

How To Help Yourself through The Holidays When Mourning

By Lou LaGrand

is the internal response to loss, the sadness, sorrow, and pain that seems endless. Mourning is all of those things and more which are public and you share with others. Mourning is healthy. Grief without mourning brings much additional pain and unnecessary suffering, which often shows up intensely on holidays.

The "year of the firsts," the first Christmas, Hanukkah, Thanksgiving, anniversaries, birthdays, reunions, the first anything without the loved one, are often made even worst when mourners do not assert themselves about what they can and cannot do at each of the firsts. Here are several considerations to facilitate honoring your loved one and yourself at these important times.

1. Make known to your family and/or friends what you can and cannot do. As a primary mourner, make your needs known to all concerned. If necessary, get everyone together at your home well before the holiday, and tell them what you feel about how you wish to celebrate this holiday. Discuss what can be added or deleted from the usual celebration.

If the event was normally held at your home, you may want to eat out, have someone else hold it this year, or have others assume more responsibility to take the load off your shoulders. It's okay to say no, and as your grief changes over time you can assume old responsibilities or make additional changes.

2. You don't have to do it the way it was always done. Traditions can change, even if they are many years old. You can even start a new tradition. Whatever you feel will be the most difficult part of the holiday for you can be altered, held at a different time, or left out for this year. Do whatever you feel will reduce unnecessary stress and sadness. Anything left out of one year, can always be brought back the next. Let your faith be your guide, and use it for the strength it provides.

3. There is nothing wrong with reducing the time you spend at events. Regardless of what others do in your family, before each holiday or celebration, tell all concerned what your level of participation will be. You alone know what your energy level is like and what your resources can take without undue strain. Feel free to say you will leave early, not participate in one or more aspects of the celebration, step outside, or come later to the event.

4. Be sure to symbolically honor your deceased loved one. Make it a habit to acknowledge the memory of your loved one at any major family event. Light a candle, make a toast, display a picture or photo album, have the deceased's favorite dessert or meal, say a prayer, display or give something he/she created, place a flower in a special place at the table, or leave one space at the table empty (have everyone sit in different places). And, it's okay if tears flow. It is normal, normal, normal.

Forget about perfect. The ideal or perfect holiday celebration seldom exists. Don't set yourself up by anticipating perfection. At the same time, refuse to let your anticipation tell you the whole scene will be a major source of distress. Diligently manage your anticipation. Keep things simple and focus on the values, beliefs, joy, and wisdom of your loved one. Give yourself a present from your loved one and remember that laughter and a smile are still important parts of life.

Finally, here are nine statements to help you develop a plan for holidays and celebrations. Advanced planning is essential. Fill in each open space. Write as much as you need to.

My Holiday Plan

1. I believe the most difficult part of the coming holiday will be: _____.
2. I believe the most difficult people for me to be with will be: _____.
3. The most comforting thought about the coming holiday is: _____.
4. The people I believe will be the most helpful to me are: _____.
5. The words I really need to hear this holiday season are: _____.
6. I will celebrate the memory of my loved one on this holiday by: _____.
7. I will tell my family/friends what I can and cannot do on this holiday by: _____.
8. I will rearrange my participation in the festivities by: _____.
9. In order to accomplish my plan, the first thing I will do is: _____.

Share your plan, if and when appropriate. With the help and cooperation of all, you and all family and friends can make it through the special days and celebrate a life that has been lived.