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## Making it Through the Holidays

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### Making it Through the Holidays

The holidays – that time of year that we usually associate with words such as “joy”, “peace”, “happy”, and “merry”; a time for family and friends; a time for gift giving; a time of festivities; a time of traditions. However, this year is different. Someone you love has died. You must now face the season without this special person. Rather than looking forward to the holidays, you might be feeling scared of how you may react, angry because you don't feel like doing anything, guilty about enjoying certain aspects of the season, and overwhelmed by all that is supposed to be done. In short, you are probably dreading this time of year and wish it would all go away.

In order to make it through the holidays, I suggest you remember four concepts during this time: PERMISSION, FLEXIBILITY, SELF-CARE, and PLANNING.

#### Permission

The first concept to keep in mind during the holidays is **Permission**. This means giving yourself **Permission** to grieve your loss and to feel what you are feeling. The sadness, loneliness, fear, anger, fatigue, confusion, withdrawal, etc. that you are feeling is natural and normal. Giving yourself **Permission** may not be easy, but it is essential. You have lost someone you love and it hurts, a lot.

Some people around you may be pressuring you by saying “It's the holidays, cheer up” or “You should be over that by now,” but you know that's impossible. Remember, everyone is different and every relationship is different. When a loved one dies and those bonds are disrupted, your response is unique to you and your relationship. Even identical twins mourn the death of a parent or sibling differently! You need your own particular time to mend your heart in your own particular way. So, give yourself **Permission** to grieve as you must and stay clear of shoulds.

**Permission** also means letting yourself express what you are feeling. The only way to get through your feelings is to go through them. Some people express their feelings through emotional outlets such as crying, some express their feelings through physical activities, and some do both. So, if you feel like crying, then cry. If you feel like doing something physical with your hands such as raking leaves, kneading bread, or building something, then do it.

Another part of **Permission** is to give yourself the freedom to ask for what you need. Many of us are afraid to bother others. Sometimes we assume others know what we need and we are disappointed when we don't receive it. Many people are quite willing to help you at this difficult time, but you must let them know explicitly what you require. If you want some time alone, some help shopping, or someone to watch the children for a little while, ask a friend or family member for it.

The final **Permission** at this time of year is permitting yourself the

right to be flexible. This leads us to the next concept to keep in mind for the holidays – **Flexibility**.

#### Flexibility

The holidays are a time of traditions. Family traditions are healthy and normal, they help us bind the past and present to the future, and they can bring us stability in a changing world. However, families can spend so many years following the same routines that they forget how and why these traditions began. As the holidays approach, you may realize that now your family's traditions carry a completely different batch of shoulds with them, shoulds that can magnify the pain of your loss. These traditions and their shoulds may no longer be the right thing for you to do. Customs that were once “set in stone” might need to be re-visited when you are grieving. Maybe it is time to create some new traditions and rituals that reflect the changes in your life.

New traditions and rituals can take many forms.

Some examples include:

- Provide flowers at the altar of your church
- Light a candle.
- Bake something for someone else.
- Pass on an heirloom from your loved one to someone else.
- Reflect a moment on the life that has passed, and its meaning for the future.
- Donate to charities, volunteer your time to organizations.
- Have a picture of your loved one framed for a gift.
- Plant a tree.
- Your loved one may have written songs, stories, poetry, or drawn pictures - you may wish to have them bound and given as gifts on special occasions.
- Gather memorabilia onto pieces of cloth contributed by family and friends and make a quilt.
- Build a shadow box - one the children especially may cherish. Ask each contributor to find a special piece of jewelry or trinket or some other small object that reminds him or her of something unique about the loved one.

# Making it Through the Holidays

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- Write notes about your loved one and put them in the stocking. You may have a special message or some unfinished business that you want to write. Now you have the option of sharing these notes with others, keeping them and putting them in a diary or memory book, or destroying them as a ritual of healing.
- Tell your favorite story about your loved one. You may like to gather these stories and put them in book form.
- Set a place at the table or leave a single flower or an empty glass to symbolize the presence in spirit of the person who died.
- Offer a toast or allow a moment of silence in memory of your loved one.

With a little time and brainstorming with other family members and friends, you can come up a new ritual and tradition that will have special significance to everyone. Remember, if you want to, you can always go back to your previous traditions and rituals next year.

