

## Handling Grief During the Holidays

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Christmas lights twinkle and holiday music surrounds you as store clerks, neighbors and friends say, “Merry Christmas!” Party invitations arrive, and greeting cards and gifts, too. The world is both merry and bright, right?

Not for everyone.

If you have suffered the loss of a loved one, and the world at Christmas seems like a snow globe full of happy people you can see but not join, then all the trappings of the holiday season just seem to illuminate how alone you feel.

“The holidays are such a challenge for people suffering a loss,” said Alan Pedersen, executive director of The Compassionate Friends, a support group network that serves those who have lost a child.

The Compassionate Friends is the largest network in the world of its kind, and has over 700 chapters.

“It will be especially hard for those who have lost someone in the last year. Even those farther out from their loss may experience a return to sadness, with the emphasis on that empty chair, the person no longer here to enjoy the festivities,” he said.

If you are struggling with grief this holiday season, take heart. There are a few strategies you might employ to make this time a little easier, and you may even find pockets of sudden joy and dear memory as you navigate new territory without your loved one.

“My first Christmas without my son, who died suddenly at 24 in my home many years ago, was a nightmare,” said a 78-year-old Connecticut mother. “For a few years after that, Christmas was awful. Then, very gradually — and I mean it took years — I felt especially close to him at Christmas.”

She sighed. “Grief and healing are both a spiritual mystery to me, still.”

“There is no right way to grieve, and this needs to be understood,” Pedersen said. “But those grieving should never feel compelled to participate in any activities that are overwhelming.”

Pederson lost his 18-year-old daughter Ashley to a car accident in August 2001, and he recalls that first Thanksgiving being particularly hard. He eventually left the gathering. For him, it was too much too soon.

“Grief happens on the inside. That’s what we are feeling in our hearts. Mourning is our outward expression of that grief, and bereaved is the term for what we continue to be — living the rest of our lives with our loss,” he said.

Try planning ahead this season.

“Have an exit strategy if you do decide to attend that neighborhood party,” Pedersen said. “Take your own car, so that you can leave early. Or, let your host know, ‘Hey, I might duck out early — don’t worry. I’ll be fine.’”

### **Contour the Holidays to Your Needs**

“Maybe you attend one party, maybe you don’t,” Pedersen said. “Maybe you take a walk, instead, or listen to comforting music, or look through photo albums.”

It may sound extreme, but it’s OK to cancel the holiday all together. Don’t send cards, don’t set up the tree, and don’t exhaust yourself buying gifts, when you are barely hanging on.

“You can’t hurt a holiday’s feelings,” author and grief expert David Kessler wrote on his website, [Holidaygrief.com](http://Holidaygrief.com). Perhaps this Christmas is a quiet day, spent exactly as you want and need to spend it. Another chance to be with others in a celebratory mode will roll around next year, says Kessler.

If you are a little further along in your grief process, the holidays offer many meaningful opportunities to pay tribute to the one you lost.

“In Judaism, some of our most important holidays include a memorial service called Yizkor, when we take the opportunity to remember that loved one, honor their memory through prayer and then donate to charity in their name,” teacher and writer Rabbi Jason Miller said. “I also encourage survivors to use the holiday time to reflect on the wonderful memories with that loved one during past holidays.”

If you have a friend, neighbor or family member in grief, there are ways to offer kindness and help, avoiding the awkwardness that often accompanies addressing another’s loss.

“Never, ever, declare a holiday a ‘No Crying Zone,’ or ‘No Grief Zone,’” Pedersen said. “This is the absolute worst thing a family can do — demanding a gathering without tears.

“If you offer an invitation to someone who is grieving, leave it very open-ended,” he said. “‘We love you, we’re here for you — come by if you can, and let us know if there is anything at all we can do to help’ are all loving things to say. This puts no pressure on the grieving, while letting them know that they are loved.”

Grief eventually can lead to many positive, meaningful things, as time goes by. Some have been moved to start foundations or change their life’s work, as Pedersen did after the loss of his daughter.

“Only people who are capable of loving strongly can also suffer great sorrow, but this same necessity of loving serves to counteract their grief and heals them,” the great Russian writer Leo Tolstoy said.

“Good things can and will come to you,” Pedersen said. “Things will come back together for you. Maybe not in the same way — your holidays and your life may look much different from now on, but that’s OK. You can and will move forward.”