

## ***Facing the Holidays Following a Loss / Paul Alexander, LCSW-R***

If you are in the midst of grief, an approaching holiday can be a cause of stress and anxiety. What used to be a day of celebration and joyful family gatherings will be different this year. It may be hard to imagine, especially in the first years of our loss, that a holiday time could ever be the same. The first Christmas after my mom died, I walked into department store and saw all the holiday displays of trees, lights and somehow felt the world had lost its mind. Didn't everyone know that there was not going to be a Christmas this year? It was somehow appalling to me and even shocking that the day was still on the calendar. I became grossly aware of the commercialism and the early advertising campaigns that seemed to stalk me as I roamed in my haze of grief.



The first few years following a loss can be extremely challenging to navigate in our day to day functioning. As a holiday approached, I became a bit like a deer in headlights. It was clear to me that life was now different and I didn't want to proceed as if it hadn't changed. It felt like fitting a round peg in a square hole. I would anguish over decision making of where to go, what to do and how to do it, or if I even wanted to do it. My years of being a therapist only helped me to realize that I wasn't completely out of my mind. However, it did not help me avoid going through the feelings and unexpected almost compulsive dread and rumination. My life was different and it seemed that not many people understood how or what I was feeling. The anticipation and the expectation of the approaching day seemed to hover over me like an approaching tornado!

For those of you in who are approaching your "first" or even second and third year of life without your loved one, I hope you can feel comforted in knowing that it is not unusual to be feeling or reacting the way you are.

### **Set Boundaries on your own and others' expectations:**

Planning for the holidays and deciding on practical matters may be overwhelming. Set priorities and limits on what you do and don't do. If it's too much, to cook or decorate, ask others to help or delegate chores including shopping and decorating.

### **Change traditions even if just for this year:**

Have dinner somewhere else, make it a buffet instead of a sit down. Go to a different place of worship. Change the location of the tree or other holiday decorations or leave them out completely. Go with the flow of your heart.

### **Be flexible...Nothing is written in stone:**

The wonderful thing about a mind is that you can always change it. Grief can cause unpredictable mood swings. If you make a plan always communicate your need for an open door policy. This is not the time to worry about what others think about you.

### **Have a family meeting or phone conference:**

Before making decisions it might be helpful to share feelings, needs and suggestions. One way to do this is to just give everyone a time to speak without interruption and without judgment. Listen to each other and try to create an atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding.

### **Listen to the children:**

If there are children in the family circle listen to their ideas and suggestions. Include them in the problem solving and in the planning. Out of the mouths of babes often come wisdom that can be useful for planning the day as well as acknowledging their grief feelings and importance to the family.

**Remember gifts come in many shapes and sizes and they're not always wrapped:**

What is the gift your loved one gave you? If you give gifts, share something that in some way connects the gift to your loved one, their hobby or favorite color. If shopping malls are too stressful use catalogues, gift certificates or even special items that belonged to your loved one.

**Take time for rest and create a day of self care:**

The stress of grief and the holiday madness can create undue anxiety and tension. Take time for relaxation whether it be a massage, exercise, or a day in the country. Do something good for yourself!

**Honor your emotional life:**

To thine own self be true. Take time to talk about your feelings and thoughts with a friend or loved one. Sometimes attempting to be strong is just not necessary. Make time for rituals and healing moments that permit access to your heart and spirit.

**Don't be afraid to mention the name of your loved one and share memories:**

Honor the life of your loved one by saying their name, displaying photo albums, talking about favorite memories, lighting a candle in their honor. Letting others know your comfort in talking about your loved one will help them open up as well.

**Do something totally different:**

If you need to get away to a new location or completely delete the holiday experience do so and let go of the guilt. Although we know we can not run away from the grief sometimes we need a space and place far removed from the everyday reminders. If that is so give yourself permission and go.

**Connect to the Spiritual:**

Some find it walking on the beach, some in church, some in meditation, music and prayer. Do whatever it is for you that brings you to the quiet place within and connects you to the spiritual. Honor the spiritual traditions of your upbringing in a meaningful way by reading a verse from the teachings of your faith or lighting a candle and saying a prayer.

**Make some kind of plan:**

Remembering that anything can be changed at the last minute, have some tentative plan for some time in the day. Be gentle with yourself. This will not be a perfect day...Listen to your heart and to an inner wisdom.

*from <http://www.griefsong.com/holidayhelp.html#3>*