

## Coping with grief during the holidays

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The holiday season, with its emphasis on gratitude and merriment, can be a difficult time for those grappling with loss and grief. Whether mourning the recent departure of a loved one or facing the challenge of celebrating without them, it could be disconcerting to be engulfed in pain while surrounded by seasonal joy.

Kevin Si, a grief coach, recalls the emotional turbulence he experienced during the first holiday season following the loss of his life partner. “During our family festivities, I felt this surge of emotions about being alone and I had to lock myself in the CR to bawl it out,” Si shared. “Grief is sensitive to connections because you will be jealous of what others still have and you lost, which is greatly emphasized by such gatherings.”

Grief is commonly linked to death, but it can also be caused by a relationship breakup, a serious illness diagnosis, or a major life transition like job loss. During Christmas, the clash between festivities and the weight of grief becomes particularly challenging. This experience is called an “anniversary reaction,” referring to intense emotional and physical responses linked to significant dates, such as the anniversary of a loved one’s passing or the celebration of major holidays. While one may feel tempted to numb the pain, experts encourage trying out healthier coping alternatives.

1. Accept that grief does not look a certain way.

Many of us have the misconception that there is a “right way to grieve.” In 1969, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross coined the “five stages” of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (DABDA), as a way to describe the sequence of emotions for individuals facing a terminal illness. As it made its way to popular culture, however, the framework had become prescriptive for how everyone should grieve, and some feel pressured to conform to these stages.

The Kübler-Ross model helps remind people that whatever we’re feeling now is unlikely to be permanent. Studies show that although the initial year tends to be very challenging, the overwhelming sentiments of grief typically diminish over time for the majority of individuals. But instead of assuming that our experience should line up perfectly well with DABDA, I prefer the poignant metaphor used by Vicki Harrison to describe the nonlinear experience of loss. “Grief is like the ocean; it comes on waves ebbing and flowing. Sometimes the water is calm, and sometimes it is overwhelming. All we can do is learn to swim.” Let us be kind to ourselves and honor our unique journey through grief.

2. Planning may help you cope better. The pressure to take part in the festivities can be overwhelming. Experts share that one healthy strategy is to plan ahead and reflect on what feels right to you. This allows individuals to identify which events they need to join and which ones they can just attend briefly or skip altogether, helping them reach a good balance between participating and self-care.

You can also plan for ways to navigate feelings of emptiness left by a loved one’s absence. Some choose to continue old traditions as a poignant tribute while others create new traditions as part of their healing process.

When my friend lost her mom, her family started dressing up in themed costumes every Christmas as a way to honor how much her mom loved the holidays.

3. Find new ways to meaningfully connect with others. While we cannot replace the person we have lost, making new meaningful connections can help with intense feelings of grief. Some choose to engage in volunteerism and other charitable acts. Seeing that they have helped bring joy to others helps them gain back some sense of purpose.

Some individuals might find that they have the desire to avoid people they most commonly interact with. Si explained that this is perfectly normal and may stem from a need for a clean slate or a fresh audience to share your story with.

“Reaching out to strangers and making new friends who don’t know anything about you could also be a good remedy.”

4. Consider seeking professional help. If the loss is taking a significant toll on your well-being, consider seeking guidance from professional therapists, psychologists, or grief coaches. “Our methods relieve the congestion of emotions and thoughts you get throughout grieving, while continuously creating new connections to the person you love and understanding your new sense of self,” Si explained. Experts can help in identifying personalized strategies to effectively manage grief that work best for you and your circumstance.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to navigating this season. Feelings of happiness can coexist with grief, and it is good to take it one step at a time. As the holiday season unfolds, it might help to remember that grief, as Clive Staples Lewis said, is the flip side of love. While it won’t make the pain go away, we might find meaning in knowing that grief is a testament to the love we have experienced and continue to hold in our hearts.

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