



Dealing with Grief over Christmas

19 December 2023

Christmas is usually associated with family and friends, with love and happiness, and with giving and receiving gifts. For some people that is not what Christmas is at all. For some, Christmas is a time when they are particularly reminded of loss, of pain, and perhaps loneliness. If that is you, you don't have to resign yourself to having an awful time. You can decide what you want to make of Christmas. Despite all the traditions associated with Christmas, it is possible to make it less of a painful time, if for you it is a time of grieving.

1. Because human beings are creatures of habit, we tend to do things without even thinking about them. We do them because we have always done them. And so we find ourselves following the usual traditions of Christmas, even if it may be painful to do so. Remind yourself that you don't have to follow the usual Christmas traditions of putting up a tree, sending Christmas cards, or indulging in lots of shopping. If something is particularly difficult or painful you can skip doing it. If you need to, then explain to others why you are no longer engaging in the tradition. That could be one way to deal with experiences that are likely to be very hard to deal with over Christmas. You can of course, also create new traditions. This is especially applicable if you are near the end of grieving and ready to move on. Don't make this Christmas about complying with others if it is going to be extremely difficult. Give yourself enough self-care and permission to not do the things you are finding it hard to do.
2. Rituals can help us deal with loss and grief. Think about if there is a particular way in which you want to remember a loved one. And think about if you want to do this alone or with others around you. Perhaps you want to light a candle for them on Christmas day. Perhaps you want to place an ornament on the Christmas tree to remember them by. Perhaps you want to remember them in a speech before Christmas dinner. There are many ways to remember and honour someone who is no longer there.
3. Christmas usually means hearing about and seeing lots of happy families and people who love one another. That can make it very painful if you have lost someone. Seeing other people who have what we have lost is very hurtful. Allow yourself to grieve. Cry, get angry, vent, if

you need to. Seeing reminders around us of what we have lost is very painful. Speak up if you need to and let others help you. Nothing is going to take away the pain, however having people around you who care for you and want to support you can go a long way to making the situation more bearable. If you know other people who are also experiencing a devastating loss at this time, you could share your experiences and console one another.

4. Think ahead about what the Christmas period usually means. What do you normally do? Who do you spend time with? Where do you go when you go out? There could be lots of events, people, and situations that trigger a wave of grief. Plan ahead and decide what you want to do, where you want to do it, and who you want to be with. Try and not cut out everything. Isolation is not good for anyone. We are social beings, even if we are introverted. You need some time with people otherwise your unhappy thoughts could overwhelm you. If something is really going to be difficult for you then say so to others. You don't need a long explanation. You could say to them, "because of the loss of xyz.... I do not feel up to doing that". Don't be forced into doing something that you really dread.

5. This works even if it is not Christmas. But of course, it also works over Christmas. When you feel awful and circumstances are difficult, sticking to a routine is very helpful. Get up the same time every morning. Make mealtimes routine. Schedule activities to do during the day. Do some exercise. Lying in bed being miserable day after day is going to lead to things getting worse. Although grieving is not a nice experience, as it is a normal and healthy process for dealing with a terrible loss, it does start to get better at some stage. You will never be the same again. But you can get on with life eventually after you have finished most of your grieving.

6. I have already mentioned this, but I will do so again because it is so important. People who often suffer from depression and have learned to manage it, learn to recognise when depression is coming on and make sure they get out and meet people and do things. Isolation is really not healthy. There is a reason solitary confinement is a severe form of punishment. Don't isolate yourself all the time. Seeing other people can help. A really good way to feel better is to volunteer and there are plenty of opportunities for that over Christmas (and in fact throughout the year). Visit people in shelters for abused women and children, visit the elderly in old age homes, visit the sick in hospital, visit children in orphanages. Have a look on websites related to volunteering and get yourself out there.

7. Take care of yourself. Don't drink so much you get into trouble. You may numb your pain, but that is temporary, and you will eventually have to deal with it. And you could be left with some challenging circumstances to deal with if you drink and drive or behave inappropriately when drunk. Don't binge eat so much you feel and are sick. Christmas is often a time of overindulgence, but don't go overboard.

8. If you need it, there are helplines open on Christmas day for people who need support and someone to talk to. Don't feel embarrassed to make use of them and don't feel like a failure for asking for help. Everyone needs help at some time or another. Life breaks us all at various points in our lives. People are there who care and want to be able to comfort and support you at this time of year.

The problem with traditions is that society tends to dictate how we should respond. Who we should be with. What we should be doing. How we should be feeling. And this doesn't take into account our different life experiences. We are not all the same. We are not all on the same life journey. And many people are suffering a lot right now. Forget about what society says you should be doing and honour yourself by doing what is right for you. That doesn't mean go and be antisocial and break laws and generally make a nuisance of yourself. Whatever you do, you don't want to harm other people. Respect others and their rights. Just make sure you are not being forced into doing things that are really painful for you.

Merry Christmas.