



COPING WITH LOSS DURING THE HOLIDAYS

By, Peggy DeLong, PsyD

The death of a loved one can be the most traumatic and emotionally painful experience of your life. Coping during the holidays is a particularly difficult time for dealing with loss. The following suggestions are made to hopefully alleviate some of that pain, to turn a painful experience into a healing experience, and to make the experience meaningful.

- Allow yourself to be fully present with your emotions and sensations. Even though grief can feel terrible and overwhelming, it is a normal reaction to death, and a healthy part of the healing process. Allow the tears to flow when you feel like crying. During grief, we sometimes experience our loved one through our senses. This can be in the form of hearing our loved ones' voice, or smelling our loved ones' scent. Allow yourself to take it all in and be fully present in those moments. It may be helpful to keep in mind that that pain will be there, and to simply allow yourself the time and space to experience it.
- Express your feelings. This can be done by journaling your thoughts and feelings about your loved one. Reaching out to a trusted friend and connecting on an emotional level may also be very helpful. Talking to another person who is also grieving can help you share in the experience and help you to feel less alone. Seek professional help from a mental health professional. This can be a valuable opportunity to process your thoughts and feelings in an emotionally safe environment.
- Keep in mind that it is natural to experience an increase in grief and emotional pain during the holidays and during anniversaries. You may have been feeling better and making progress in your grief path, only to experience a heightened sense of loss during the holidays. Do not let this alarm you and make you feel that you are regressing, that something is "wrong" with you, or that you are not grieving "properly." This is a natural reaction and part of the grief process.
- Take time out to nourish your soul. Do whatever brings you a sense of peace and you have found in the past to enhance your mental health. This could be taking time out to exercise, enjoy a craft, read, or meditate. The holiday season can get so busy that we find we do not have time to do what nourishes our souls when we need it the most.
- Take on a favorite characteristic or action of your loved one. Did your loved one tell jokes or stories during gatherings? Cook or bake? Lead a prayer or recite a poem? You may find comfort in carrying on a favorite aspect of your loved one. If you decide to do so, you may also wish to practice this before the actual event.
- Although this may be a time when you expect others to support and comfort you, you may find yourself in a position of needing to forgive others. An example may be to forgive the friend you see at a holiday party who has not called since your loved one's death. Death brings up our strongest vulnerabilities and fears, and not everyone will be capable of dealing with your loss and their own feelings about it. Forgive, try not to take it personally, and spend time with someone who does provide comfort.

- Allow yourself to experience joy. Remembering your loved one does not mean sacrificing joy when it comes naturally. Allow yourself to laugh. It is not a betrayal to your loved one to experience happiness and joy.
- Planning is important:
 - Consider how you plan to obtain additional emotional support. If being alone is too painful, invite someone over, or accept an invitation that you might not normally accept.
 - Sometimes people need to be told that it is okay to mention your loved one's name, or that you especially want them to mention your loved one's name. Do not be afraid to let others know what you specifically want and need. People mean well, but sometimes need to be told how to respond to you and the loss. Out of fear of saying the "wrong" thing, people sometimes say nothing of your loss, and this can be painful. Let others know and give "permission" if you would like your loved one to be freely mentioned and remembered.
 - Consider how you plan to handle rituals. If you plan to keep a ritual, decide how your loved one's role will be handled. The role may be shared among family and friends, assigned to a different person, or modified in some meaningful way.
 - Consider making new rituals. The purpose is to create the opportunity for meaningful remembering of the loved one, and to express and experience thoughts and feelings. The new ritual can also be an action, such as planting a tree, or a ceremony, or both. This can be done privately or with family and friends.
 - You may want to create a symbolic remembrance of your loved one. This can be your loved one's favorite holiday decoration placed in a special location, a new holiday decoration to represent your loved one, an object that belonged to your loved one, favorite music playing, or a burning candle.
 - Consider whether there will be an empty chair. If your family ritual or gathering involved your loved one being seated at a particular chair around the table, you may wish to discuss with the others who will be present what to do with the empty chair. Seeing the empty chair can be a painful physical reminder of our loved one's absence and preparing for this can make the experience less painful.
 - Anticipate your limits and do not be afraid to let others know what they are. This may mean telling a host/hostess that you are not making your usual dish or dessert this year. This could also mean informing the host/hostess that you may need to make an early exit, that this exit could be sudden, and that it may need to be done without making your usual round of good-byes.

Remember that your experiences, emotions, and reactions are flowing and changing, just as life is flowing and changing. What might feel right to do this year may be different next year. You can make a mental note of what felt good and what did not feel good based on your individual needs, and this is likely to change year to year. Also keep in mind that it is impossible to do all of these suggestions. Pick and choose what resonates with you, as the grieving process is intensely personal. The pain you experience is in proportion to the love between you and your loved one. The difference is that the pain will diminish over time, yet the love will forever endure.

Margaret ("Peggy") DeLong, PsyD is a licensed psychologist with a private practice in the Liberty Corner section of Bernards Township since 2002. She provides evaluation and psychotherapy with clients and their families, preschool age through adult. She specializes in grief and loss, trauma, parenting issues, relationship difficulties, and issues related to child protection. In addition, she provides consultation with other health care professionals and preschool staff and parents. She also provides forensic services and has provided consultation regarding child protection matters and expert witness testimony in Passaic, Hunterdon, Warren, Somerset, Middlesex, Essex, and Hudson counties. In her free time, Dr. DeLong enjoys writing, telemark and downhill skiing, hiking, and mountain biking with her family in the Poconos and Vermont.