

# Handling Special Days & Celebrations

Birthdays, holidays, and other special days are usually times for family gatherings and celebration. When you come together for the first time after a death, it can be really difficult. The following guidelines are shared in the hope that they will be helpful to you in thinking about and planning for the holidays and other special days. Grieving people have definite limitations: you do not function at normal capacity. Therefore, you must re-evaluate your priorities and decide what is truly meaningful for you and your family.

## KNOW WHAT YOUR SPECIAL DAYS ARE.

- Special days are those times when family and friends get together for fun.
- Mark on your calendar the months during which your family celebrations occur.
- Begin early to plan your coping strategies.

## DECIDE WHAT YOU CAN HANDLE COMFORTABLY.

- Whether or not to talk about your loved one openly.
- Whether you can handle the responsibility of the family dinner, holidays parties, etc., or if you wish someone else to take over some of these traditions this year.
- Whether you will stay here for the celebrations or try something totally new this year.

**PLAN THE SPECIAL DAY BY MAKING A LIST** of things to be done for the day, drawn up and discussed by family members. In this way priorities can be set, some tasks can be shared, some eliminated, and plans made to accomplish those things considered essential. This sharing can demonstrate a recognition of and respect for each family member's values.

## DON'T BE AFRAID TO MAKE CHANGES.

- Exchange gifts at a different time.
- Have dinner at a different time. Eat at a restaurant or at another person's house.
- Attend a different place of worship.
- Let the children take over: baking the birthday cake, decorating the tree, making cookies.
- Give the job of planning to a friend or relative.

## GREAT COMFORT MAY COME IN DOING SOMETHING FOR OTHERS.

- Giving a gift in memory of your loved one.
- Donating the money you would have spent on your loved one's gift to a meaningful charity.
- Adopting a needy family for the holidays.
- Inviting a guest (foreign student, senior citizen, someone who would otherwise be alone) to share your festivities.

## OTHER SUGGESTIONS:

- Burn a special candle to quietly include your absent loved one.
- Shopping is definitely easier if you make a list ahead of time.
- Then, when one of the "good days" comes along, you can get your shopping done quickly and with less confusion.
- Shopping by phone, from catalogs, or on-line can also help.

## BE INTENTIONAL ABOUT HOW YOU PLAN YOUR SPECIAL DAYS.

Examine the events and tasks of the celebration and ask the following questions:

- Have I involved or considered other family members?
- Do I really enjoy doing this? Do other family members enjoy doing this?
- Is it done out of habit, free choice, or obligation?
- Is this a task that can be shared by other family members?
- Would the celebrations be the same without it?

## EVALUATE YOUR COPING PLANS.

- Do your plans isolate you from those who love and support you best?
- Do your plans allow for meaningful expression and celebration of what the particular day means to you?

## LET YOUR PLANS AND LIMITS BE KNOWN.

- Schedule a family meeting in which each person can share his/her feelings.
- Write, e-mail, or phone friends and family to inform them of intended changes which would involve or leave them out.
- Tell close friends how you plan to approach the special day and the role they can play in helping you.

## DON'T BE AFRAID TO HAVE FUN.

- Enjoyment, laughter, and pleasure are not experiences in which you abandon your lost loved one. You have not forgotten him/her. Your loved one would not want you to be forever sad: you need not feel guilty over any enjoyment you may experience.
- Give yourself and your family permission to celebrate and take pleasure in the day.

## REMEMBER:

- Take one day at a time.
- Be realistic. It is most important to recognize that fatigue can be deadly and lead to feelings of depression. Don't over-extend, don't over-commit. Recognize that you need to set limits and do those things which are meaningful to yourself and your family.
- Eliminate the unnecessary and reduce the pressures on yourself and others.
- Know that whatever you choose to do this year, you may decide to do differently next year. Growth and change go hand in hand.
- If your faith has been an important part of your life, allow time for its expression.
- Your special days will be different. The important thing to remember is to do what is comfortable for you and your family.
- It may help to know that the anticipation is frequently worse than the day itself.
- Finally, as you seek to make sensible plans, remember to make them firm enough to support you, but flexible enough to leave you some freedom.
- Most importantly, take time in your plans to love and be loved.

*These guidelines are based on guidelines prepared by Shirley Melin, with Compassionate Friends, Fox Valley Chapter, Aurora, Illinois.*

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