

## **“Getting Through the Holidays” - A Resource Guide from Doane House Hospice**

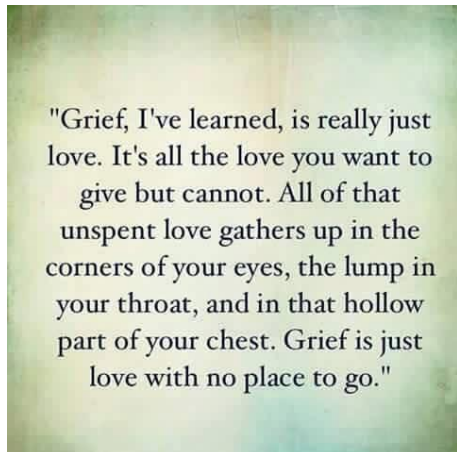
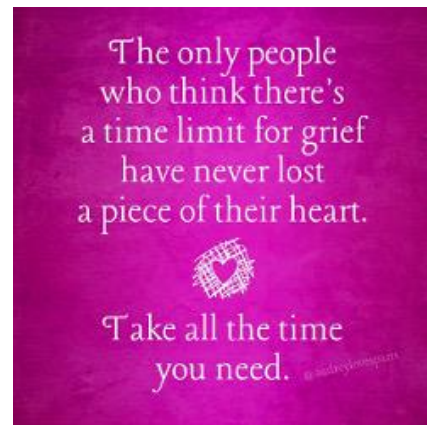
### **Grief and the Holidays**

The holidays are tough for those who have lost a loved one. In good times there is no greater tie of year however in times of loss and grief it can be the most difficult experience anyone has to endure. Bittersweet memories and watching the carefree exuberance of others can intensify the pain of grieving and the sense of loneliness.

Negotiating through the first holiday season following a death is seldom uncomplicated. Although the traditions that evolve in subsequent years may be fine in their own way, holidays without our loved one will never be quite the same. The holidays after a recent death highlight the absence and often throw people into confusion. Grieving people know they should “move on” – whatever that means – but aren’t at all sure they want to and don’t know how. Those who care about the person in mourning want to be helpful but are equally confused about how to do it. It’s a situation that is poignantly human.

When it comes to holidays in general, Christmas really is the exception. Most holidays are one-day events but when it comes to Christmas we think of the season that begins in late November and continues on until after the New Year. You can’t escape it unless you retreat from humanity. What with the holiday music, decorations, radio and T.V. commercials and specials and the overwhelming expectations placed on that day to be “perfect”, it can all be very challenging.

For those of you who have lost a loved one within the past year, thinking about the empty chair at the holiday table may intensify grief in all its complex manifestations: sadness, anger, resentment, and maybe even guilt about the loss and, yes, joy and sweetness and gratitude that the person was in your life. For those who care about the grieving person, it can be difficult to know how best to honor the memory without contributing to pain. Keep in mind that sadness is normal during the holidays, no matter how long ago your loss took place. Try to accept that feelings of sadness and pain are unavoidable and heightened during this season. The intense feelings will pass, but grief is an ongoing process not an event. Don’t ever expect closure. It gets easier with time, but there will always be an empty space at the table. Also remember that if the loss has been over a year many people will expect you to be “over it”. They don’t understand how grief creeps up at special times such as holidays and anniversaries. Be prepared to educate those who expect the impossible. Let them know that you will never be “over it”, but assure them you hope to eventually enjoy the holidays again.



## Supportive Guidelines

Grief counselors generally agree on some basic guidelines that can help you manage a personal loss or help you support those in mourning during the holiday season.

