, do not listen.
7. **You have the right to embrace your spirituality.** If faith is a part of your life, express it in ways that seem appropriate to you. Allow yourself to be around people who understand and support your religious beliefs. If you feel angry at God, find someone to talk with you who won't be critical of your feelings of hurt and abandonment.
8. **You have the right to treasure your memories.** Memories are one of the best legacies that exist after the death of someone loved. You will always remember. Instead of ignoring your memories, find others with whom you can share them.
9. **You have the right to move toward your grief and heal.** Reconciling your grief will not happen quickly. Remember, grief is a process, not an event. Be patient and tolerant with yourself and avoid people who are impatient and intolerant with you. Neither you nor those around you must forget that the death of someone loved changes your life forever.

CREATE YOUR OWN RITUALS

Creating your own personal rituals to remember your loved ones allows you to access and work through your grief in a safe and constructive way. Some people plan rituals in honor of a loved one's birthday or an anniversary. Others choose to express their grief through small daily or weekly rituals. A ritual can be as elaborate as a public memorial service or as small as a quiet moment alone with your loved one's picture. Some examples of small rituals include:

- Lighting a candle at certain, special times of the day or week to remind you of your loved one (for example, at dinnertime to represent sharing meals with him or her)
- Creating a memory scrapbook and filling it with photographs, letters, postcards, notes, or other significant memorabilia from your life together
- Spending time listening to your loved one's favorite music or creating a special mix of music that reminds you of that person
- Watching his or her favorite movie
- Planting a tree or flowers in your loved one's memory
- Making a donation to a charity that your loved one supported
- Visiting your loved one's burial site
- Carrying something special that reminds you of your loved one that you can take out and hold when you feel the need or wear a special piece of clothing
- Creating a work of art in your loved one's memory
- Preparing and eating a special meal in honor of your loved one
- Developing a memorial ritual for your loved one on special days or whenever you wish

Ritual Ideas

Ritual Reflection— Terri Balash

A few months after my grandson Orion passed. I went on retreat, and sat with my grief. I cried! I reflected on scripture, encountered nature and this image of Orion, cradled in the arms of our Lord surfaced. I'm not an artist, but I felt this nudge within my heart, to give the image life, and begin the healing process. The drawing that appeared on paper, was a gift from the Holy Spirit. I gave the image to my daughter and son-in-law and it now hangs in our family room. We will always remember Orion, "our shining star."



Be Still

- Sitting in stillness with your grief will help you honor the deeper voice of quiet wisdom that come forth from within you. In honoring your need to be still, you rest for the journey.
- Personal times of stillness are a spiritual necessity. A lack of stillness hastens confusion and disorientation and results in a waning of energy of your mind, body and spirit. Stillness with our Lord, restores your life force. Grief is only transformed when you honor the quiet.
- Integration of grief is born out of stillness, not frantic movement forward. When you halt any instinct to attempt to “let go” become counterproductive and deplete an already overwhelmed mind, body and spirit. It is through sitting with stillness that your soul is ever so slowly restored.

Cry

- Tears are a natural cleansing and healing mechanism. It's OK to cry. In fact, it's good to cry when you feel like it. It lets the anxiety of your body wash out with your tears. What's more, tears are a form of mourning; they are sacred.
- On the other hand, don't feel bad if you are not crying a lot. Not everyone is a crier. Some people do not feel the need to cry, especially as death grows more distant. The inability to cry is not a weakness.
- You may find that those around you are uncomfortable with your tears. As a society we're not so good at witnessing others in pain.
- Explain to your friends and family that you need to cry right now and that they can help by allowing you to express your grief.
- You may find yourself crying at unexpected times and places. If you need to, excuse yourself and retreat to somewhere private. Better yet, befriend your tears and feel no sense of shame or need to conceal your authentic feelings.

Listen to Music

- Music can be very healing to mourners because it helps us access our feelings, both happy and sad. Music can soothe the tension in your body, nurture your heart and renew your spirit.
- All types of music can be healing.
- Do you play an instrument? Sing in the shower—LOUDLY!
- What kind of music did the one you've lost - love? Get out their old CD's and spend a rainy afternoon listening to the music.
- Because music is the language of the soul, it can be comforting.

Let Go

Dear Lord, I know that...

To *let go* is not to welcome sorrow but learn from it.

