



HOSPICE BRAZOS VALLEY PRESENTS

HOLIDAYS WITHOUT YOU



Dear Friends,

We have entered that time of year when special days and holidays abound. Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, Christmas, New Year's, birthdays and anniversaries are special days, often full of memories. Simply thinking about these times usually spent with family and friends can be difficult when facing the holidays without a loved one who has died.

At a time when most people are expected to be happy and are anticipating parties and family gatherings, persons experiencing grief may feel brokenhearted, numb, depressed, and alone, especially during the first year after a loved one's death. The flood of memories, even very happy ones, can be overwhelming. Have you been asked the dreaded question, "What are you doing for the holidays?" Or worse yet, been told by well-meaning friends what you *should* be doing for the holidays?

Hospice Brazos Valley is here to help you cope with your grief during this difficult time. There are steps you can take to make it through this potentially difficult time of year. We hope you find this program, Holidays Without You, and this booklet, helpful.

Sincerely,

Hospice Brazos Valley
Bereavement Coordinators

EMOTIONAL WISH LIST

What would the holidays be like
if I could have these wishes granted?

That I could be alone when I choose, or be with others
when I want to be...

That others would know without asking or guessing
when I want to talk about my feelings of my loved one
and when I want to remain silent...

That others would accept me, my tears and my anger,
without judging me...

That others would not tell me it was time to
“be over it”...

That others would not try to tell me what is best for me,
but instead would ask me what I want...

That the holiday season would disappear like a
magician’s coin trick and reappear only when I
am ready for it.

Adapted from: “Tis The Season To Be Jolly?”. Dr. William Axley. Bereavement Magazine, November/December 1989. Reprinted with permission of Bereavement Publishing, Inc. (719) 282-1948.

THE HOLIDAY DILEMMA

Grief is very hard work at any time of the year. It demands your full energy. This can be especially true during the holidays. Your grieving can be interrupted by the celebrations and the joy, the gifts and the lights... and it all seems to trivialize your loved one's memory and your loss. The world expects you to go on "as usual," and this simply may be difficult for you.

The holidays also make demands on you that you may be unable to fulfill.

Focus

You may try, but it's almost impossible to concentrate on usual holiday activities.

Emotions

Grieving people may not be in sync emotionally with the holiday spirit. You go through the motions with little or no enthusiasm.

Facade

If you force yourself into the typical holiday frenzy, you may find that you're wearing a mask, faking a smile, or putting on an act. Projecting a facade is exhausting. One hour of pretending becomes a day of hard labor.

SO WHAT CAN YOU DO?

PLAN AHEAD

The single most important thing you can do for yourself is to develop a plan. Although you had no control over the death of your loved one, you can determine how you respond to your grief.

This is particularly difficult during the holidays. Hiding or acting as if little has changed will not work.

As hard as it is, it is helpful to be proactive.

Most people find that when the holidays actually arrive, they are in a better position than if they had not made plans.

HOLIDAY SURVIVAL TIPS

Be intentional with your planning.

Evaluate traditions, the events, and the tasks that are usually involved. Do you really want to do all those things or do you want to make changes? Be sure to set limitations on how much you do personally. Be careful not to set expectations too high for yourself or the day. The rest of your family will be looking to you for guidance, so take the opportunity to let them know how you feel. A simple holiday may be just what everyone needs this year.

Be as organized as possible.

Plan each day. Prepare a list before going shopping and arrive early to avoid the crowds. For example, write a few cards each day instead of all at once.

Establish the basics.

Whom do you want to spend the holidays with? Where? Plan to be with others who will let you talk about your loved one, share your stories and your grief. Remember, you are not the only one who lost this person. By telling stories and openly grieving during the holiday, you are giving others permission to do so. One option is having the holiday in a different place than usual.

Re-examine your priorities.

Do you really enjoy writing greeting cards, baking, decorating, and cooking, or would you like to help with some of these holiday tasks? Do you want to eliminate one or more of these activities this year?

Recognize that the holidays won't be the same.

If you try to keep everything as it was, you may be disappointed. Doing things a bit differently can acknowledge the change while preserving continuity with the past. For instance, decide ahead of time what to do with the empty place at the table.

Don't be afraid to make changes.

Remember that tradition is meant to serve people, not the other way around. If a tradition isn't comfortable or convenient for you, it's okay to make changes so it works for you. What you choose to do the first year, you don't have to do the next.

Don't try to be strong for others.

