

Hope During the Holidays: Ways to Cope with Loss

By Emmanuel Hospice

During the holidays, our culture suggests that we should be experiencing unmitigated joy, enveloped in one celebration after the other.

But that season wrapped in ribbons and bows feels altogether different to someone trying to cope with grief tied to the loss of a loved one.

“The death of someone close can really shake a survivor’s world, and celebration is the last thing on their mind,” says Heather O’Brien, director of bereavement and volunteer services for Emmanuel Hospice. “Even if it’s an expected death, the triggers are so many. The minute you walk into a store, there’s the Christmas displays. Every station on the radio seems to be playing carols. And the decorations are everywhere. It can all add up to stress for people who are already suffering.”

O’Brien also points out that for those of us living in Michigan, December traditionally provides us only scant amounts of sunshine, compounding the dilemma by creating gloomier-looking days than usual.

What to do?

O’Brien is quick to point out that there are proven strategies to combat feelings of sadness and anxiety during the holidays. The answers lie in preparing for that sadness to unfold, and being purposeful about how you respond to it.

“Coping is different for each person,” says O’Brien, who has been working in hospice care for the better part of two decades, the last four years at Emmanuel, a faith-based organization with a staff that boasts more than 200 years’ combined experience.

Devising a plan should meet those individual needs. If you’re missing a spouse, for instance, with whom you used to celebrate holidays, you may need to remove yourself from times and places that remind you of what was. That may mean spending more time with others as an antidote to retreating into chasms of loneliness.

When traditions are turned upside-down because of a death in the family, it might be time to invent others to take their place. O’Brien suggests being deliberate about honoring the loved one through storytelling, online posts, or perhaps creating an ornament or planting a tree (if warm enough) to replace that aura of sorrow with a little bittersweet joy.

It’s also important to consider setting boundaries, she says.

“Ask yourself if this is something – a party, for example – I want to do because I enjoy it, or because I’ve just always done it,” and then decide what’s in your best interest. In other words, don’t be shy about declining an invitation or slipping out early.

“Park your car so that no one can block you in, and you can leave when you want to, or simply tell your host ahead of time what hour you plan to exit, she recommends.”

As for how the rest of us might assist, O'Brien advises that instead of saying "Let me know if there's anything I can do," offer something specific – a shopping trip, a movie or meal, or just time talking.

Finally, have a Plan B worked out ahead of time. "Sometimes, just having that in place can bring your anxiety down," O'Brien says.

The holidays may never be the same after losing someone close to you. Remember there is no right or wrong to grieve. Take care of yourself and recognize that, as with each passing day, each holiday season will become a little easier.

For more information, visit emmanuelhospice.org.

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