



Holidays, Birthdays & Anniversaries

Birthdays, anniversaries, Thanksgiving, Mother's Day, Father's Day, and religious holidays such as Christmas, Rosh Hashanah and Ramadan—these and other annual reminders of a loved one's death can be challenging, particularly during the first few years. Everywhere you turn sights and sounds and smells trigger memories. In addition to fond remembrances, you may feel depressed or encounter waves of terrible loneliness. Be gentle, accepting, and kind to yourself. In years to come you will once again be able to enter wholeheartedly into these times of celebration.



When a loved one has recently died, you are likely to greet family celebrations and special events with mixed feelings. Remember to honor your personal sense of how best to handle these occasions. Talking with a trusted family member or friend can help you clarify your thoughts and feelings.

While holidays, birthdays and anniversaries are difficult times for those grieving a close and recent death, don't create problems for yourself by expecting the worst. Simply be aware that certain circumstances may trigger sorrow and other painful feelings. Be prepared, stay flexible, and trust your ability to handle whatever arises. Chances are everything will go relatively smoothly.

PLAN AHEAD

It usually helps to plan ahead. As a general rule, even early in your bereavement, you'll benefit from

joining family and friends on days of special celebration. Of course, there are exceptions, and only you can know what is best in your particular circumstances.

You may wish to decline some holiday invitations or perhaps stay at an event for a briefer than normal period. Because of your grief, your energy level is likely to be lower than normal. So pace yourself accordingly, and take advantage of opportunities for a little extra rest.

Avoid staying overly busy. Give yourself some space so that you can more easily respond to the wisdom of your body, mind and spirit. Ignoring your grief won't make it go away. Allow your feelings to be whatever they are, and remember that it's good to reach out and share your thoughts and emotions with those who understand. Don't be surprised if your sadness alternates with times of laughter and happy memories. This too is normal



and healthy.

Grief expert Alan Wolfelt recommends that you spend special holidays with supportive, comforting people: “Identify those friends and relatives who understand that the holiday season can increase your sense of loss and who will allow you to talk openly about your feelings. Find those persons who encourage you to be yourself and accept your feelings—both happy and sad.” Dr. Wolfelt also suggests that you speak candidly and use the name of the person who died in your holiday conversation.

PRACTICE ACCEPTANCE AND FORGIVENESS

If the memories of your loved one are tinged with resentment, if the death was violent, or if he or she committed suicide, you may find yourself dealing with some very hard-to-handle emotions. These emotions can make you feel like you have run into a brick wall at full speed. Without warning, they can flare up and overwhelm you, and if not dealt with, they can hinder your healing and growth.

When difficult emotions arise, allow them, feel them, learn from them; but remember that you are still in charge. When you do not let negative emotions dominate you, you grow in strength and wisdom. Just as the muscles of the body grow from lifting weights, you grow emotionally as you push through heavy emotions, struggling to accept, understand, and release them.

Keep in mind the enormous healing power of forgiveness. Each of us requires forgiveness at various points in our lives. Without it we cannot thrive. Forgiveness does not condone hurtful behavior, but it does free us from self-defeating resentment. And it does bring peace of mind, freedom of spirit, and an opportunity to make fresh starts. As you feel led, extend the gift of forgiveness to others and to yourself.

ADDITIONAL REMINDERS OF YOUR LOSS

Special family celebrations such as reunions, weddings, christenings, and bar mitzvahs and bat

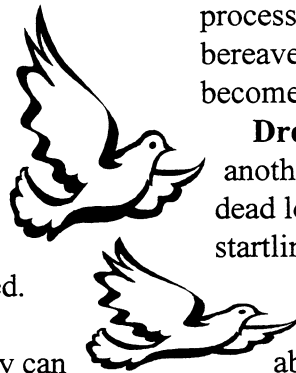
mitzvahs also can be difficult for a person in bereavement. Besides celebrations, a variety of other bittersweet reminders are likely to crop up: a song that sparks special memories, a visit to a favorite restaurant or beach, mail addressed to your deceased loved one, or a phone call from a friend who has not heard about the death.

Reminders like these, particularly the unexpected ones, are likely to reawaken your sense of loss and sadness. It’s never easy. If the reminder jolts you, sit down, take a few deep breaths, and acknowledge your grief. You’ll soon feel better. Remember too that what you are experiencing is normal. It’s all part of the sometimes painfully slow healing process. Take heart: As the years go by, most bereaved individuals report that their memories become predominantly warm, pleasant, loving ones.

Dreams. Now and then reminders surface in another way—in our dreams. While dreaming of a dead loved one is a normal experience, it can be startling. As grief expert Helen Fitzgerald points out, “You may be trying hard to realize he or she is really dead, and wham, you dream about your loved one, alive and well, the two of you having a good time.”

Nightmares. While most of these dreams are positive in nature, sometimes they are anything but pleasant, such as a nightmare related to a violent death. It may be the replay of the death scene itself, or an out-picturing of rage directed toward the perpetrator of a homicide. If nightmares trouble you, we recommend seeking assistance from a qualified mental health professional.

Visions. Occasionally, individuals report seeing a vision of their loved one or hearing the deceased loved one’s voice. This may happen during sleep or while awake. Some psychologists believe such experiences are a product of wishful thinking or the subconscious mind. Other professionals recognize many of these experiences as genuine. A good rule of thumb is to trust your own heart. If the vision leaves your heart feeling peaceful and comforted, consider it a gift. It often helps to share your experience with a respected friend.



HEALING DOES NOT MEAN FORGETTING

As the years go by your pain will soften while the fond memories of your loved one continue to comfort you and cheer you on. In that sense you will take the best of the past into the future with you. The healing that comes as you go through your grief brings learning, growth and renewal, but the memories of your loved one will always live in your heart. Healing does not mean forgetting.

SOME ANNIVERSARIES CAN BE JOYFUL EVENTS

Laura's beloved grandmother died eight years ago in November. Every November since then, Laura and her young children plant a little patch of bulbs somewhere in the backyard. Then they have hot chocolate, and Laura tells a story about the adventures of growing up with her grandmother. "It doesn't cost much or take long," says Laura, "but the kids really look forward to it. They call it Granny Day. Now throughout the spring and summer colorful reminders of Granny bloom all over the backyard."

FEEL FREE TO STEP TO A DIFFERENT DRUMMER

As human beings we display a marvelous variety of personalities, and we each have our own creative ideas and unique preferences. Be true to yourself; do what feels right to you. Trust and follow your own heart.

After the death of her only son, Jane, a 35-year-old single woman, decided to establish a new Thanksgiving Day tradition. She teamed up with another single friend and threw a large Thanksgiving dinner to which they invited other single friends, newcomers to their neighborhood, and a number of foreign students from the local university. The dinner was a delight, and Jane and her friend plan to continue the tradition next year.

Taking a distinctly different approach, a well-adjusted widower chooses to spend his wedding anniversaries at a secluded park with beautiful meadows and wooded trails—a nature sanctuary he and his wife enjoyed.

He explains: "I derive so much peace and comfort from being alone in nature and recalling the treasured memories of our times together. I smile, shed a few tears, even laugh a bit. She is still *very* much with me. I can feel the spirit of her love in my heart. It's very sweet and very strong."

For him the words of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow hold special meaning: "The holiest of all holidays are those kept by ourselves in silence and apart; the secret anniversaries of the heart."

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Prepared by Sam Quick, Human Development and Family Relations Specialist; and Derek Gwinn, Graduate Student, University of Minnesota. (# 30 of 33, 1996)

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