



Dear Readers:

Some days are more difficult than others when we are grieving, and those that are predictably painful are usually holidays, birthdays, and special anniversaries. Each individual experiences grief and recovery in his/her own unique way, and each of us has special times that we shared with the person who died which we anticipate with a great deal of dread. The reason is that those dates represent special times. Our anguish is great because we are confronted with the fact that we will never again enjoy any new experiences with our loved one. We are reminded of how much we cared for them and how lonely we feel without them.

When confronted with pain of this intensity, the tendency is to try to avoid feeling anything. While avoidance is a coping strategy that we may resort to at times when we are overloaded, in truth, prolonged avoidance is unhealthy. We cannot really recover unless we experience the feelings.

Rather than run from them, it is far easier and in the long run less painful, if we simply confront those feelings head on. We can best survive and use these days for special healing by deliberately planning what we will do to help ourselves get through them in the most constructive way possible. This newsletter will describe coping strategies for the common holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries. With this basic information you can develop your own plan to prepare for your difficult days. Our goal is healing, not hurting.

Yesterday is already a dream, and Tomorrow is only a vision, but Today, well lived makes every Yesterday a dream of happiness and Tomorrow a vision of hope. Sanskrit

Creating New Rituals for Celebrations

Birthdays and other special occasions are filled with family rituals. After a death, these occasions do

not seem to have the same meaning. It is important that we recognize that things have changed. We are different, and nothing will ever be the same as it was before. Therefore, let us examine some of these rituals to see how we can continue with the old, but make it significant in a different way, or develop a new ritual that is more appropriate for this new period in our lives.

It isn't the mountains ahead that wear you out. It's the grain of sand in your shoe.

Sometimes anticipation of the event empowers the pain. We feel so much pain now that even the idea of more may seem overwhelming. If you are feeling pain now, deal with that pain. If you are anticipating an event that you expect to be difficult, plan how you will handle that event in advance. Don't wait for disaster to happen. If you think it will be difficult, it will. Try to determine exactly what will be the

most difficult aspects of the upcoming event. Once you have identified those issues, decide in advance what you are going to do about it. Focus as much as you can on the positive.

Birthdays

Billy's eighteenth birthday was coming up. Birthdays were special times at our house. We extended the celebration for as long as we could. Gifts were given over a period of several days, we always baked a cake, cooked a special meal or had friends over for a party. He was my first born. I kept thinking about all the things he would not do, and all the joys of those events that I could not share. His birthday could not pass without my thinking about him so I planned to spend the day doing just that. I took time off from work, took my photo album of him, a box of tissues, and found a quiet place. I began reviewing my life with him from the moment he was conceived until the day he died. His gifts to me were those memories. When I had finished this review, I was reminded of all the joys he had brought to me. I had no choice but to accept that we would share nothing new, but even though separate now, nothing from the past would be lost.

Coping With Grief

Hyperactivity is one coping strategy some people use to survive special occasions. Staying busy is often recommended to us by well-meaning people. The idea is that if we stay busy, we will not feel. To some degree staying busy is healthy. Our mind and emotions must have some time to rest, and we may get stuck wallowing in our own misery. However, staying so busy that we avoid feelings simply prolongs the suffering.

Today I can look back with love in my heart, knowing that every moment, every experience of my life has been necessary, valuable, and significant.
Ruth Fishel
Time for Joy

Our goal in recovery is to heal as quickly as possible without abusing ourselves or allowing others to abuse us. What do I mean by abusing ourselves? Some of us are "guilty of punishing ourselves" with lots of "should's" and "if only's." When we tell ourselves that we should have done something we are beating up on ourselves. What we really mean is that we have regrets regarding our actions. Now that we have had time to review an issue, we can think of

other things we "wish" we had done. Simply substituting the word "wish" for the word "should" in our thinking process takes the guilt, blame, and shame out of our actions. It is also a human recognition that each of us in human and human beings are capable of making mistakes. Saying "I wish I had" to yourself is a way of expressing an understanding that we have regrets and sometimes we must forgive ourselves for not being perfect. No one is. Sometimes other people attempt to abuse us by telling us what we "should" have done or how we should be experiencing our grief. No doubt their thinking process has been similar to our own. When we are grieving we are particularly sensitive it seems to the feelings and opinions of others. At this time some people seem to have a special knack for pushing our guilt, inadequacy, or anger buttons, thereby invoking these feelings in us. While it is difficult to do, it is important that we recognize what is happening. The other person may also have regrets and wish they had done something differently. Projection of negative feelings and behaviors onto others is another unhealthy way of attempting to deal with

negative feelings. No one can take responsibility for our actions, nor can we take responsibility for theirs. What is past is past and cannot be undone. Guilt is worthwhile only if it is helpful in clarifying what we wish we had done differently. As soon as we have learned that lesson, we can forgive ourselves. Then we are less likely to repeat the same mistake.

