

Grief and the Holiday Season

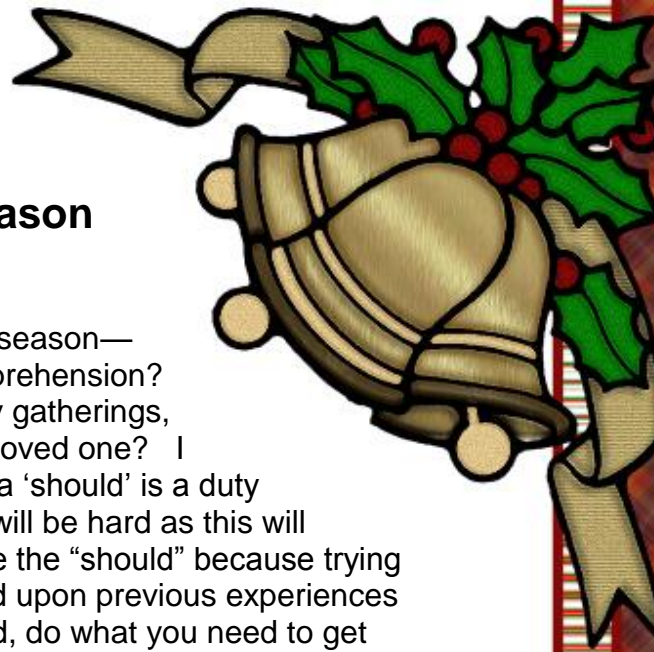
Brent Richter, MA, LPC

How can we celebrate and enjoy the upcoming holiday season—is that even possible or conceivable? Is it beyond comprehension? How can we approach this season of celebration, family gatherings, lifelong rituals and holiday traditions and still honor our loved one? I have some suggestions. First, eliminate the “shoulds”; a ‘should’ is a duty or obligation to act or behave in a certain manner--this will be hard as this will be a different season; give yourself permission to ignore the “should” because trying to meet expectations (our own or those of others) based upon previous experiences is not realistic, or even possible given your loss. Second, do what you need to get through the difficult days---give yourself time to settle in, acknowledge, and respond to the myriad of feelings, emotions, and reactions that each new experience brings.

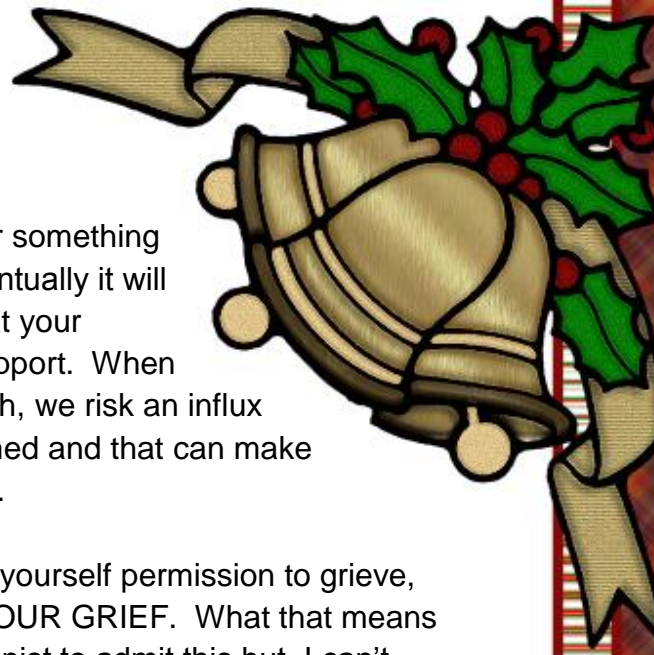
The first year of your loss can be overwhelming as you realize what is lost; and each new experience without your loved one presents new reasons to grieve – the missed birthday, the shared anniversary, the annual vacation, and the missed holidays and family gatherings; each milestone exposes raw emotions just as if it were the first day of the loss. Whether it is making cookies, burning fudge, having dinner, wrapping presents, decorating the house, or writing and addressing holiday cards – every family or relationship has uniquely shared traditions and rituals and perhaps your loved one was the center, instigator, and/or organizer of those traditions. It may be too early for some of you, and that’s understandable--the whirlwind of your loss may have not fully settled in; for others you may just be starting to think of some of these times and holiday rituals; some of you may have muddled through or ‘survived’ that first year of ‘firsts’; and others may well be into years of dealing with the loss and have found ways to integrate your loved ones death into new familial traditions. Others may continue to still struggle.

I don’t believe we ever ‘get over’ our loss, because I don’t see my walk with grief moving toward being cured. Personally, I don’t want to be cured – I want to fondly remember my friends and family that have been lost and to remember those happy times; but unfortunately I think it’s necessary to recognize and gauge the sad memories against those fond or happy memories because they are woven into the fabric of our shared experiences.

I’ve learned through my education, training, and the many people I’ve been honored to counsel and chat with, that experiencing a loss and the inevitable grief changes you forever. It I think it’s imperative that you question, search for answers, grieve with others, and share your thoughts, memories, experiences, and feelings about your loss and how your life has changed--do this for yourself and for others because sharing, grieving, and crying gives your family and friends permission to share, grieve, and cry *with* you.



Grieving during the holidays is especially difficult and it necessitates extra care and attention. Grieving is never something you can do passively – you can try and ‘stuff’ it, but eventually it will surface. It will rise when you are the most vulnerable, at your weakest and when you are in your greatest need for support. When we don’t attend to our grief and loss the cost can be high, we risk an influx of despair, loneliness, and/or sense of being overwhelmed and that can make us feel like what we are experiencing is insurmountable.



When I speak of paying attention to yourself and giving yourself permission to grieve, I’d like you to think of **BEING INTENTIONAL ABOUT YOUR GRIEF**. What that means is---**Open Up!** It might be a bit strange for a grief therapist to admit this but, I can’t make it right for you. I can’t take away your pain or the hurt of others, just like you can’t take away the pain of others – but together we can lend a purposeful ear and a caring heart which is really what heals. By sharing your loss, telling the story of your loved one until you don’t need to tell it anymore is what heals, watching as your story is heard, being understood and seeing the concern of others continues the integrative process.

It is especially important as you proceed into the upcoming holiday season that you try and maintain those important traditions and rituals. I suggest you set a place for your loved one, talk openly, and suggest others share stories – inviting the memory of your loved one into your celebration allows you to begin (or continue) the process of accepting what it is, and what it will be like, without them. If it’s too difficult or hard to invite them in, then think about creating a new tradition or holiday ritual – one that may honor what they stood for. It is possible to celebrate the holiday season, but realize that you will be celebrating it differently than previous years, and that’s OK.

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