

Surviving the Holidays



With good reason, holiday seasons are among the most emotionally difficult times for people who have experienced the death of a loved one. Holidays may be difficult no matter what you try to do or where you go. Be gentle with yourself. Below are some tips that may help.

- Traditions are meant to serve us. If one is uncomfortable or painful, change it or create a new one.
- If you want to let the day pass quietly, then do so.
- Emotional and physical strength may be limited. Enlist the help of family members and friends. If shopping is overwhelming, try using catalogues or shop online.
- Parties may be too exhausting for you. Conversely, do not feel guilty for going to a party and enjoying yourself.
- Take care of yourself by eating right, exercising, getting enough sleep, drinking water, and limiting alcohol and caffeine.
- Communicate with your family about expectations for the holidays.
- Volunteering during the holidays in the name of a loved one can bring solace.
- Set a place at the table for your loved one. You may place a single flower, empty glass, or lit candle to symbolize the presence in spirit of the one who has died.
- Allow time when friends and family have gathered to share favorite memories of your loved one. Embrace both the laughter and tears that these memories bring.
- Plant a tree in honor of your loved one.
- Select an heirloom of your loved one and pass it on to someone else.
- Write notes about your loved one and put them in a stocking. You may have a special message or some unfinished business that it is important to express. Then you may share them, keep them private, or surrender them to the ashes in the fireplace as a ritual of healing.
- Set limits for yourself. Do only as much as you can manage.
- Grief is a physical experience for children. Lighting candles, drawing pictures, decorating photos, making food, or contributing in some way to the overall ritual can be helpful.

Hospice Austin offers support groups and individual counseling to help you through your loss. Please call (512) 342-4784 for additional information.

Coping With the Holidays Checklist

You may want to share this list with your family or have them complete a list of their own and then compare notes.

Cards

- Mail as usual
- Shorten the mailing list
- Include a "holiday letter"
- Choose not to send this year

Decorations

- Decorate as usual
- Modify decorations
- Ask for help
- Let others do it
- Have a special decoration for loved one

Shopping

- Shop as usual
- Give cash
- Shop through catalogs
- Ask for help

- Shop early
- Make gifts
- Give baked goods
- Shop with a friend
- Ask for help wrapping gifts
- Exchange gifts later

Holiday Music

- Enjoy as usual
- Avoid turning on the radio
- Shop early before stores start playing holiday music
- Listen to it, and allow yourself to feel sad

Traditions

- Keep the old traditions
- Attend holiday parties
- Don't attend holiday parties
- Bake the usual holiday foods
- Buy the usual holiday foods
- Modify or reduce holiday foods
- Go to religious services

- Do not attend religious services
- Attend religious services but at a different time
- Attend a totally different spiritual place
- Spend quiet time alone
- Visit the cemetery
- Open gifts on different days
- Open gifts in front of others

Holiday Dinner

- Prepare as usual
- Go out to dinner
- Invite friends or family over
- Eat alone
- Change time of dinner
- Change routine of dinner, such as buffet instead of sit-down
- Change location of dinner, eat in different room
- Ask for help

Post Holiday and New Year's Day

- Spend as usual
- Remove holiday decorations early
- Go out of town
- Avoid New Year's parties
- Attend a New Year's party
- Have a New Year's party
- Spend time with a few friends
- Go to a movie
- Go to bed early
- Write your hopes in your journal



Families, Holidays, and Change

Preparation

If your family faces a holiday season in which things will be different from before, here are some suggestions for preparing:

- First, be sure to have a place with adult friends or family members where you talk about your stress and sort out your own feelings beforehand, away from your children.
- When you talk with your children, ask open-ended questions, like “What did you like most about...?,” or “How is it for you when you remember...?,”
- Be a good listener—do not judge feelings or thoughts; just listen and say back what you hear to be sure you are understanding correctly.
- Do not require your children to discuss things. After you have offered a chance to talk, and are turned down, let your child know that if he chooses, he can bring it up another time.
- Instead of trying to help your children feel better immediately, allow some time to simply acknowledge their feelings and let them know that their feelings are natural.

Planning

With this style of exploration, you and your family will be able to develop realistic expectations about the holidays, so that, as much as possible, you can avoid disappointment. Including the whole family in this planning will make it more successful.

- Talk first about what each of you has liked about past celebrations — favorite foods, activities, and people.
- Talk honestly (without burdening your children with too much information) about what may be different this year — financial resources may be limited; emotional resources, such as energy, joy, feelings of security and satisfaction may be lacking.
- Given that, discuss which of your usual celebrations can or cannot happen this year and, if not, why not. Identify one (or more) thing that the family is most appreciative of; something you want to celebrate, even though things are not the same.
- Decide how you can show that appreciation and/or give to others within the new limits—plan a new celebration, for ex-



ample. Mark things as important by doing them in a special place or at a particular time. Use candles, or “journeys” to a celebration site; have a particular person lead the ritual. This is a way to honor a family’s life together.

- Discuss feelings about the fact that things will be different. Ask your children how they are coping with the changes at home. Allow them to express a range of feelings, even those that are unpleasant. We all need an opportunity to share pain; this is a good time to show family that you want to understand all of their emotions, not just the easy ones.

Asking family members to work together to plan for the holidays, especially in stressful times, is a wonderful way to comfort and reassure children. It sends the message that, despite difficulties or loss, this family will continue to work together to provide for one another’s well-being.

Many of the concepts and suggestions in this article were adapted from [Helping Children Prepare for and Cope with Natural Disasters: A Manual for Professionals Working with Elementary School Children](#), by Annette M. La Greca, Ph.D.; Eric M. Vernberg, Ph.D.; Wendy K. Silverman, Ph.D.; April L. Vogel, Ph.D.; and Mitchell J. Prinstein, M.S.