The one who died is worth crying about. It is unrealistic for anyone, including yourself, to think you'll get through the holidays without sorrow. Tears do not mean weakness. They honor your loved one.

Let your plans and needs be known.

Talk things over with those who will share the holidays with you. Tell family and friends about any intended changes which would involve them.

Be gentle with yourself.

Avoid overcommitting. Pace yourself on good days, and give yourself lots of latitude on rough ones. Get plenty of rest. Remember, you can always change your mind, even if you have previously agreed to do something.

Select the social events you want to attend and decline the others.

Strive for a balance between time with others and quiet holiday reflection. Do not allow well meaning family or friends to pressure you into merrymaking if you don't want to.

Don't isolate yourself.

It is okay to take time for yourself, but don't cut yourself off from the support of family and friends.

Be open to accepting support.

No one will know you need help unless you tell them. Share your concerns, feelings and apprehensions with someone you trust and let them help you. The best gift you can receive is someone who is ready to listen to what you have to say.

Stop the comparisons.

It is easy to watch other families and compare them to your own. Seeing other families together and enjoying the festivities may make you feel deprived. Keep in mind that the holidays are stressful for most families and are rarely the magical gatherings depicted in greeting cards. Try to embrace what you have rather than compare it to what you think others have.

Honor the memory of your loved one.

Some suggestions are:

Remember them in a prayer, a toast,
or by lighting a candle.

Give a gift in their memory.

Honor the empty place at the table with a
flower or another symbol.

Reduce your stress by talking about your loved one
and sharing the stories of their life.

Have some fun without guilt.

It is okay to laugh or have a good time during
the holidays.

Decide what is best for you.

Plan for a meaningful expression of what this holiday means for you and be open to changing if you need to. Celebrate your loved one's life. Surround yourself with people who support you. Allow quiet time for yourself. Do what feels best for you, not what others think is best for you.

Do something for others.

You may find that the rewards from helping others are the greatest comfort for you.

Have an exit strategy.

If you aren't feeling up to going on the day of the event, stay home. Whenever possible, drive yourself so you can leave early if you need to.

Don't forget:

The anticipation of any holiday is often worse than the actual holiday. As hard as it is for you, you will survive and you will make it through the holidays. It may be the most difficult season in your time of grief, but it will pass. And when it does, you will come out on the other side stronger than before.

HEALING GRIEF RITUALS

Grief rituals help you remember your loved one. Choose rituals that have the most meaning for you. These rituals can bring you comfort at birthdays, anniversaries, or any other special time.

Buy a candle and light it in your loved one's memory.

Volunteer to feed the hungry.

Create a scrapbook or memory book with anecdotes.

Donate gifts or money in a loved one's memory.

Plant a tree or bush you can nurture.

Find a tree in a peaceful location and visit it frequently.
(This is especially helpful when ashes have been scattered and there is no gravesite.)

On special days, buy a gift and donate it to a hospital, nursing home, community organization or school

Hang a Christmas stocking for your loved one and ask everyone to write a special note or memory to put inside. Read the notes together.

Buy a Christmas ornament each year to remember your loved one.

If you go on a trip, do something special to remember your loved one. For example, toss a rose in the ocean, light a candle, or pitch a penny in a fountain.

Recase your wedding ring into a setting for a necklace or other piece of jewelry.

Invite family and friends to a Memory Night to share and reminisce about special times.

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CHILDREN, GRIEF & THE HOLIDAYS

HOW YOU CAN HELP

The holiday season is painful for adults after the death of a loved one, but it can be even more isolating and distressing for children if they are not given ample guidance from adults in their lives. Here are some suggestions for how to help you children during the holidays.

1. Suppress the urge to ignore the holidays because they seem too painful to endure. It's important that children are given the opportunity to celebrate the holidays without feeling bad or guilty. After all, they still have a need to "just be a kid," especially during the holidays.
2. Discuss the painful feelings that might arise during the holiday season. Children are flooded with memories from the past and they want everything to go back to the way it was before. Help normalize these feelings for your children by allowing them to openly talk about their feelings. As a parent, you might explain that you've been feeling that way too.

3. Together, as a family, create new holiday traditions. When creating these new rituals, ask your children what they want. Their input is extremely important. If you have more than one child, get all of their opinions. Then, as a group, decide the best way to spend the holidays.

4. Include the memory of your loved one in your celebration. Encourage your children to make something meaningful, such as a holiday card or a special gift, specifically for your loved one. Decide as a family where these items should be placed during the holidays. Your children might want to place them under the tree, on the fireplace mantle, or in their room. Some children might want to take these items to the cemetery.