The best and most beautiful things in this world cannot be seen or even touched. They must be felt with the heart.

Preparations for the holidays

Rituals are very important in a family. While your old rituals may not be reenacted now exactly as they occurred in the past, they can be recreated and are important to continue. Rituals allow us the opportunity to share experiences that bring us joy.

Think about the positive traits of your loved one that you wish to always remember. It may be that the person was kind, considerate, thoughtful, loving, warm, and generous. You can continue their special traits and recreate a living memorial to him/her by making that

special quality a part of your own lifestyle or personality. Think for a moment about your loved one. What trait did you value most that you would like to honor and memorialize in your own life?

Thanksgiving and Christmas

These are both family holidays that can seem empty unless you plan things that will fill your need to address the loss. It is important that we talk openly about the things we miss and that we devise a plan to accommodate those traditions that are now different.

One of our holiday traditions was to give each child a new ornament for Christmas which was wrapped and placed in their stockings. When it came time to hang the stockings, Chris asked me what I was going to do with Billy's. It is so important that children be included in family decisions. Realizing that the stocking was an issue for Chris, I asked him what would he like to do. He wanted to hang it. Later he decided that he could put gifts for the dog and cats in Billy's stocking so that it would be full. He hated to see his stocking with presents in it and Billy's

empty. When it was time to decorate the tree, he asked what I was going to do with Billy's ornaments. Each child was to take his collection of ornaments with him when he married. Each year as we decorated for the holidays, the boys selected their favorite ornaments to hang on the tree. I asked Chris what he wanted to do with Billy's stocking. He wanted to keep them also. I agreed. After the tree was decorated, I noticed that he had carefully chosen the same number of ornaments from his box as he had from Billy's. My sense was that he felt good about the activity, having symbolically decorated the tree in honor of his brother.

These stories are real life events. To help you plan and focus on your own particular issues, use the following suggestions as a guide for your reflection:

Openly discuss traditions.

Talk things over as a family and make changes that respect the wishes of everyone if possible.

Create a special tribute for the day.

Light a candle, gather some treasured stories of

holidays past, or have special flowers that mark the memory of the loved one.

Plan where to spend the holidays.

Remember that it is hard to escape the holiday atmosphere. Rather, try to face the pain, perhaps at the home of someone who will understand and provide nurturing. If being in your own home is more appropriate, by all means stay home. You may be surprised to learn that your anticipatory fear of the holidays is worse than the holiday itself.

Balance solitude with sociability.

Solitude can help renew our strength, but being with friends can give us strength also. Carefully select holiday outings to attend and enjoy as much as you can.

Relive pleasant memories.

Trying to pretend nothing has happened is not only burdensome, but nearly impossible. Try to recall several happy memories and celebrate them. When you have feelings of sadness, try to think of these happy times also.

Set aside some "letting go" time.

Set aside some time for crying, for writing down your thoughts and feelings, or talking with your loved ones.

Counter the conspiracy of silence.

Often family members may be afraid to bring up the topic of your loved one for fear of upsetting you. You can talk about the person, or alert others to the fact that it is O.K. to do so. This will help others as well as yourself by getting them to share fond memories.

Try not to "awfulize."

It is easy to think of "life is awful" during the holidays, to put on a grim face, and to feel only sadness. Try instead to reach out to others, and accept their love in return. Give yourself permission to be joyful. This does not mean that you have forgotten your loved one.

Find a creative outlet.

Grief can give us strong creative urges. Use them by writing a story or poem in the loved one's honor, or through making gifts, or baking special treats for others.

Consider the needs of remaining family.

Pay attention to your children, or other family

members. Listen to them. Celebrate them. Let them continue to have the joys of the season even though you may want to "forget it."

Utilize available resources.

Don't try to grieve alone. Use your family, your faith community, or seek out a support group for assistance.

Gift giving

Symbolic of holidays and special occasions are the gifts that we give to others as a demonstration of our love. The nicest gifts a family could exchange is the sharing of their fondest memories of the deceased. Set aside a special time for sharing. Ask each family member to recall and share their fondest memory. By focusing on the positive memories, we are able to push the painful ones aside.

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