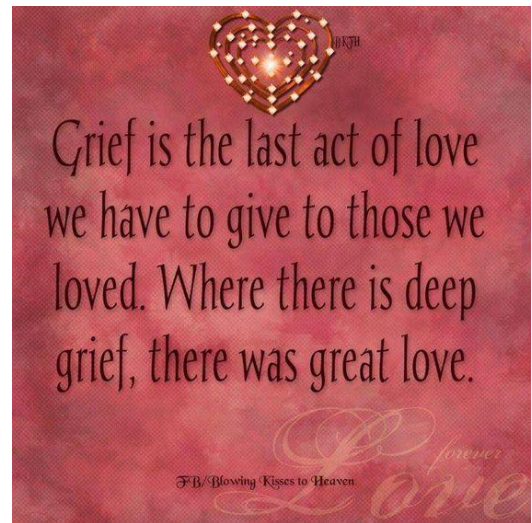
If you are the grieving person:

- ♥ **Allow yourself the right to grieve.** For some reason, there is pressure to get on with life within a year after a loss. That expectation is unrealistic and unfair. Most people take three to five years to fully accept the loss of someone they loved. If someone dear to you died during this past year, remind yourself that it's normal and healthy to want to bow out of some of the events of the winter holidays that emphasize family and togetherness when you are feeling alone in a new and painful way.
- ♥ **Take care of yourself.** Discipline yourself to get enough sleep, to eat right, and to follow your normal routines – especially if you don't feel like it. You'll be better able to make good decisions about what makes sense for you to do over the holiday season.
- ♥ **Plan ahead.** Do you want to be alone or will being with those who love you ease the pain?? Really think about it. Sometimes being alone makes the aloneness much too hard to bear. Sometimes being in a crowd is overwhelming. Only you know what is best for you. Talk to key family members and ask them to support you in whichever decision you make.
- ♥ **Rethink hosting the party.** If yours is the usual gathering place, think about whether you want to do it this year. Some people like getting lost in the details of planning and managing a dinner for twelve. But if you are one of those who finds it just too hard to make a party when in mourning, know that it's okay to be "selfish" in times like these and to beg off. People who love you will understand. Those who don't aren't worth worrying about. At the very least, ask for help and accept all offers to spread the responsibilities around.
- ♥ **Give people permission to share stories.** Many people have the idea that the best way to help someone in grief is to avoid talking about the person who has passed. Most of the time, they are mistaken. When we stop talking about someone is when they are really lost to the family. Let people know that as hard as it is that the person is no longer with us, it's important to remember the good times, to laugh about funny things they did or said, and to acknowledge that he or she is missed. Allow yourself the right to talk about the person who died. The process of sharing memories will help with the healing process. Our memories often bring us both tears and laughter, but they are what sustain us through the years.
- ♥ **Do things a little differently.** For some people, doing the usual traditions and celebrations makes the love one's absence all the more painful. Traditions can be



comforting or difficult depending on what they are. Think about whether doing things a bit differently or going to a different place would be helpful.

