

Hope for the holidays with a grieving heart

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For The Visitor



As we prepare for the coming of Jesus into our hearts this year, it is the fifth year that I will greet the Christmas season without my husband, Dave.

Each year, I find the season to be more gentle, less pain-filled, and I am more fully able to remember this world is not our ultimate home. But, as I once again look forward to the celebration of our Savior's birth, I know that our lives of faith here on earth matter.

From my own experience, I have come to believe holidays can be especially difficult for those who are experiencing grief.

At family gatherings and celebrations the bereaved may feel lost, lonely and empty without their beloved. Many holiday activities, sights, sounds and foods remind us of what — and who — we are missing in our life.

Family and friends are seeking ways to provide a glimpse of joy for those who are grieving amidst their loss. We may long to fill others with love and joy. There are ways we can indeed provide a light of God's love to those who are experiencing grief these weeks of Advent and Christmas.

It is important to be mindful that we all love and grieve in our own personal ways. While some of the following suggestions may be of great help to one person, they may not to another person. Be open to learning from yourself as well as others about what people find helpful and supportive as they journey in their grief.

- Care for yourself — honor your feelings. Be open to sadness, tears and moments that may be difficult. Allow yourself to feel deeply and honor your love lost. Tears and sadness are not a sign of weakness but rather a response to a love that is lost. Be open to joy and happiness as well. If it feels good to laugh and feel joy, allow yourself that delight.
- Care for others — honor their feelings. Be willing to allow others their feelings. Be willing to be a "safe" person. Hold yourself back from saying, "don't cry." Be willing to sit with another in silence. Offering a heartfelt "I'm sorry" may be the most powerful words offering care to their feelings of loss. Affirm signs of their joy and happiness. The bereaved person may feel they cannot both feel loss and joy. Be willing to embrace all the emotions of their journey.
- Care for yourself — allow faith to lead. Spiritual practices and beliefs may provide support and care. Be aware that others may not have an understanding of what beliefs are supportive and comforting. You may want to share with others your thoughts and practices.
- Care for others — allow their faith to teach you. Be willing to learn from others what is helpful for them. Open yourself to understand and allow the grieving person to "teach you" what they believe and what gives them comfort. For those who are spiritually minded, death and loss may shake their beliefs. Consider how you may be a safe person for them to seek answers. You do not need answers, nor is it your responsibility to find them, you are there to provide comfort in their journey.
- Care for yourself — remember your beloved. Find ways for you, your family and friends to include your loved one's memory in the festivities.

If you have a Christmas tree, perhaps add an ornament each year to recall your beloved. Consider holding the deceased person's place at the dinner table with an empty seat and candle.

Say their name, perhaps including a prayer of thanksgiving with grace at mealtime for their life and love. Say their name, tell the stories of their life. Embrace your memories. Memories made in love are never lost.

- Care for others — remember their beloved. You can support another grieving person by giving them an ornament or candle while sharing with them a memory of their beloved who died. Ask them to share a memory of a past holiday with their beloved. Say their name, honor their life. Memories are often of great joy and comfort.
- Care for yourself — become involved in service. Consider an activity or service in the community to lift your spirits and honor your beloved. It can be humbling and affirming to help others. Perhaps you can find a service or need that honors something that was important to your beloved.
- Care for others — serve in their memory. Spend time or consider buying a gift in honor of a person who has died. Select a gift that reflects the person you are doing this kindness in memory of. Perhaps a game, sweater or a favorite meal can be a gift to someone in need this Christmas season. Send a note to the deceased's family and share a memory of your gift. Example: "We are remembering this Christmas how much Dave enjoyed roast beef; in his memory we have gifted a roast beef dinner to a family in need."

For those who are grieving and missing their beloved this Christmas season, I am so very sorry for your loss. During the holidays, surround yourself with people and activities that feel good. Remember to be gentle with yourself. Grief is the result of love.

