

Coping with Christmas and End of Year Celebrations

For those of us bereaved of a child or children, the onset of the Christmas and New Year season of celebrations can leave us feeling anxious, overwhelmed or alone. It can seem like there is no escape. The emphasis on all things joyful and life-affirming can leave us bereaved parents feeling even more isolated by our grief. The 'happy greetings' we receive from other people may seem insensitive when we are so devastated. On the other hand, this season could also give us welcome pause from the daily grind of life.

Some bereaved parents find that the run up to the event, with all the accompanying anticipation, can be more difficult to cope with than the actual day itself. In addition to Christmas and other seasonal events, the New Year celebrations looming in the background may also be unwelcome and even dreaded. This is all part of the landscape of our life now and something else to find our way through.

Figuring out how to manage these times and events – especially in the early years of our bereavement – is likely to be an ongoing challenge. For instance, coping with a family reunion when our beloved child or children will not be with us may intensify our yearning for them. On the other hand, finding ways to acknowledge them may bring a little solace, especially if other people join in.

We will also need to cope with other people's expectations of us. We may find the anticipation and stress of what other people seem to feel that we 'should' be doing hard to deal with. Additionally, if we have young children or grandchildren, we will want to consider their needs. For their sake we may choose to continue with our usual traditions, even if this is difficult for us. When everyone else seems to be feeling positive and uplifted by the season, we can feel additional pressure not to come across as negative, gloomy or bringing down the mood.

This season can be hard to bear particularly in the early years of grief, but it's worth remembering that we won't always feel the same. Most of us develop our own ways of coping with our grief. It is not always so intense. As the seasons unfold, year by year, we find our way through. In time, we will feel more confident making our own decisions. We will feel able to decide for ourselves whether or not to give presents, send greeting cards, decorate the home, put up a tree, attend a place of worship, join others in a meal or a time of fasting, or go to a party. We may still have our ups and downs. There may be times when we feel numb, but there may also be times when we actually enjoy ourselves – something perhaps hard to imagine early on in our tragic bereavement.

Here are some ideas, based on the experiences of bereaved parents, that we hope will be a help as you prepare for this holiday season:

- **Do what feels right for you.** Try not to allow other people to dictate how you should get through this difficult time of year. It's okay to say NO. Don't feel you have to go to the work party or festivities if you can't cope with them. There is no right or wrong way with grief, listen instead to what feels okay for you at the time. Remember that "no" is a complete sentence. You can say "no, thank you" if you must say more.
- **Leave whenever you want.** Please remember that this is your life. You do not have to do anything that feels bad or wrong or horrifying. Even if you agreed to participate in something, you can change your mind at any time. Stop whatever you're doing whenever you want.
- **Sometimes you won't know what you will feel like doing until the last minute.** Let people know that you may need to decide on the day and you will come if you feel up to it, but may well not be able to. You might want to say that you will come for a short time only.
- **You might like to develop some remembrance rituals involving your child.** For instance, attending a candle-lighting service with other bereaved parents, spending time at a special memorial place for your child on your own or with others, or making or buying a special card or decoration for your child.
- **You may want to tell people that you need to have your child acknowledged by others at this time.** Family and friends remembering our child with a toast during a festive meal can mean so much. Tell your family members and friends that you'd like to hear your child's name being spoken or memories shared. People often worry about getting it wrong or making us sadder. We need to let others know what we want, if we feel able to do so.
- **It is not being disloyal to our child to feel okay or happy at times.** You might find yourself enjoying a special meal, a drink, the good company of friends, songs and music. You may find comfort in familiar rituals or religious

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services. Adjusting to life without your child means that hopefully, in time, you will find more joy in living, and not feel guilty about this.

- **Look for creative ways to pass the time.** It can be helpful to find ways to distract yourself, such as starting a craft project, going on an organised walk, doing a jigsaw puzzle or reading up about a place that you'd like to visit in the future.
- **Make your own decision about sending festive cards.** Some bereaved parents choose not to. Others like to include their child's name – for example - "Love from x x and x and always remembering xx".
- **Try to talk with your family and friends about how you are feeling and your wishes for this time.** Having even one person you can confide in can make a real difference, because unfortunately, not everybody in our circle will necessarily be sensitive to our pain.
- **For surviving children or grandchildren, having a 'normal' celebration can be important.** Their peers at school will be celebrating, and they may want to as well, even though this can be painful for us parents.
- **Don't put too much stress on yourself. If there are difficult relations who expect to visit or for you to visit them, try to make things easier on yourself.** Tell them you can't do it this year or introduce a time limit - "We'll come over for a quick drink but will only stay an hour." Take time out whenever you can, whether this is to go for a walk alone or with an empathic friend or family member. Take yourself off to another room for periods of time to rest from the effort of making an effort, and to enable you to gather the strength to re-join the event when you feel able to.
- **Check in with yourself.** This is true not just for events and gatherings, but for every single moment of life: check in with yourself. Take just a minute to breathe, one good inhale/exhale, and ask yourself how you're doing. Ask yourself what you need. It may be that the piped in Christmas carols at the grocery store are just too much. Maybe you need to leave now – just abandon that cart in the aisle. Or maybe you feel like you can push through, so you put your emotional blinders on and sing yourself some other song to blot out the noise. Give yourself what you need in that moment.
- **Volunteering can be a positive distraction, and also provide you with company if you don't have other family.** For example, there are many charities that serve meals to the elderly or the homeless at this time of the year. But don't feel that you need to take on anything you don't have the energy or motivation for – try as best you can to be kind to yourself.
- **Try to take some gentle exercise every day.** This helps boost those much-needed endorphins.
- **Some parents try to avoid celebrations by going away and doing something completely different.** Be aware, though, that sometimes being away from supportive friends or family can be more difficult and the jollity of strangers may be painful. Christmas, in particular, is celebrated in different forms in many countries.
- **Be aware that the New Year celebrations can also be difficult.** The arrival of a new year can feel like you are moving 'further away' from your child. The celebrations of others, wishing you a 'Happy New Year', can intensify your yearning and grief. You can feel isolated from and resentful of the happiness of others. Acknowledge these feelings to yourself and others close to you. It might help to have a plan for the evening of December 31st – whether that is to be alone, or with understanding friends or family, who will allow you to be yourself and remember your child at this time.

After the death of our child, the holidays may continue to be difficult for many years and perhaps even forever. There will be a natural yearning for what might have been, an added poignancy to these occasions. However, we bereaved parents do survive these days, difficult as they are. What matters is that, as far as possible, we are able to do whatever feels right for us, and eventually be able to more easily carry the loving memory of our child with us into future times.

Acknowledgement – the content in this brochure was sourced from The Compassionate Friends UK brochure on coping with Christmas and has been reproduced with their permission



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