

When the Holidays Will Never Be the Same

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It's been more than 20 holiday seasons since my husband, Max, died. Our son was 13 and our daughter was 16 at the time of Max's death. Just when the three of us had passed through our initial shock and grief, the holidays were upon us and I wanted them to go away. Of course, that wasn't about to happen. As the mom, I had to push past my grief to provide some semblance of normalcy for my children. They had enough loss for one year; I couldn't take away the holidays too.

As I look forward to Thanksgiving, I am reminded that, even after all these years, I still find the holiday season bittersweet and sometimes difficult to enjoy. I have, though, found ways to embrace the holidays rather than just get through them. I'm writing this for you if you have experienced a loss that impacts and influences how you enjoy your holiday celebrations or for you to pass on to a friend or co-worker who might need it.

Holidays are particularly hard for people who have suffered a loss. Whether through death, divorce, job change, relocation, family "issues," or a change in financial circumstances, we are challenged by wanting things to be the same but knowing they will never be. So what do we do? Here are some things I have found helpful:

Be Good to You

I believe one of the best things we can do is to be very good to ourselves. The holidays can be exhausting, as can grief. If you have suffered a loss during the past year, this should be the holiday season where you do the bare minimum—only things that will bring you comfort and pleasure. Even if your loss was years ago or seems trivial in the scheme of things, choosing to simplify can lighten your spirits. Simplifying for you may mean shopping by catalog or on-line, being more selective in the invitations you accept, or keeping your holiday decorating to a minimum. Choose to minimize your stress to maximize your enjoyment.

Being good to you also means taking care of yourself. Try to get as much sleep as possible. With so many holiday treats available, be sure you are eating a balanced diet. Keep yourself feeling good by drinking at least eight glasses of water a day. Try to do some form of exercise daily—even a short walk can do much to change your mood.

Traditions—Old and New

Your holidays should contain something of the past but this year would be a good time to start a new tradition—open presents at a different time or have a celebration at a different location. You may want to stay home rather than travel or you might want to get out of town. You may choose different people with whom to celebrate. If you've always celebrated in an intimate way, this may be the year that you join a larger group of family or friends. If you find yourself alone, plan a little get together with others who don't have family or friends with whom to celebrate. If you can't find anyone, make arrangements to volunteer in a hospital, retirement home, or at a community gathering for those less fortunate.

Choose Your Companions Well

Surround yourself with people who will not push you to be jolly and can be comfortable with your sadness. If you've lost a loved one, show by your example that you can speak of that person, reminisce, and honor his or her memory. If it's your child's turn to spend the holiday with your ex-spouse, choose to celebrate with others who don't have children with them rather than in gatherings with lots of parents and kids present.

If you have had financial setbacks this year try to be with people who don't exchange extravagant gifts. Or, suggest that this year each relative only pick the name of one other to buy for. This may be a good year to exchange services rather than things. You might give computer lessons to a loved one who needs them or give coupons for car washing or babysitting. If you've moved and can't be with those you love, indulge in a long distance call or stay connected during the day of celebration by e-mail.

Lower Your Standards

Whether they've experienced a loss or not, most people have expectations for the holiday season that are rarely met. We look around us and it seems like other people are having that warm, loving, sparkling, good time with family and friends that we see on television commercials. We often reflect on our own past holidays and forget their imperfections. If we were to be honest though, we would remember that nothing is ever perfect. Be realistic in trying to make the holidays into an idyllic time. Better yet, make them into a collection of fleeting moments of sweetness, tenderness, and meaningfulness to you.

Go With the Flow

Most people will experience some sadness or melancholy during the holiday season. I have found that when the sadness envelops me, if I let it flow over me rather than fight it, then it passes more quickly. At first I was afraid that if I started crying I would never be able to stop or I would ruin other people's good time, so I held back the tears at all cost. I learned, however, that just being by myself for a few minutes to be present with my sadness and let the tears flow was just what I needed. If the sadness doesn't pass right away, realize that the longer you stay with it and the more you experience it, the quicker the intense feelings will dissipate. Yes, the holidays will never be the same but they can bring you joy again. It takes time, patience, and the support of those who care about you. Choose to take control of how you celebrate the holidays this year. Accept that you will probably feel uncomfortable at times. Avoid dwelling on what can never be again. Allow yourself to experience the special moments each day. Most importantly, give yourself a very special gift by taking good care of you.

More than twenty years later, my kids and I still miss Max. Our holiday celebrations aren't the same, but we've learned to take delight in them again. I believe in my heart that you will too.

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