When the Holidays Hurt: 10 Steps to Ease the Pain.

By Dr Bill Webster

Have you seen Dr Bill’s “Christmas Meditation” on the website at www.GriefJourney.com? There is also a “Living with Loss” TV programme there on “Coping with the Holidays”)

Losing someone you care about can be one of the most difficult experiences of life. The Christmas season can be one of the most painful reminders of what we have lost. There may be an empty chair at your Christmas table this year, but it will not compare to the empty feeling in your heart. Things like pulling out the old familiar decorations and tree ornaments will be a painful reminder of what you have lost.

It is important to remember that our grief is not a sign of weakness, it is a sign that we cared. Christmas is particularly painful to a grieving person simply because it IS supposed to be a time of celebration. We remember other occasions, and these memories are difficult as we recall better days and compare. Holidays are usually a time to look to the future, but now future is difficult … unimaginable … and uncertainty always creates fear. So we are apprehensive about what we have to confront.

Listen to what two people said about facing Christmas without a loved one:

“Martha died in September and before I knew it the holiday season came crashing upon me. As December neared, I found myself experiencing much dread and anxiety. Who would sit where Martha always sat for Christmas Eve dinner? Who would organize the decorating of the tree, something she always did so efficiently and well. How could I attend Christmas Eve services without her? I only had painful questions and no easy answers.”

“I dreaded the first Christmas after my daughter Jennifer died. How I wished that I could just hibernate through the holiday season ... fall asleep ... and wake up in late January. But Jennifer had two younger siblings who had great expectations for Christmas, and so, for their sakes, I did what I could to make sure they had a merry Christmas.”

Anticipation can often be worse than reality. It is important to realize that Christmas is a season, not just a day. So, while acknowledging that nothing will make this Christmas perfect, here are 10 steps to at least making the season as meaningful as possible.
1. **Recognize that this Christmas is different.**
Each holiday has its traditions that may have been formed decades ago. THIS Christmas is a NEW holiday, unlike any other, no matter how hard you try to make it the same. Maybe this is the time to look at the traditions and say, Why do we do this? Is it because we WANT to do this, or simply that we have always done it this way?

2. **Plan Ahead**
So, what do you want to do? Eliminate as much pressure as possible. Avoid all those “should’s” and “oughts”. This year, if it is too difficult, don’t do it. There is no right or wrong way to handle the day. Some may follow established patterns … others may decide to change things. Sit down with your family and plan ahead. What would make the season as good as possible for you all? Then once you have decided, stick with it. Let everyone know what to expect. And do remember, what you choose for the first year is not written in stone for the next.

3. **Take Responsibility for your own Happiness**
“Initiate rather than Hesitate.” “Act rather than react.” Don’t wait for others to invite you, or to suggest what should happen. YOU decide what would make this Christmas meaningful. Do things because YOU want to do them.

4. **Stay in touch with your Feelings**
Whatever you decide, acknowledge that you can’t escape grief. Family “get togethers” may be difficult for you. People are supposed to be happy and merry during the holidays, but you probably don’t feel that way. That is understandable. If you are not feeling joyful, accept those feelings. Be honest about them. Talk about how much you are missing the person. Chances are others are feeling the same way.

5. **Don’t be afraid to Relive your Memories**
Talk openly and let people know that the person who died should be mentioned. Too often there is a “conspiracy of silence” This is because people do not know what to do and are afraid they will say the wrong thing. Mentioning the person’s name gives others permission to remember and to grieve. Talk about the memories of other Christmas’ and laugh at the humorous things you remember about the person’s life.

6. **Look after Yourself**
Make sure in the rush and bustle of the season you don’t overdo things. Respect your body’s need for rest, because you are going through a lot these days. Make sure you get good nutrition, and some exercise. Do what you need to do to look after yourself this season. And above all, be compassionate with yourself about not being perfect. So what if you don’t get presents for everyone, or send out cards. The world will go on, and people will understand. So be gentle with yourself.

7. Ask for and Accept Help
Let me quote a friend of mine:

“In the midst of my adversity, I noticed a tendency to retreat, not to bother anyone else with my misfortune. What a mistake! The love and support of family and friends, in letters, phone calls, visits and invitations, was so gratifying and so enriching as to defy description. This caring continues to stand out in my mind as a bright spot in an otherwise bleak scenario. Reach out rather than retreat! Martyrdom is not necessarily a part of the grieving process.”

Ask for what you need from other people. Keep in mind that they did invite you to “let me know if there is anything I can do!” But remember that family and friend are not mind readers. Let them know your wishes and what you need to get through the holidays. Reach out to them and they will usually respond.

8. Try to find Something Positive in your Life
Nothing can bring your loved one back, but you can keep that person’s memory and spirit alive by doing something special in their memory. So is there a way you can help someone else whose Christmas will be difficult. It does not have to be elaborate. Volunteer somewhere. Have someone over. Provide help to a needy family. Plant a tree, make a financial donation to a worthy cause, or help a needy child or student. You will find that by helping someone else, you feel better about yourself. But know your limits, for you can’t BUY your way out of grief.

9. Create a Special Tribute to the Person
Grief invites us to remember, so perhaps you could consider doing something to remember the person as a part of the Christmas celebration. Find a way to celebrate the person’s life as well as acknowledging their death? Perhaps you could light a memorial candle at the dinner table, or take some time to share special memories or stories. Humorous incidents recalled can have a special healing quality to them. Try not to ignore the fact that someone is missing this year, for to pretend that nothing has happened actually increases the tension.
10.  Face the Future with Hope
Rollo May once wrote: “The only way out is ahead, and our choice is whether we shall cringe from it or affirm it.” We have to honor our loved ones by going on. Even though this Christmas may not be so jolly, can you be thankful for SOMETHING? Of course you are sad because someone you care about is absent, or your situation has changed, and that is natural and it is right. But can you be thankful for the years you did have and the memories you still share?

Celebrate what you HAVE as well as realizing what you’re missing. Someone may be missing, but are there people who WILL be there this year for whom you can be thankful? Don’t allow looking back at the past to spoil what you have in the present. Don’t spend so much time grieving what you have lost that you fail to appreciate what you still have. Yes, you miss the person who will not be there, but are there children, relatives and friends you can enjoy today? That may not cancel out your sadness but it certainly makes it easier.

So while this Christmas season will be different, and perhaps difficult, my hope is that some of these suggestions will help you make it as meaningful as possible

For further helpful information about the Grief Journey, check out Dr Bill Webster’s web site at www.GriefJourney.com, where you will find a wide range of resources, including articles, videos, music, talks, meditations, a “let’s Talk” forum, Dr Bill’s BLOG, and the opportunity to purchase some of his books, tapes and videos.

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From our family to your family, warmest wishes at this blessed Christmas season.