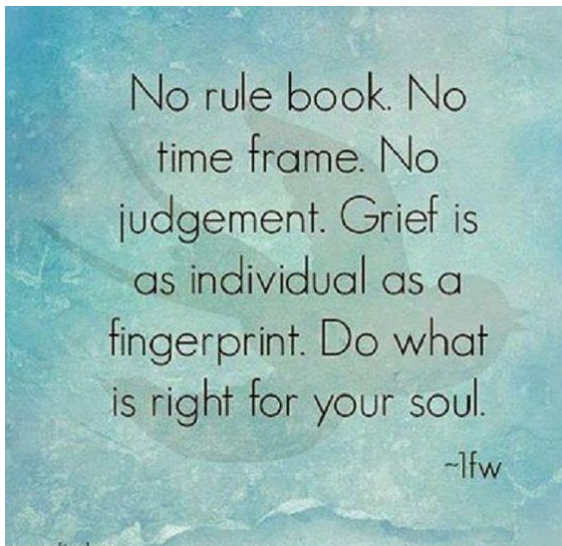
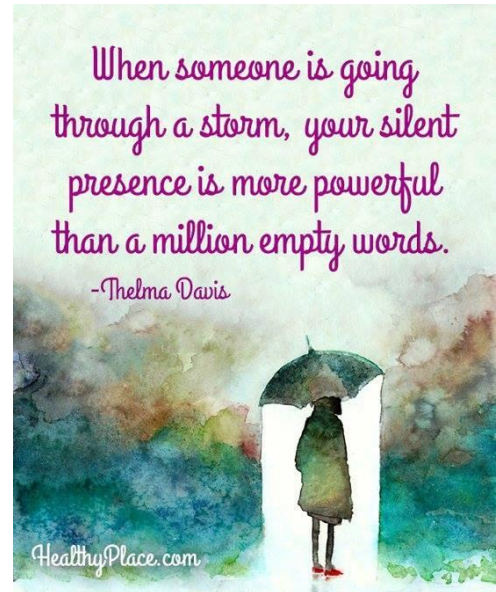
- ♥ **Set limits.** Don't give into holiday pressure. Don't feel that you have to go shopping or cook up a storm. It helps if these activities energize you, but avoid them if they cause stress. It's important to let go of the need to be perfect or of "doing it all". If you're used to doing all of the shopping, cooking, and decorating, perhaps this is the year to share those duties with others.
- ♥ **Be gentle with yourself.** Treat yourself like you would treat your own best friend. Take time out to care for yourself, whether it is through pampering or just slowing down your pace. Be sure to eat a nutritious diet, avoid excess alcohol, exercise, and get an adequate amount of sleep. If you cry, don't let your tears ruin the day for you. Your example may provide others the permission to grieve and feel sad on a "happy" day.
- ♥ **Don't isolate yourself.** Surround yourself with supportive people who are good for you. As the holiday approaches, share your concerns, worries, and apprehensions. Let others know what is difficult for you and accept their offers of help. Christmas shopping can be upsetting, and it may help you to shop early, to shop by telephone, catalogue or internet, or to take along an understanding friend. Friends may be happy to help shop for you if they realize how difficult this is for you. Talk about your feelings with people you love and who love you.



If you are a family member of friend of someone who is grieving:

- ♥ **Allow the person the right to grieve.** Everyone does it differently. Some people want to withdraw from the world and work through their sadness alone. At the other end of the spectrum are those who manage by carrying on as usual and tempering the pain through the distraction of people and parties. Carefully consider what your loved one needs, not what you would do in the situation.
- ♥ **Take care.** If you notice that your family member or friend isn't eating, getting enough sleep, or functioning well at home and work, don't ignore it. These are signs that the person is possibly getting clinically depressed. Invite the person to a meal. Talk to her about the importance of maintaining routines. If her inability to take care of herself is prolonged, do what you can to get her to a counselor.
- ♥ **Plan ahead.** Ask the person in mourning what he wants to have happen at family events. How would he like to acknowledge the loss and at the same time keep the holiday going for everyone? Some families literally set an empty place at the table and take a moment to share anecdotes about the person who has passed away. Others make a toast to the memories. Still others offer a prayer. Talk together about what will feel best for everyone involved.

- ♥ **Offer help.** If the grieving person is the one who usually hosts family gatherings, see if someone else can do it this year. If she wants to keep up the tradition, get as many family members as possible to help with the shopping, cooking, cleaning, decorating, and whatever else needs to be done.
- ♥ **Talk to the grieving person about the loss.** Listen without judgment. Resist giving advice. Just be there. Understand that grief comes and goes in intensity and frequency for quite a while. It is by talking and listening that we all integrate sadness and gradually move on.
- ♥ **Try out a new activity that was never shared by the person who is gone.** It's helpful to do some things that aren't shadowed by the fact that the last time we did them, the deceased person shared it.



## Time

Time does indeed heal most things. But everyone has his or her own sense of timing. If this is your first holiday season since the loss of a loved one, give yourself permission to feel what you need to feel and do what you need to do to get through it. Find ways to honor the memory of your loved one and to accept the support and care of those who love you.

To be honest with you, I don't have the words to make you feel better, but I do have the arms to give you a hug, ears to listen to whatever you want to talk about, and I have a heart....



