

But I Don't Feel Like Celebrating

Facing Special Days After a Loss

Donnerstag Jeudi Giovedì
Friday Freitag Vendredi Viernes 12
Sabato Sábado

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August was well under way when Susan finally got around to turning the calendar past July. Well-meaning family and friends kept telling her that even though her husband's birthday was on the 18th she "just needed to cheer up and get on with the rest of her life."

"It's so hard to face that he's gone," she told her bereavement support group. With tears welling up in her eyes she continued: "Everyone reminds me of what a great life we had. But I don't feel like celebrating!"

Perhaps like Susan you are facing a special day – a birthday, family holiday, holy day in your faith tradition or the anticipation of a granddaughter's wedding. But whatever this special day is, its occurrence causes tears and sadness rather than joy and celebration.

Most bereaved people find holidays, anniversaries and anticipated events to be especially difficult during the first few years of their grief. And many bereaved people feel fresh waves of sadness around special days, even years after their loved one's death. Of course, there is no right or wrong way to grieve because your grief, your relationship and your special days are all unique. So take time to grieve your way.

Special days are all about relationships and that's one reason they are so difficult. Maybe you travelled to be with extended family and being with special people was the centrepiece of your celebration. Since a special person's absence makes these days so poignant, listed are some practical, proven ways to face your grief.

Plan in advance

Getting "blindsided" by a special day makes it seem even more difficult. Take out your calendar and begin thinking about which days you and your loved one always participated in holiday or family activities. After listing the "tough days", write down two or three of the ways you shared the day – decorating your house, baking a cake or enjoying a meal together. Then write down two or three activities you think you want to do and the people with whom you want to share it.

Take care of yourself

Most people over eat, delay exercise and get inadequate rest during holidays and family events. Yet grief takes a great toll on your body's physical well-being. As a result it's important for you to try to get extra rest, drink lots of fluids and take care not to overindulge in sweet and fatty foods. Your body needs the extra energy that comes from healthy eating, adequate rest and regular exercise.

Choose which traditions to keep this year

Trying to “keep everything like it was when Dad was here” is a practice that is sure to fail. Much as you might want to do everything like the past, grief means finding a “new normal” and that means deciding which of the traditions you want to keep.

If you have always entertained the entire family in your home but now lack the energy, have a candid conversation with your family. Suggest everyone brings a dish or that you dine together in a restaurant. Even if you’ve always sent hundreds of cards, it does not mean you must this year. You can always resume the old tradition in a future year if you want.

Create a new observance

Honouring your loved one’s memory while acknowledging how different life now is can be an important way to grow through your grief on special days. Make a contribution to charity or take flowers to the cemetery to create memorable new traditions that honour your loved one.

Christmas was the first time since his wife’s funeral that the whole family was together. Before the meal was served, David chose to light a candle in the centre of the table while inviting everyone to tell their favourite “mum story”. Knowing the time would be emotional, David’s oldest daughter placed a small pack of tissues by every place setting.

Join a bereavement group

We are not made to grieve alone but to share with others. Bereavement support groups provide great gathering places to exchange ideas and find support for the “alone times”. If you haven’t already found a group, ask a friend, your funeral director, a member of the clergy or a healthcare professional to recommend one.

Help someone else

Some of the pain from special days seems lessened when you find someone else to help. Volunteer centres in your community can recommend places where you can help using your gifts, talents and abilities. Something amazing happens in grief when you give yourself to others. You end up feeling better too.

Don’t forget the Children

Sometimes in the rush to do what you want during special days in grief, younger family members are overlooked. Ask their opinion and discover what they want to do for the special day. Involve them in the preparations.

When Bob and June’s 11-year-old son died they wanted to just skip Halloween. “We knew that wouldn’t be good for our three younger boys,” June said. “So we asked what they wanted to do. Together we made Robbie’s favourite cookies. That’s our new tradition to celebrate his favourite time of year.”

Even as the sun sets on this chapter of your life, you can hold memories of special occasions in your heart. Tell the stories. View the pictures. Remember the heritage you shared. Observe special days with quietness, fanfare or something in between. But above all else, give yourself the chance to grieve your way, especially when you don’t feel like celebrating.

William G. Hoy

Christmas can be a particularly traumatic period for the bereaved. The following ideas and suggestions may help ease the pain:

1. Buy a Christmas candle and light it each day though December.
2. Plan your shopping trips ahead of time or try creative alternatives.
3. Enlist the help of others in wrapping your gifts.
4. Give yourself permission to change family traditions.
5. Try a new idea when you are ready to hang up Christmas stockings.
6. Determine to do one special thing for someone else in December.
7. Contribute to your favourite charity in your loved one's name.
8. Pamper yourself this month.
9. Plan on taking time to cry.



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