

Voices: Holidays and grief after loss

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I recently heard, “Traditions are the stories families write together.”

Holidays are pages those stories are written on.

The weather is crisp as leaves are changing colors. The seasons assault our senses with reminders of the past and announcements of change.

We begin the tally of who will be home for Thanksgiving and then Christmas. We schedule times for the family traditions to continue the family story. For many of us, there are parts of the story that will not continue and seats at the table that will be empty.

We name the death of a loved one a single “loss,” even as we experience their absence as a cascade of losses. The holiday will be different. When the pain of those losses is palpable, some decide not to celebrate at all.

Families will gather this holiday season in the wake of the loss of a loved one, particularly in these pandemic years when so many have died in too-full hospitals, alone and with families relegated to electronic goodbyes.

For some, gathering these holidays will be our first time together since the funeral. Back in grandparents’ homes, some will wonder how to mention it. Added to the death of a loved one, a common loss to think of this time of year are other losses: divorce, moves, illness and distances that will keep us apart. This is particularly hard because of our expectations of holidays.

We are surrounded by messages that the holidays are supposed to be perfect—the perfect time with the perfect weather for perfect families to gather, eat perfect meals and exchange perfect gifts while we make perfect

memories.

What do we do when that doesn't happen and the expectation is shattered?

What to do

How do we celebrate when we are trying to survive the pain that crowds out joy? How do we manage expectations when the reality of loss brings pain?

First, for ourselves:

Acknowledge we all are different, and there are no answers right for everyone. Honor each other while healing, and the right to make the decision right for you.

Remember we are not alone, and we are not without hope. We serve a Savior acquainted with grief who asks us to bring joy and hope to each other. Let's be honest with ourselves, acknowledge the changes, speak the names of those who are not present with us, acknowledge their importance to us, and face the challenge together.

Second, for each other:

As there is no right answer for everyone, let us give grace and space to others to find the answer right for them.

Some family members may want to have the traditional family dinner at home or at "grandma's house." Others might find that too difficult and decide to take a family skiing vacation.

In this initial time of healing, provide space for different answers and grace to love others' decisions for them. Talk to each other, and make intentional choices about what traditions to keep and what to change, understanding

those choices may change from year to year.

Third, for those who are absent:

Find a way to acknowledge the continued psychological presence of those not physically present with us.

In our house, we light a candle for those who can't be present with us physically, those who have died, those in the military and deployed, and others. We can look at that candle (or not) with a deep breath of appreciation. We place an ornament reminder on the Christmas tree to represent their presence in the family holiday.

Fourth, for those who are alone, grieving or both:

We are not all the same. While grief impacts each of us emotionally, cognitively, physically, socially and spiritually, that looks different for each one of us. The solutions we seek need to be individual as well.

Some will want to talk about the person who isn't with us. Others will write, draw or make music. You can gather the stories, perhaps into a family album or treasure chest. Make ornaments, give memorial gifts, plant a tree, find out what others have done to remember well.

As you heal, recognize the losses of others, and help them to acknowledge them as well. Send cards, letters or texts to recognize and affirm their continued importance in our lives.

What not to do

Do not do what feels wrong to you, even if someone tells you differently. Do not ignore the pain, avoid it with platitudes, or pretend nothing has happened.

Do not ignore children's questions, grief and pain. Model it is OK to be real, with hope it won't always feel this bad. We will get through it together in the ways right for us.

Young children do not understand the permanence and universality of death. They sense the concern, uncertainty and upset of the adults around them. Small children need to be reassured we will be there for them and still will experience the holidays in all the ways right for us. Tell them, while we will have some sad memories, we also will remember good things and enjoy good times.

Young children worry if one person can die, others may too. They need the truth from an adult they trust that death is a part of life for everyone, and sometimes bad things happen. When sad things happen and we hurt, we stick together and will hurt together and get through it together.

Questions, tears and laughter are OK. Include into the rituals of the holiday the memory of persons who are gone. Tell the story of the family, teaching them love never dies and memories honor that love. Cry, laugh, play, heal and write the next chapter of the family's story together.

References and resources

- *The myth of closure: Ambiguous loss in a time of pandemic and change* by Pauline Boss.
- *Grief is a journey: Finding your path through loss* by Kenneth J. Doka.
- *How will I get through the holidays: 12 ideas of those whose loved one has died* by James E. Miller.
- *Healing a child's grieving heart: 100 practical ideas for families, friends and caregivers* by Alan D. Wolfelt.

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