

# 10 Ways to Manage Your Grief at Holiday Time

By Lou LaGrand

Are you dreading the approaching holidays? Fearful of being alone or without your loved one? Or have you been thinking about the possibility of receiving a greetings card from someone who does not know your loved one has died?

Most experts agree that anticipation of a holiday and what is expected is almost always worse than actually experiencing the day. There are many unrealistic expectations at holiday time.

In any event, here are 10 things you can do, that have been used by others through the years, which will help you deal with your grief and reduce unnecessary suffering.

1. Structure your day. Plan. Plan. Plan. Make a schedule of what you will do each hour of the day and be committed to following it. Decide before hand what you can and cannot do on that day. Make a "to do" list and a "not to do" list. Talk about both with your family members. You do not have to follow what was done on previous holidays.
2. Have a back-up plan. If things go wrong and you are unable to follow the schedule you had prepared at a given time during the day, substitute an alternative activity. Let's say you cannot stay at dinner as long as you had originally planned. Then be sure you have someone and something else to do (another place to go) so you can remove yourself from the highly stressful situation.
3. Simplify. You do not have to do all the work of sending cards, buying presents, and decorating if it does not feel right for you. It is likely you won't have the energy to begin with. Cancel this part of the holiday. Or shorten your list or decide not to send cards. Send money or shop through the internet. Instead of a Christmas tree, simply decorate with pine boughs or small ornaments.
4. Decide on a way to symbolize the presence of your loved one. It could be by lighting a candle, placing his/her picture in a special place, making his/her favorite dessert, telling a favorite story, or setting a place at table. It is okay to reminisce about past holidays with him or her. Celebrate his/her life and what has enriched yours by your relationship with the beloved.
5. Buy a gift for yourself (from your loved one) and another for your loved one. Then decide to give the gift for your loved one to someone who would benefit from it. Make helping others one of your New Year resolutions to honor his/her memory. Focus on this thought throughout the holiday season.
6. Allow yourself to express your feelings as they arise. Don't resist. Let grief move through you in a natural way. It's okay to cry and feel sad. Crying is coping. If you feel especially sad, call someone you trust to talk to. Picking the right person and asking if you can call them "just in case," is part of your back-up plan. Ask for assistance. Don't expect friends to automatically know what you need.
7. Take time just for yourself to do something that is pleasing to you-and don't feel guilty about doing so. Do this every day of the season. Eat a special food. Get a massage. Take a bubble bath. Visit a nearby park or beautiful scenery. But remember, don't isolate yourself. You need your own time, but don't over do it.
8. Be sure to exercise. This is a commonly overlooked but extremely profitable way to change feelings and emotion. Walk, ride a bicycle or engage in your usual exercise pattern. We all need physical outlets for the emotional stressors of the day. Accept the fact that the absence of your loved one on a special day is bound to cause pain. But you can use exercise as a counterbalance.
9. Deal with your feelings by periodically asking yourself where you are in your inner life at the moment. Are you overwhelmed, fearful, angry, and lonely or are you experiencing a moment of joy. Once you have identified your emotional state, follow up with examining options for dealing with your state of mind. Do you need to be with someone or go somewhere or say something to yourself? Your encouraging self-talk can be important here.

10. Combine these two survival skills when you start to feel you are going in a downward spiral: take action and refocus your attention. These two critical skills are essential for all of us for the rest of our lives. When you make your holiday plan, list a number of activities you can do when you need to change the sadness and prevent slipping into a depressive state.

Decide on the immediate action you can take to combat too much distress: get up and do something, walk around the house, pray, repeat a mantra, "Google" the word grief. Find a way to change your thought pattern. It will work for you, if you consistently go for it.

You can get through this holiday season, or any day that you feel is a special day involving your loved one. Three things will guarantee your success: make the commitment ("I will get through this"), be determined ("If I fall down, I will get back up"), and persist over time (remember it's like an endurance race). There is no right or wrong way to deal with the holidays. There is only your way.