To *let go* is not to deny but to accept.

To *let go* is not to stop caring but to care in a different way.

To *let go* is not to reject what was but to make the most of what can be.

To *let go* is not to isolate myself but to realize I can make it on my own.

To *let go* is not to push others away but to let them into my life.

To *let go* is not to forget the past but to live in the present and dream for the future.

To *let go* is to fear less and love more.

Dear Lord, help me to *let go*.



*Death is not extinguishing the Light.
It is putting out the Lamp because
the Dawn has come. ~ Tagore*

A Candle Lighting Memorial for Those Who are Grieving

An important part of the grief process is to pay tribute to and remember on any special occasion the one who has died. This memorial tribute is designed to use four candles, arranged either in a circle or in some other manner in keeping with your own personal taste. The tribute can be used alone by an individual or in a small family setting:

As we light the **four candles** in honor of you, we light one for our **grief**, one for our **courage**, one for our **memories** and one for our **love**.

This candle represents our **grief**. The pain of losing you is intense. It reminds us of the depth of our love for you.

This candle represents our **courage** to confront our sorrow, to comfort each other, to change our lives.

This light is in your **memory**—the times we laughed, the times we cried, the times we were angry with each other, the silly things you did, the caring and joy you gave us.

This is the light of love. As we enter this holiday season, day by day we cherish the special place in our hearts that will always be reserved for you. We thank you for the gift your living brought to each of us. We love you.

Taken from: "Holiday Help" (Hope and Healing for Those Who Grieve) Published by ACCORD INC.

The Fortune of Love

By Terri Balash, Director of Pastoral Care

My sister-in-law Penny was a young, vibrant woman, who lost her battle to pancreatic cancer, and her death had a huge impact on our entire family. I felt like no holiday could ever match up to those when we were all together, and for the first few holidays we just coped. But, by the third Christmas without Penny, I had decided to use my grief training to help the family I loved so much.

On Christmas morning, we gathered at the graveside of Penny. We celebrated her life, our children released balloons, we sang Christmas Carols, we shared funny stories and we cried. Through acknowledging our own grief, we were able to move forward and celebrated Christmas in a new way. The highly-celebrated holiday, isn't about a perfect tree, a perfect gift or a perfect day. It's all about enjoying the moments and finding good fortune in family and friends who are still there to share it with you. Penny continues to be our good fortune, and a gentle reminder to keep the holidays simple.

The purpose of these days are to remember, and celebrate. It is a time of year where we remember our past, enjoy our present and look forward to our future. It is a time of year when friends and family gather to celebrate traditions. The phrase, "tis the season to be jolly" can quickly magnify our feelings of loss and grief. When anticipation of a celebration is carefully planned, emotionally you and your families can truly enjoy these days.

I encourage you not to deny your sense of loss. Chances are friends and family are afraid to mention their name for fear "it will make you cry." Tears are okay, and a wonderful sign of unspoken love.



I Speak to Mary

Mary, you have been there before me, weary and worn out from the long vigil, saddened by the pain of your loved one, heartbroken over what you could not change

Your valiant stance beneath the cross tells me of your unceasing love.

Long years of unfailing faith upheld you.

I, too, am standing with a loved one who hung upon the cross of suffering.

I, too, am powerless to help.

Teach me how to stand beneath the cross.

Women of Compassion, Mother of Sorrows,
I draw inspiration from your journey.

I, too, can move through the pain of my present situation. Your faith and courage leads me to my own.

Amen.

Christmas In Heaven

Tis Christmas in Heaven
what a beautiful sight!
It's My first one here;
everything is all right!



And tonight we'll all gather,
in reverence we'll kneel,
for the babe in the cradle,
up in Heaven is REAL!

I think of my family, that I left behind
and I pray that your Christmas is as blessed as mine.

The crib is adorned
with the brilliance of the star;
Wiseman have come from near and far.

Please shed no more tears, for my soul is at rest.
Just love one another, live life to its best.

I've met all our dear ones
who preceded us here;
the reunion was lovely,
an event full of cheer.



Yes, it's Christmas in Heaven,
so I've heard them say,
Yet Christmas in Heaven
happens every day!

Notes: _____

Contact: Terri Balash, Director of Pastoral Care
414-469-6173 or balasht@archmil.org