5. Spend time together reflecting back on special holiday memories from the past. Have your children draw a picture of their favorite holiday memory. Give them the opportunity to talk about their drawing, if they choose to.

6. Light a candle in memory of your loved one. If you have more than one child, allow each child to have his or her special candle. Consider creating a place of honor for the candles in your home.

7. Together, make a holiday ornament in memory of the person who died, or consider an ongoing ritual of purchasing an ornament each year in their memory. This ornament could represent anything your loved one held dear.

8. If the person who died had any favorite holiday songs, play these songs with your children and reflect back on meaningful times that you had together while listening to these songs.

9. Plan a special remembrance meal together. Help your children make a favorite holiday dish or dessert of the person who died. If you have more than one child, offer each child the opportunity to make a favorite dish.

10. As a family, consider volunteering your time to a charity in need during the holidays. Often, giving back to others who are also hurting can be very beneficial to grieving children.

11. Donate toys to a charity that helps children. Have your children help you choose and purchase the toys and then wrap them together. Include your children in the delivery of the toys.

12. Attend a holiday memorial celebration as a family. Many communities hold candle lighting events during the holidays. This provides an opportunity for you and your children to honor the memory of your loved one in a community setting.

EXCERPTED FROM GHOSTS OF CHRISTMAS PAST

BY JOANETTA HENDEL

The key to surviving the holidays as a bereaved individual is flexibility and foresight. It's important to plan ahead, and it's important to anticipate the changes you will need to make. Habit is easy, and it does take a little more effort to implement creative changes in holiday planning. But change and adjustment are essential for the newly bereaved.

Families can spend so many years following the same patterns and routines that they forget these choices were made because they were right for the moment. But choices made under different circumstances may not be the right choices for the newly bereaved. The early moments of grief demand new rules. Even customs "set in stone" can be bent.

Festivities that expend more energy than we have can be skipped. Entertaining and socializing can be altered or curtailed altogether. Decisions can be delayed and new plans designed and implemented at the last minute. The bereaved can learn to be creative and flexible in customizing their holiday plans.

Traditions bind families and societies closely together. But altering our traditions to suit our current needs makes sense. Each moment, each stage of life, demands its own customs and its own rituals. By building our bridges moment to moment, we link the past and the present to the future.

IN MEMORY OF YOU

BY KIRSTI A. DYER, M.D., M.S.

I find an old photograph
and see you smile.
As I feel your presence anew,
I am filled with warmth
and my heart remembers love.

I read an old card
sent many years ago
during a time of turmoil and confusion.
The soothing words written then
still caress my spirit
and bring me peace.

I remember who you used to be
the laughter we shared
and wonder what you have become.
Where you are now,
where did you go,
when the body is left behind.

Perhaps you are the morning bird
singing joyfully at sunrise,
or the butterfly that dances so carelessly
on the breeze
or the rainbow of colors
that brightens a stormy sky
or the fingers of afternoon mist
delicately reaching over the mountain or the final few
rays of the setting sun
lighting up the skies
edging the clouds with a magical glow.
I miss your being
but I feel your presence,
in whatever form you choose to take,
however you now choose to be.

Your spirit has become for me
a guardian angel on high
guiding, advising, and watching over me.

I remember you.
You are with me
and I am not afraid.

THE HOLIDAY

YOU MAY FIND THIS CHART USEFUL FOR ANY

HOLIDAY JOB LIST What choices do I have?	Do you know WHY YOU DO IT? Tradition/Habit Choice/Obligation	Does it matter WHERE you do it?
The family meal		
Religious Services		
Traveling		
Gift giving to friends & family		
Holiday cards		
Taking children to special holiday events		
Baking & Cooking		
Special Friends		
Entertaining at Home		
Family Gatherings		
Business Parties		
Visiting with Others		
Cleaning		
Holiday Clean-Up		



Hospice Brazos Valley

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hospicebrazosvalley.org

For more information, contact the
Hospice Brazos Valley office nearest you.

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Bryan, TX 77803
979.821.2266

Brenham

302 E. Blue Bell Rd.
Brenham, TX 77833
979.277.9525

La Grange

1048 N. Jefferson
La Grange, TX 78945
979.968.6913

Additional Resources

National Hospice & Palliative Care Organization

703.837.1500 | nhpco.org

AARP Foundation - Grief & Loss Programs

888.687.2277 | aarp.org/families/grief-loss

The Compassionate Friends, Inc.

877.969.0010 | compassionatefriends.org