

# **Voices: First holiday without a loved one**

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If this is your first holiday without a spouse or close relative, know that many have walked this path before you and may offer advice—myself included. If your loved one passed away since the last holiday season, you possibly are dreading this Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Sadness, loneliness and the replaying of memories means you have lost a relationship for which you always can be grateful. Many people never know beautiful family love, but you did. You enriched the life of the one who is gone, and that person enriched yours.

Life is joy and gratitude, then sorrow with gratitude when a new chapter like this begins. Love lasts forever, but the feelings that come with new circumstances may change.

You likely realize no two people handle grief exactly the same way. Some are able to have a family group for a holiday meal and get their minds off of their loss—at least temporarily. Others seem frozen in one spot, unable to move forward. How we cope—such as being social or not—is normal for us and should be respected by others.

## **How I handled grief**

When my mother died, my pain was as bad as anything I have known in life. Yet, at Thanksgiving and Christmas, I tried to deny that emotion and overcome it by cooking, decorating and filling the living room with wrapped gifts. I tried to become my mother, doing everything I ever saw her do—as if I could make her loss go away.

That year, our “celebration” included my dad, my stepdad and his children, as well as my own sister and family. We had quite a crowd for our modest table. Food was plentiful with a ridiculous amount of homemade desserts.

I had worked myself into a daze, while the other guests were ravished with sadness. They wanted to remember mother and grieve, not eat cheesecake. So, I learned a few lessons, and together, we found a balance that felt like truth. Exhausting myself didn’t work.

## **Ways to engage grief**

If this is your first holiday after a death, I recommend talking about your loved one at the time the family says the blessing over your meal. Ask for comfort through the Holy Spirit. Picture the glory of heaven, as what may feel like a joyless “rejoicing” is a foretaste of full joy with Jesus.

Holding hands as a family while you pray is healing. Stand together in grief, and together, face what lies ahead.

When families gather, members tend to form conversation groups. The various generations find one another, and the cousins talk to one another. Ministering to those we know best can be positive. Laughing, telling stories and recalling the past shows the true strength of our bond and memories together. Don’t discourage laughter, smiles or good times—even when you are sad.

Taking time out for a walk, nap or private conversation breaks up the day and gives us personal space we may need. Tears are more than OK. Tissues and hugs can be our friends right now.

Some people like new ways of celebrating when death has visited. To form new traditions, families may go on a cruise or rent a house in a vacation spot.

Some do this to avoid seeing an empty chair at home. But the loss will have to be faced eventually.

People grieve differently, though. If going away on a trip works for you, then do it. Enjoy life and use that energy for renewal.

## **Healing will come**

No one can stay “broken” forever, as Creator God has built healing and resilience within us.

Eventually, our messy emotions catch up with one another and with reality. We find harmony with loved ones and their feelings and with own experiences with grief. We may incorporate some of their healing ways and find new help for ourselves in them.

The sun will come up again on a new day, and we will begin the familiar routines that sustain life and mental health—having our coffee, watching the news on TV, praying, seeking God in his word, eating healthy food, calling a friend.

Sunday rolls around, and we are drawn again to the fellowship of the saints. Friends welcome us back to church and may come pick us up to make things easier at first. Someone may bring us a casserole for lunch.

We can prepare for the death of loved ones by having these soul-nourishing routines in place now as an integral part of life—a close walk with God, friends, food and plenty of communication and exercise.

## **This year first**

I am planning for my first Thanksgiving without my uncle as my family gathers next week.

My preparation for the gathering is so much more than making casseroles and desserts. This year, I have insight into deeper preparation I can make—spiritual preparation.

Everyone in my family one day will transition to heaven, and so will I. Are we ready?

Do we know how to handle the sad times as well as the happy? Maybe this year, we will learn how a day of gratitude with grief can become a sacred time that will strengthen our family for generations to come.

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