Coping with Loss During the Holidays

Holidays are often difficult for bereaved people and the period between Thanksgiving and New Year’s Day can be particularly hard. The days are filled with reminders of the loss and with painful examples of things their loved one can no longer enjoy. Most bereaved people experience surges in sadness and longing during the holiday season, but over time they find ways to comfort themselves and honor the person who died. People with complicated grief have trouble doing this.

If you have complicated grief, you have lost someone very special and you struggle with intense grief most of the time. Still, the holiday period can be especially difficult. It may be hard to accept your sadness and you might wonder why other people don’t feel as badly as you. You may think you need to put on an act so others don’t see how badly you are feeling. Your pain may be so intense that it seems like nothing can help, like there is no way to take care of yourself. You may not realize that there are friends and family members who want to help but are afraid to do the wrong thing. You may think that you only have two options for getting through the holidays: Trying to escape the pain by staying home, sleeping and avoiding friends and family or participating in holiday festivities and pretending to enjoy yourself despite feeling alienated and misunderstood. Neither option works very well. Isolating yourself or concealing your true feelings from your friends and family usually makes you feel even worse.

Even if you have complicated grief there are things you might be able to do to help yourself. You may feel that you don’t want to think about it, but it’s a good idea to do just that. Anticipating and planning can help you feel less out of control and powerless. Remember that this time is hard for everyone who lost someone they love. If you have complicated grief it’s even harder, but you can still learn ways to cope with the strong feelings so that they are less overwhelming.

Here are some suggestions for people with complicated grief that might help in coping with grief during the holidays.

1. **Accept that the holidays are difficult for bereaved people.** Remind yourself that it is okay to feel sad – even very sad. You don’t have to hide how you are feeling.

2. **Be compassionate and take care of yourself.** Try to lower your expectations of yourself; give yourself time and permission to feel sad. Be especially careful not to be harsh and critical of your struggle with grief. Think about what helps you when you’re feeling sad. Make a list of these activities and take time to do them during the
holidays. For example, read a book, listen to music, watch a movie, exercise, take a warm bath, visit a museum, sit in the park or do something else you can enjoy.

3. **Let others do things that will lessen your stress and anxiety.** When they offer, let others take over activities that you find stressful, unpleasant or anxiety provoking. Even if they don’t offer, think about how and what you can ask family members and friends to do that could be helpful. Remember that they may not know what you need.

4. **Try to find enjoyable things to share with other people.** Holidays can provide opportunities for shared pleasurable activities; try to see if you can find some. Remember that your loved one would want you to enjoy being with family and friends. It’s important to remember that you need and deserve this.

5. **Find ways to remember and talk about the person who died.** The holidays can be an opportunity to remember your loved one, honor your relationship with her or him and share memories. Once you get started, it usually isn’t hard to come up with things to talk about. For instance:

   - Acknowledge your loved one during a celebration with friends and family and share stories about when he or she was present.
   - Share memories of something special in your heart or things your loved one especially liked about the holidays: A gift he gave, a song she liked, a favorite food, or special holiday clothing or jewelry.
   - Tell stories about past events, silly antics, special personality traits, favorite movies and things or places he or she especially liked. Share amusing or heartwarming memories.