

COPING WITH THE HOLIDAYS



Holidays used to be a wonderful time of year. The death of your child *[or grandchild or sibling]* may have changed much of the way you move through the last weeks of the year. In this article, we will look at how bereaved parents coped during the months of November and December during the first few years following the death of their child.

As I've done in previous articles, I called on parents and said, "I'm writing an article for TCF magazine about coping with the upcoming holidays. Looking back, what did you do that helped you through those rough two months?" Here's what they said.

On December 23rd four of us couples met at the cemetery where our children are buried and we had a short ceremony at each child's grave. We each brought a Coke can with a candle inserted in it and something to read such as a poem or letter to our child. We lit the candle, did our reading. In this way, it signified that our child is with us. We leave the candles and Coke cans and pick them up the next day. Years later it continues to feel good to look forward to taking this day out for our child—to honor our child. As we finish at the last grave, we do a closing ceremony (such as holding hands or singing a song). As a reward, we go out to dinner.

Perhaps you're not ready to do anything. Here is what a mother said:

What helped me during the holidays was absolutely refusing to smile and refusing to carry on the usual traditions. I did what was comfortable for me. My relatives didn't seem to like it, but I was a mess and just couldn't bring myself to do any sort of so-called "celebrating." The first year I actually stayed by myself. The second year I scheduled myself to work. This year I may either do volunteer work or head to Canada. Thanksgiving is great in Canada—no Thanksgiving!

Here is what a couple has done since their son died six years ago:

The first year I went to the mall to buy people things. I walked into the stores, looked at items, picked them up, and put them back. I walked out frustrated. So, I didn't get anybody anything the first year. The next year I went to a craft store and bought a large candle, a little artificial tree, miniature lights, and decorations. We put the candle and tree in our kitchen, where we spend the majority of our time. The candle stays lit all day. Over the years we buy ornaments that remind us of our son. At holiday dinner, just before we eat, we each go around and say the name of a person who died. But we have learned to do it quick before the food gets cold. Then, as we're eating we say, "Remember when. . . ?" Sometimes our food gets a little salty, but it's worth it. It's like our son is there with us. The first time we did it a couple people were uncomfortable, but once they got into it, it was OK.

A mother whose daughter died eight years ago suggested the following:

A stocking is hung for each person in the family, including my daughter. Into her stocking family members write a note stating what she taught them. The notes are read after dinner. It is a wonderful way to talk about her life and acknowledge what she meant to us.

A couple whose son died four years ago shares their experience of the first three years:

During the first Christmas, my daughter thought she would help by keeping me busy shopping for her three children. There I was pushing a cart with a gift list of toys and tears streaming down my cheeks. All I wanted to do was crawl in a hole and pull everything with me. I'm not sure how we made it through the holidays, but we eventually realized that things would never be as they were before. The other family members thought they were helping, but we had to decide for ourselves what was best. The second Christmas was the hardest. On Christmas Eve we went to church and to the cemetery and on Christmas day we delivered our gifts and spent the day alone. We were feeling sorry for ourselves, but that's all we felt we could do at the time. The next years we decided to do something for others. I called the nursing home and asked the director if they needed any help serving the holiday meal. She was very excited to have us. A few days before, we had our grandchildren over and instead of making cookies, we made table favors, including cards, candy, and ribbons. On Christmas day we dressed in our Santa hats and headed to the nursing home. When we arrived, we were greeted with smiling, appreciative faces. We served their breakfast and many of the residents took us back to their rooms to see their gifts and family pictures. While honoring the memory of our son we forgot our grief that Christmas day.

In closing, let me leave you with some holiday stress-relievers:

- There is not enough time for everything. Ask yourself, "What am I willing to give up?" and then, let them go.
- Practice saying "No" to the things you do not want to do. Here are versions of the same message: "No thanks." "I just can't." "I won't be doing it this year." "Sorry." Remember, when you say, "No" you don't have to give reasons.
- Plan ahead. Make yourself sit down and write out your "things to do" list. Then go through it and, as mentioned in #1, ask yourself, "What can I omit?" Also, arrange your list in priority fashion to put the most important things at the top of the list.
- If you must purchase gifts, ask yourself, "How can I do this with the least amount of stress? For example, consider using the Internet, having someone else pick up the gifts, consider giving money or gift cards as gifts, or have a family lottery where each person picks a name from a hat and buys only that person a gift. Try one of these ideas this year as an experiment just to see how it works.
- Start early. Pick a date to get done many of your obligations now. Don't put it off. Remember how crazy last minute stuff can be. You don't need any more craziness in your life.
- Do not rely on your memory to keep track of things to do in your life. Presume you will forget things and write everything down.
- Ask yourself, "How can I work smarter, not harder?"
- And finally ask yourself, "In what ways do I wish to keep things the same and how do I want to change things?"

As you finish this article and begin to put it down, you might be saying to yourself, "Yes, there were a couple of good ideas. I should do them some time." Quick! Capture the moment now! Tape this article up on your wall so that you will see it every day as a reminder of helpful ways to get through the holidays. I'm willing to bet that your child would agree with me. So, get started, OK?

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