

Grief and the holidays: you can survive

Chances are, if you are grieving the death of a loved one this year, you might not share in the “happy” of holidays or “merry” of Christmas.

It's only natural. The pain of losing a family member, friend, coworker or pet can feel unbearable when everyone around you is celebrating.

“Grieving during the holidays is a struggle for anyone, but for older adults, it can be even more difficult,” says Marilyn Chapla, associate director of the Good Grief Center for Bereavement Support. “Health problems, loss of independence, loneliness and other issues that accompany growing older can compound and intensify the grief experience.”

Grief is a normal human reaction to the loss of someone important in our lives, according to Marilyn. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. Every person moves through the process in their own way and at their own pace. Grief can affect people physically, emotionally, psychologically and spiritually.

The Good Grief Center, located at 2717 Murray Avenue in Squirrel Hill, assists individuals and families as they work through the grieving process. Services are offered free of charge and include compassionate listening, grief education, referrals to community resources and access to a lending library of grief-related materials. Clients can receive emotional support from staff and trained volunteers in person, or over the phone.

“Calls from seniors do increase over the holidays and we welcome that,” Marilyn says. “We’re here to offer support and help them learn how to manage their grief, especially during the holidays. No one has to grieve alone.”

If you're up for taking part in festivities, enjoy them in moderation and to your comfort level. If you are grieving too deeply and celebrating is not an option, there are ways to



cope—specifically, by remembering the three “C’s”: choice, communication and compromise.

If you're the family matriarch or patriarch, it's okay to choose not to carry out seasonal traditions this year, such as hosting the main family gathering. Give yourself permission to choose what specific things you want to do and who you want to be with. If attending a party makes you feel panicky, that's okay; maybe skip the party this year. Don't want to be around family? That's okay, too; spend time with a close friend or by yourself.

Communicate your thoughts and feelings about those choices with loved ones, especially those also affected by the loss. Finally, be open to compromising with family and friends on all issues.

Society often forgets the special needs of seniors. For instance, when a senior loses a spouse, life changes dramatically; everything that was done as a couple for decades must now be done alone. If it's the first holiday season without a spouse, a widow or widower may not feel comfortable visiting others alone or celebrating at all. Newfound grief can also significantly increase loneliness for seniors whose families live out of town, or who no longer can drive, or have health issues that leave them homebound.

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Holidays that follow the death of a grandchild can be extremely difficult, too. "Many people don't realize that when a grandchild dies, grandparents grieve twice," Marilyn explains. "Not only do they mourn the loss of the child, but they also carry the pain of their own child's suffering."

Friends and family members can help seniors by encouraging them to talk about their grief and share memories of the person who has died. Refer to them by name; it's comforting for the grieving individual to hear. Listen to their stories. Hold their hand. Sit with them as they cry. Offer help with holiday chores or daily activities. Respect their decision to not attend celebrations, and their need to be alone. Be

supportive, and encourage them to find support outside of their social circle.

The Good Grief Center currently offers three ongoing bereavement support groups each month: an Afternoon Open Group from 3 to 4:30 p.m. on the first and third Wednesday, an Evening Open Group from 7 to 8:30 p.m. on the second and fourth Thursday and a Daughters Without Mothers group from 7 to 8:30 p.m. on the first and third Thursday.

"Holidays are about love and there's no better way to show your love to senior friends or family members at this time than to just be there for them on their terms, and let them grieve in their own way," Marilyn says. **PSN**

Tips for grieving during the holidays

- Be mindful of the energy that grieving and the holidays take. Both are hard work and exhausting. Take care of yourself by spending your energy wisely, by getting enough rest and by being careful not to overbook yourself with activities.
- Just because everyone always comes to your house for the holidays doesn't mean they have to come this year. Suggest that someone else host the gathering.
- If certain family traditions – such as carving the turkey or leading the family in song – make you uncomfortable this year, don't do them. You can always pick them up later.
- If you are grieving, your memory may not be up to par or you may be having trouble concentrating. That's normal. For holiday tasks such as cooking, shopping, cleaning and organizing, make lists and rely on them.
- If you are feeling pressured to participate in more than you're comfortable with, just say "No, thank you." You don't owe anyone an explanation. Be kind but firm.
- Instead of trying to push back memories of the person you are grieving this holiday, ask friends and family members to share recollections with you in photographs, stories and mementos.
- Most importantly, pay attention to yourself. Listen when that little voice tells you that you're tired and need to take a break from holiday preparation.
- Trust that you will make it through the holidays this year. Even with the differences, you will find the experience bittersweet. Trust that while the season will be tinged with many emotions, you will be able to celebrate more fully in the future.

For more tips or grief-related information, call (412) 224-4700 or (888) GRIEF88, or visit www.goodgriefcenter.com.

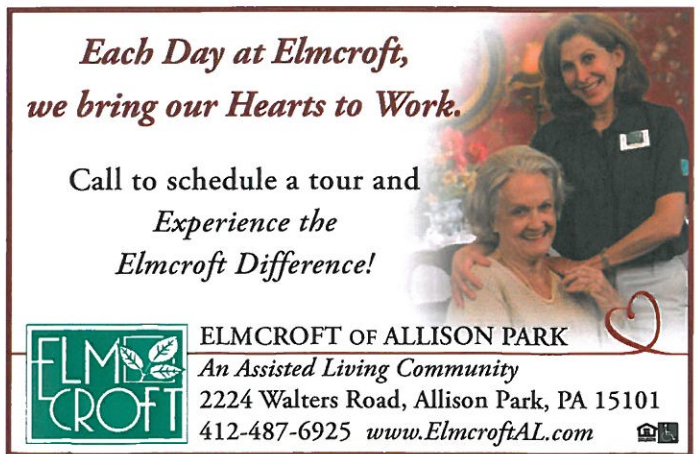


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