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Coping with grief during the holiday season

By Audry Van Houweling, PMHNP

For many of us holidays are made meaningful by spending time with the people we love most.

We build traditions and memories defined by our loved ones playing special roles in helping to make the season bright. Someone hangs the Christmas lights, carves the turkey, decorates the home, prepares our favorite foods, eats the cookies, lights the candles, or whatever holiday traditions we may value. We come to anticipate these traditions, and it therefore can be especially difficult when those traditions and memories are disrupted after a loss. Feelings of togetherness and celebration can seem unreachable. The holidays may become a time of pain rather than joy.

Grief is felt more intensely during the holiday season. It may be hard to conceive of joy when a loved one that seemed to make the holidays meaningful is no longer with us. It can be difficult observing the joy and connections others may have when we might feel sad, angry, and/or lonely. We may feel the need to withdraw and isolate as socializing can feel uncomfortable or burdensome. Seasonal depression may be amplified as the winter months not only signify shorter days, but also grief and loss.

There is no right way to grieve. Coping with grief is a unique and individualized journey. It is important that we give both ourselves and others the grace and space to process loss without judgment or expectation.

We often have our vision of what the holiday season "should be." After losing someone we love it may seem that vision and the joy tied to it may never again be replicated. For one person it may be helpful to take a "year off" from the holidays and take time to process, while another person may find it helpful to celebrate the holidays and build new traditions. While losing someone can forever change the holiday season, it is possible that feelings of joy can in time begin to trickle back into our holiday experience.

Embracing grief and the emotions associated with it can help begin the healing process, but this can also be overwhelming. The holidays can be a time we may want to numb the

pain associated with grieving. Consider reaching out to social supports or asking for professional help.

Consider volunteering or finding ways to help others, which can shine perspective on our grief and help us feel connected.

After losing someone, we can often feel that by experiencing joy we are somehow not honoring those we have lost. Consider honoring those who have passed by lighting a candle, telling a story, or making their favorite food. In this way we can take part in memorializing their legacy and continue to include their spirit(s) in our holiday traditions.

It is also OK to create new traditions and new memories that may be different from years past, but still meaningful.

Regardless of how you feel about the holiday season, know that whether those feelings are positive or negative, you are not alone. Please see below for a list of grief support groups in the Central Oregon area.



CENTRAL OREGON GRIEF SUPPORT GROUPS

Partners In Care Bend
Adult and children's support groups
541-382-5882

Grief Share
Faith-based grief support groups.
Multiple Central Oregon locations.
www.griefshare.org

St. Charles Hospice
541-706-6700

Redmond Hospice
541-548-7483

Good Grief Guidance Bend
goodgriefguidance@gmail.com



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