

Commentary: Helping those who have lost loved ones this Christmas

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Chances are, you will encounter someone who's grieving the loss of a loved one this Christmas.



Helen HarrisThe loss might be fresh—sometime these past few months, or this past year. Or the loss might have occurred several years—maybe decades—ago, yet the pain and grief still are evident. For those who haven't experienced such a loss, this type of grief might be foreign. And it might even prompt a curious question: "How long does grief last?"

Grief expert Helen Harris, assistant professor in Baylor University's Diana R. Garland School of Social Work, shares some insights about long-term grief and how to approach others who are hurting during the holidays.

(This column originally appeared on the [Baylor University website](#).)

Q: How long does grief last?

Helen Harris: This is a difficult question. So much depends on the complications around the loss. When there is a disrupted relationship, or the death is traumatic, or the survivor is dealing with multiple losses or other issues like mental health or substance problems, it is a longer, more complicated process. Losses can persist throughout our lives, especially as they impact other milestones.

What does it mean when a 7-year-old loses her mother and then 16 years later doesn't have her mom there when she gets married as a 23-year-old or when her first child is born? That is just one example.

And different folks will have different experiences depending on their relationship, the support they had to grieve, and the new relationships and attachments they have established. I do recommend that we all keep in mind that the loss of a child or spouse or childhood loss of a parent has lifetime implications for change.

Q: How does grief change over the years? Does it lessen? Does it increase?

HH: I think about grief similarly to other wounds. Wounds heal over time, but it is never like they didn't happen at all.

In many cases, we heal and are stronger in the broken and healed places, which is what helps us help others. In other cases, we can be blindsided by new grief when a loved one is not there for a special event many years later.

Q: If we interact with someone this Christmas who is grieving, what are some things we should and shouldn't do?

HH: I recommend asking them what they need—what would help. Perhaps find a way to memorialize that person and validate their life and contributions to ours. For example, I place an ornament with each of my

parents' names on the tree. It is a way to include them and the memories of them in our Christmas traditions.

If I suspect someone is grieving, I mention the person who is gone and ask about past holiday traditions and memories. Then I let the survivors decide if they want to engage in that conversation or not and if they want to include new traditions that honor the life of the one who is gone.

An unhelpful response, I think, is to ignore the pain of others and pretend we don't see it or to trivialize it with statements like: "It's been long enough now to be over this."

Q: What are ways we can help someone with the grieving process this Christmas and beyond?

HH: Stay tuned in to the possibilities and ask the grieving person how they are and what they need. For some, it is helpful to go to the cemetery and leave a wreath or flowers. For others, that would be painful and not helpful.

There is no one right answer. It is important that people trust their own intuitive knowledge of themselves and that each person give the other grace to do what helps.

I light a candle on Thanksgiving and Christmas to represent the presence or spirit of those of the family who are not with us physically. I make ornaments with the names of those who have died to add to the tree and include them in the special day. But those aren't prescriptions. They are possibilities.

And most of all, I am not afraid of or try to dodge pain.

Q: Are there steps people can take to aid their long-term grief?

HH: Considering the memory and contributions of the person who died is important. Tree planting, giving a gift in honor of the person who is gone,

family pictures—all are ways to validate the importance of a life.

Look at pictures together. Tell stories of family legacy. Remember that all persons have strengths and weaknesses. Authentic remembering is honoring. Hugs are important. Tears are not a bad thing. There is an old song I used to love that included the refrain: “Tears are a language God understands.”

Helen Harris is an assistant professor in Baylor University’s Diana R. Garland School of Social Work. She began the first hospice in Waco. She has served as a social worker and bereavement coordinator. Since joining Baylor in 1997, she has continued to work with hospice by volunteering and by providing volunteer training for several area hospices.