## Self-Care

Grieving is hard work – physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually – and can quickly wear you out. It is vital that you take care of yourself at this time. There are two aspects of self-care that are important to review: Physical Care and Feeding Your Soul.

## Physical

The place to begin taking care of yourself is with your physical self. Eating nutritiously, drinking properly, and getting plenty of rest are always key to giving you the strength you need to grieve, but they are crucial during the highly stressful holiday season. An especially helpful thing for you to do for yourself is to get some exercise. Exercise helps get more oxygen into your lungs, circulates your blood so you get more of that oxygen to your brain, and burns off the hormones that grieving naturally produces. If you are physically able to, walking is exceptionally beneficial. The act of walking actually fires the neurons in your brain making you more alert while giving you an opportunity to be out of doors enjoying nature and breathing fresh air.

Another aspect of the physical side of self-care is not depending on alcohol or drugs to help numb yourself through the holiday season. While these substances may seem to provide some temporary relief, they will actually leave you more depressed when the effects wear off. A vicious cycle can begin that will result in you having a more difficult time with your grieving.

The final physical aspect to address is that of the prescription medications you might be taking. Your doctor prescribed these medications because your health depends on them. Be sure to make a renewed effort to take any prescribed medications as you have been directed.

## Feeding Your Soul

Just as you have physical needs to take care of, you also have emotional needs. Feeding your soul can take many forms. For some, prayer or meditation helps them become more centered and in touch with themselves and with God. Getting a massage can work out the tightness resulting from stress. Many have found that writing a journal, a letter, a poem, a story, or music is a way for them to describe what is happening to them. For others, reading an inspiring book gives them insight and peace. Expressing how you feel through the creative arts – painting a picture, playing music, sculpting, photography, etc. – has long been a form of feeding the soul.

A different way to feed your soul is to do something for someone else. Fewer things make us feel as good about ourselves as doing something for someone else. During the holiday time, there are plenty of opportunities to volunteer a little of your time to organizations that serve others.

Finally, another way to feed your soul is to give yourself a present. These gifts do not have to be fancy or expensive. They are really nothing more than you consciously acknowledging you are doing something for yourself. Here are some suggestions:

- Blow up a balloon and turn it loose.
- Give yourself a compliment.
- Search out a long-lost friend.
- Look at the stars.
- Read a poem aloud.
- Visit someone.
- Use a new word.
- Open up to the person closest to you.
- Frame a picture.
- Forgive a grudge.
- Take yourself to lunch.
- Go to the library.
- Try a new food.
- Sit on the floor and read the paper.
- Take a risk.
- Listen to the rain on the roof.
- Feed the ducks.
- Jump in a puddle.
- Look up at a treetop.
- Tell someone you love him/her.
- Hold a hand.
- Take a nap.
- Sign up for a class.
- Study a spider web.
- Do something that you always wanted to do.
- Contact someone that you've been thinking about.
- Say YES.
- Learn something new.
- Surprise a child.
- Hug someone.
- Sing in the shower.
- Walk in the rain.
- List 10 things that you do well.
- Pay a compliment.
- Throw away something that you don't like.
- Waste a little time.
- Curl up with a cup of hot cocoa.
- Buy a ticket to a special event.
- Organize some small corner of your life.
- Try to feel another person's joy.
- Pop popcorn.
- Turn off the TV and talk.
- Keep a secret.
- Practice courage in one small way.
- Warm a heart.
- Laugh at yourself.
- Enjoy silence.
- Walk to the nearest park.
- Break a bad habit - just for today.
- Get to know the neighbor's dog or cat.
- Bake bread.
- Go wading.
- Pick up a travel brochure and dream.
- Smell a flower.
- Send a card to someone for no reason.
- Kiss someone.
- Clean out your purse or wallet.
- Hum.
- Take an early morning walk.
- Tell someone how much you appreciate him/

# Making it Through the Holidays

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her. • Encourage a young person. • Talk to a pet. • Tell a joke. • Run down a hill. • Start a new project. • Take a different road to get home. • Acknowledge when you are wrong. • Volunteer some time to a good cause. • Let someone do you a favor. • Reread a favorite book. • Listen to the dawn. • Allow yourself to make a mistake. • Watch the sunset. • Make a surprise gift. • Lie on the grass. • Drop a quarter where someone will find it. • Take time to talk to a child. • Go for a swim. • Do something hard to do. • Don't do anything - just sit there. • Rearrange a room. • Let someone love you. • Think up other presents to give yourself. • Enjoy whatever you find yourself doing.