[lifelovequotesandsayings.com](http://lifelovequotesandsayings.com)

A heart that's aching to see you smile again.

## Family and Friends

Some people may find it helpful to be with family and friends, emphasizing the familiar traditions; others may wish to avoid old sights and sounds and find new ways to acknowledge the season. Do whatever feels right to you. There are no universal rules to follow and there is no right or wrong way to get through this. Give yourself and your family permission to celebrate and take pleasure in the holiday rituals, as much as possible. Enjoying yourself is not a betrayal of your loved one. Laughter and joy are not disrespectful.

## Children

Remember to consult with your children to see what their wishes are. Christmas can still be a special time for them even though they are grieving. It is important to realize that children grieve in small doses and should be given the opportunity to enjoy holiday festivities, family and friends. Children need to feel comfortable and secure and this may be achieved by keeping as many family traditions as possible and creating new ones. Discuss their feelings associated with their loss, such as anger, depression, and fear. Talk about their special memories of your loved one, especially those related to past holidays.

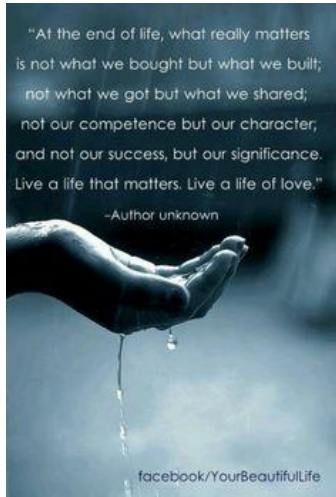
Encourage them to write a note or make a gift for their loved one. Such notes or gifts can be delivered to the gravesite. Allow them to spend time with their friends, even on Christmas day.

If you are a friend or family member of someone who is grieving, give them support, love, and concrete assistance. By talking about their loved one and by listening to their stories and feelings, you help reassure them that the sadness may fade but our relationships with people we love never really end.

Sometimes we need someone to simply be there...Not to fix anything or do anything in particular, but just to let us feel we are supported and cared about.

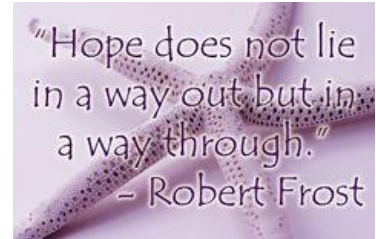


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## Holidays and Hope

Just know that there are no magical formulas to remove your suffering. It is not a choice of pain or no pain, but how you will manage that pain for that special day. Have faith that the sadness of your loss will be lessened through the hope and spirit of the holidays, through fond memories of the past, and through thoughts and prayers from friends.



### Sources:

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<http://psychcentral.com/lib/the-empty-chair-at-the-holiday-table/>

## 24-Hour Crisis Line: 1-855-310-COPE

### Holiday Grief: Bereavement Support Websites

Association for Death Education and Counselling

Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D.

A Website for the Grieving

Beyond Indigo

Bereaved Families of Ontario

Bereavement Ontario

Bereavement Care Centre

Canadian Cancer Society

Compassion Books

Crisis, Grief, and Healing

Doane House Hospice

Dougy Centre

Fernside

Grief and Loss

Grief Recovery Online

Grieving Children at Seasons Centre

Grief Support

Hearth Place

Hospice Durham

Poems, Articles, and Memoirs

Robert's Press

Support Groups

<http://www.adec.org/adec/default.aspx>

[www.centerforloss.com](http://www.centerforloss.com)

[www.griefnet.org](http://www.griefnet.org)

[www.beyondindigo.com](http://www.beyondindigo.com)

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[webmaster@ontario.cancer.ca](mailto:webmaster@ontario.cancer.ca)

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[www.aarp.org/griefandloss](http://www.aarp.org/griefandloss)

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[www.groww.com](http://www.groww.com)

[www.grievingchildren.com](http://www.grievingchildren.com)

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[www.robertspress.ca](http://www.robertspress.ca)

[www.griefshare.org](http://www.griefshare.org)