



# Coping With Christmas

## ***Remember the golden rule of grief: there are no rules***

Grief is as unique and individual as the person who is experiencing it. There are no fixed stages or set sequence of emotions and behaviours. People can experience the same type of loss and cope in entirely different ways. Christmas can be a particularly difficult time. The following suggestions may be helpful.

### **Communication - Let people know how you feel**

Let your family and friends know you are unsure about Christmas and what you want to do, or that you don't feel up to it this year. Let them know:

- ❖ How deeply the loss has affected you;
- ❖ You are experiencing intense emotions at the moment; and
- ❖ That you are not sure how this will affect you and when.

Tell your friends and family that you will do what feels right for you day to day...and that is likely to change over time. Reassure them that you're going through a natural grieving process and that you need to adjust how you operate in the world because your life as you knew it has changed. Let them know that your love for them is unchanged and that declined invitations are not personal you just need time to adjust.

### **Delegate - You do not have to do it all... or any of it**

Regardless of whether you were the main chef and organiser or only ever took a salad for Christmas lunch, you do not have to do any of it. Let someone else do the work, or at least help you. You may want to withdraw from all Christmas and holiday activities this year. That's OK. 'Taking a year off' may be what you need to begin integrating the loss of your loved one into your life. Or you may want to go away somewhere. Alternatively, you may want to carry on with your family traditions with a focus on your loved one. Any of these options are OK. Let your family and friends know what you decide to do.

### **Options - You can change your mind**

Go ahead and arrange to participate in festivities, but see how you feel on the day. Give yourself permission to pull out at the last moment if you don't feel up to it, people will understand if you forewarn them (and therefore not take it personally). Often the lead up to the day may be harder to cope with than the day itself. See how you go, and have a plan to leave after a period of time if you need to.

### **It's your choice - Do what feels right for you**

This is your grief and only you can decide what feels right for you. Other people can make suggestions or extend invitations, but ultimately it's your choice about what works best for you.



## **You're Normal – You're not going crazy**

The barrage of emotions that engulf you after the loss of a loved one can become more intense during any special occasion. Having fun can sometimes seem wrong, almost as if you are betraying your loved one. This is normal. Sometimes, the day after you have enjoyed yourself, you may find yourself feeling very low. Don't let that stop you doing things and enjoying yourself. Grief and joy can and need to be able to co-exist.

## **Create a new tradition**

You can create new traditions that can honour the memory of your loved one at Christmas - and at any time. Christmas can be an opportunity for a beautiful tribute to your loved one.

Only you will know what's meaningful for you, but here are a few suggestions:

- ❖ Make a special memorial spot in the garden where you can sit and 'be' with your loved one.
- ❖ Plant their favourite tree or flowers.
- ❖ Make a memory box with special items that belonged to your loved one, that meant something special to them or symbols that represent their life. You may like to bring it out every Christmas as a memorial and perhaps add to it.
- ❖ Write a letter to your loved one that can be placed in the memory box.
- ❖ Ask friends and members of the family to write down a fond memory or a quality of your loved one and place it in a stocking. As you pull out each slip of paper, ask the person whose name is on the slip to share their memory of your loved one.
- ❖ Light a candle for your loved one. If you like, set a place at the table for them and raise your glass in honour of their memory.

## **Children**

If young children are part of your life, you may feel overwhelmed with the thought of preparing for Christmas. You may like to call on family and friends for support at this time. Practical things like shopping for food and gifts, help with decorating the house and tree, babysitting whilst you do the gift shopping or helping with housework and other domestic chores may lessen the burden of the lead up to Christmas. The extra help may leave you with some energy to just enjoy being with the children.

### ***Plan in advance.***

Whatever you decide to do this Christmas it may be a good idea to let the children know what is going to happen in advance. They also need to know that what has been planned may even change at the last moment. Children are very sensitive to their environment and the moods of others.

Depending on their age they don't necessarily need an elaborate explanation for every question. As long as you remain open and honest with them, children may more easily adjust to their new circumstances. Allow them to see you upset and give a brief reason why you are upset (children have a tendency to blame themselves or worry).



If they see you openly mourn it may give them permission to mourn too and help them accept grief as a normal part of life.

### **Adult Children**

Even adult children may still feel some of the insecurities of younger children in their time of grief. They may not know how to relate to you at this time and may be looking to you for guidance. Or they may be struggling with their grief in ways that affect their relationship with you.

Things that may be useful to remember when relating to adult children:

- ❖ Remember that they are adults who make their own choices.
- ❖ Remember that they are hurting for your loved one too.
- ❖ It may be your instinct to protect them from your grief, but they are old enough now to support you at this time, or for you to share your grief together
- ❖ They may also try to protect you from their grief so as not to burden you.
- ❖ Be open about how you feel and they may be open in return.
- ❖ Sharing each other's grief may be a way of getting to know each other better and strengthening your bond

### **If family and friends are unable to be with you this Christmas**

If you know that you will be alone this Christmas, try making a list of the things that you would like to do on the day. You may not get around to doing any of the things on the list, but at least you will have a plan if needed.

Some suggestions include:

- ❖ Visit a local spot that you both enjoyed together.
- ❖ Visit somewhere that you had both wanted to see together but couldn't get to.
- ❖ Visit your local Community Centre or Church to see if they are looking for people to visit others who will also be alone at Christmas.
- ❖ Volunteer for a couple of hours in a charity kitchen.
- ❖ Light a candle or create a special display.
- ❖ Buy or prepare yourself a lovely meal, curl up on the sofa and watch a movie.



## Practical suggestions for managing grief

It is possible to feel isolated and alone even when you are surrounded by people. If you can, be with people who will allow you to talk when you need to and who will also sit with you in silence. Instinctively, people will try to 'fix it for you'. You may be able to reassure them that all they have to do is listen, to be there, or to let you be alone when you need to. Practical help can also be an enormous support and relief.

Remember:

- ❖ Allow yourself to feel all of your emotions. There is no need to 'perform' and be happy. You may feel sad, angry, happy, tired, resentful, maybe all at the same time. Try to make room for all your emotions, allow them to come and go as they need to.
- ❖ Write a letter to your loved one telling them how much you miss them, find a quiet spot to remember all the good times, journal your feelings, or talk with a good friend.
- ❖ Go for a walk, go to the beach, listen to music, have a massage.
- ❖ Look after yourself. Eat well, exercise, take time out and rest when you need to. Follow your instincts.

The Internet as a valuable grief resource and the website below has lots of helpful written resources:

**[www.grief.org.au](http://www.grief.org.au)**

Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement website.