## Planning

Now that you've given yourself **permission** to observe the holidays in a way that is comfortable for you, you've decided that you will be **flexible** about what happens during the holidays, and you are dedicated to **self-care**, you need to develop a **plan** to implement your decisions. Bereaved persons who experience the most difficulty with the holidays are those who have given little thought to what they will face.

The best way to develop plans is also to include other family members in the process. This will help everyone know what you need and will give them a chance to talk about what they might need.

The main objective of **planning** is not necessarily the plan itself. It is the process of planning that helps you prepare for the holidays so you are not overwhelmed by all of the happenings. Your plans do not have to be detailed, but they should help give some specific direction to what you will do during this time. These plans do not have to be cast in stone, either. When you are grieving, things can change daily and your plans might need to change with you.

In order to help you get started with the planning process, here is a Holiday Planner that you may want to use once or several times as conditions change during the season.

## The Holiday Planner

The Holiday Planner is designed to help you with the difficult decisions that come at holiday time. Apply the Planner to any occasion that you find difficult to face or to plan. Add your own list of **WHAT** things must be dealt with and then work through the questions to make your decisions.

As you can see from the sample, the planner begins with a simple list. Beneath the word **what**, you write a list of the decisions you must make. Across the top of the planner are six questions, to which you must answer a simple "YES" or "NO." It won't be easy, but give it a try (you can always change your mind!) The point of the planner is to help you look at your **choices**. When you answer "YES" it usually means that this tradition is important to you. When you answer "NO" it usually means you might be open to some changes. Most of the time you'll probably find that you have mixed feelings - some "YES" and some "NO" answers. That should help you discover places where you can compromise to get the meaning you need while avoiding some stress you can do without.

For example, consider the first **what** on the sample list:

### The Family Meal.

"WHY do you have it?"

You might answer: "because it's a family tradition."

"Does it matter WHERE you do it?"

If you say: "NO", then you might consider having it in a different place.

"Does it matter WHEN you have it?"

If you say "YES", then you know that the day or the time you have the family meal is important to you.

"Does it matter HOW you do it?"

If you say "NO", then you may want to consider going to a restaurant or having the dinner catered.

"Does it matter WHO does it?"

If you answer "YES", then you may want to cook that part of the dinner that is the most important to you and have someone else prepare the rest.

"Do you WANT to change it?"

If you answer "YES", then look over the decisions you have made and pick the areas you want to change. If you answer "NO", then you have given yourself permission to do things, "just like always".

# Making it Through the Holidays

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## The Holiday Planner

This simple questionnaire may give you some direction in planning the Holidays ahead. Many of the preparations for Christian holidays may also be applied to those for other religions' holidays.

### Holiday Job List

<b>WHAT</b> Choices do I have?	Do I know <b>WHY</b> I do it?	Does it matter <b>WHERE</b> I do it?	Does it matter <b>WHEN</b> I do it?	Does it matter <b>HOW</b> I do it?	Does it matter <b>WHO</b> does it?	Do I <b>WANT</b> to change it?
The Family Meal						
Religious Services						
Traveling						
Gift Giving to Family/Friends						
Gift Shopping						
Giving to Charities						
Cards						
Decorating Inside/Outside						
Cleaning						
Baking/Cooking						
Entertaining (my house)						
Family Gatherings						
Business Parties						
Visiting Others						
Taking Children to Holiday Programs						
Holiday Clean-up						
Other Traditions						
Other Traditions						
Other Traditions						

SOURCE: Adapted from *Handling the Holidays* by Bruce H. Conley & Karen L. Howard, Revised 2000

# Making it Through the Holidays

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## Conclusion

As we come into the holiday season, you may be dreading what lies ahead. You don't have to let the pressure and expectations of the holidays come crashing down on you. Take some control and protect yourself while you are putting the pieces of your life together. With some flexibility, planning, and focusing on what you need, you can make it through the holidays. Many have gone down this same path before you and survived; and you can, too.

## Sources and Additional Resources

*How Will I Get Through the Holidays 12 Ideas for Those Whose Loved One Has Died* by James E. Miller; Willowgreen Publishing, 1996.

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