

THE HOLIDAYS

The holidays are a time of remembrance of past celebrations, of present get-togethers, and of future opportunities to break away from everyday stress. But for people who are grieving, the holidays may be a time of mixed emotions, feelings of being overwhelmed with multiple demands, and the pain of loves lost. As the holidays approach, think about how you take care of yourself during this vulnerable time.

HELPFUL HINTS

- Acknowledge griefwork as real work. Adjustment to the death or dying of someone close to you does not simply come with time. The work of grief demands that you deal with all the feelings that loss engenders. This work takes emotional and physical energy that can leave you unable to deal with the extra demands of the holiday season.
- Allow yourself to be merely human. Avoid perfectionistic expectations during the holidays. Let some things slide. If you really want to do all the cooking and baking, let the dusting go. Enlist the aid of others in the spirit of holiday sharing. You do not have to do it all yourself this year.
- Plan ahead. Sit down with your family and friends ahead of time to discuss and decide those activities, experiences, and people that make the holidays special. Decide to do a few special things with a few special people, not everything with everybody.
- Set limits. Tell your family, friends, and yourself now—and continue to remind them— that you are on a stress-reduction diet this holiday season. You will not be overdoing, over-cooking, over-shopping, over-complying or over-worrying this year. Put a sign on your bathroom mirror or refrigerator to remind yourself (or others).
- Change **shoulds** to **wants**. Be aware of your own statements to yourself. Are you saying "I should do this or that?" Decide which of your shoulds you really want to do, and make those your priorities. Remember: You should not should yourself; there are enough other people doing that already.
- Strive for a balanced lifestyle. With all the parties and demands of the holidays, it is difficult for anyone to get enough rest and exercise. It is easy to overindulge.
 - Set exercise as a priority. It is an antidote to depression.
 - Learn relaxation techniques. They are an antidote to stress.
 - Don't overdo the eggnog. Alcohol is an antidote for nothing.

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- Tell others clearly what you want and need for the holidays. Do not be embarrassed or shy to let others know what you want from them in terms of emotional support, help, or sharing. Mindreading is best left to fortunetellers. Unknown expectations generally go unfulfilled and lead to disappointment and bad feelings.
 - Honor the old, create the new. If this is the first holiday without your family member, include your deceased loved one to the extent that you can. The memory of him or her will be with you this holiday season no matter what you do. Consider giving gifts in acknowledgment of your dying family member or in memory of the deceased; consider giving love to others in honor of the love you have received. Only you can put the joy into the holidays.
 - Be generous to yourself. The holidays are a time of real and symbolic gift-giving. What are you giving yourself this season? When the new year rolls in, what will be your answer to the question, "What supportive and caring thing did I do for myself this holiday season?"
 - Celebrate life. It seems like an impossibility for someone in grief to find joy and peace at any time, but especially during the season for joy and peace. This is your challenge. Life is worth living only to the extent that we make it so. Survivorship means more than merely surviving; it means fully living. Search for the living path for you and start now!

This material was prepared by Ellen S. Zinner, Psy.D., and based on materials developed in part by Sally Featherstone, RN.