



HOLIDAYS AND FAMILY GATHERINGS WITHOUT YOUR SIBLING

*Facing Traditions, Celebrations, and the Empty
Place Their Absence Leaves*

Holidays and family gatherings can make the absence of a sibling feel especially visible. Traditions, familiar conversations, shared jokes, favorite foods, photographs, and even the seating around a table can carry memories. A day that once felt comforting may now hold both love and sadness, and you may find yourself approaching celebrations very differently than you did before your sibling died.

WHEN FAMILIAR TRADITIONS FEEL DIFFERENT

Family traditions are often woven together with the people who participated in them. Your sibling may have been the one who arrived early, cooked a certain dish, teased everyone, exchanged a particular gift, called from far away, or simply occupied a familiar place in the room. When that person is missing, even traditions you want to keep can feel changed.

WHAT YOU MAY NOTICE

- You may dread a holiday or gathering that you once looked forward to.
- You may feel your sibling's absence more strongly when the family is together.
- You may want to participate in some traditions while avoiding or changing others.

GENTLE REMINDER

You are allowed to change a tradition, leave early, say no to an invitation, or enjoy a moment of celebration. None of these choices measures how much you love or miss your sibling.

GIVING YOURSELF CHOICES

You do not have to celebrate exactly as you did before the loss. Consider which traditions still feel comforting and which ones feel too difficult right now. You might attend for a shorter time, drive separately so you can leave when needed, ask someone else to take over a task, create a quieter celebration, or choose not to participate in a particular event. Your needs may also change from one year to the next.

WHEN FAMILY EXPECTATIONS ADD PRESSURE

Family members may have different ideas about what the holiday should look like. One person may want everything kept the same, while another wants to avoid familiar traditions altogether. These differences can create tension, especially when everyone is grieving. Clear, gentle communication can help. It is okay to say what you can manage and to recognize that another person's way of coping may be different from yours.

A DEEPER LOOK

Gatherings can bring both comfort and pain. Being with people who knew and loved your sibling may provide a sense of connection, but it can also make the empty place feel unmistakable. You may laugh at a family story and



cry moments later. Joy and grief can exist in the same room, and enjoying part of a celebration does not diminish your love for your sibling.

INCLUDING YOUR SIBLING IN A MEANINGFUL WAY

- Some families find comfort in intentionally remembering the sibling who died. You might light a candle, display a photograph, prepare a favorite food, share a story, play meaningful music, make a donation, visit a special place, or simply speak your sibling's name.
- There is no requirement to create a memorial ritual. Sometimes the most meaningful remembrance is quiet and private. Choose what feels genuine to you rather than what you think grief is supposed to look like.
- If family members want different forms of remembrance, it may help to allow more than one approach. One person may want to talk openly, while another prefers a private moment. Both can be expressions of love.

A THOUGHT TO CARRY WITH YOU

The empty place at a family gathering is real, but so is the love, history, and connection your sibling brought into your life.

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

FINDING A WAY THROUGH THE DAY

The first holidays and family gatherings after a sibling's death may feel especially uncertain, but later years can bring unexpected waves of grief too. Give yourself permission to adjust your plans, step away when needed, remember your sibling in your own way, and accept moments of comfort when they come. The gathering is different because someone important is missing, but the love and history you shared remain part of your family's story.

A song, recipe, ornament, family photograph, familiar phrase, or empty chair may bring a sudden rush of memory. You do not have to push the feeling away or explain it to everyone. You may choose to pause, take a walk, share the memory with someone, or simply allow yourself a quiet moment before returning to the gathering.

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

Which holiday or family tradition feels most connected to your sibling? What would make that gathering feel a little gentler for you this year?

CREATING A NEW FAMILY BALANCE

A family does not return to exactly what it was before a sibling died. Over time, however, it can find a different balance. Allow yourself to remain who you are rather than feeling that you must become the person who died. Your sibling's place in the family was unique, and so is yours.

With heartfelt compassion,
Linda Findlay
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