



MOMENTS



MATTER

When grief hits the holidays

Karen Sanders, guest contributor

Ah, the holidays. When someone mentions “the holidays,” I bet your mind immediately goes to the time between November and January. For most people, this is a period of time devoted to family, people we love, and celebrations. What if this upcoming holiday season won’t bring those things? What if this upcoming holiday season means a series of firsts without your wife, sibling, child, or any other person whom you loved deeply?

Regardless of the relationship, those firsts are difficult. From my personal experience, I think these big holidays can be more trying on us physically, emotionally, and spiritually when we’re grieving. Are you dreading Thanksgiving dinner? Christmas morning? The eight nights of Chanukah? New Year’s Eve? Traditions are wonderful. Though when you’re facing a long-standing tradition with a gaping hole in it, that tradition can seem like the salt waiting to be poured into your freshly cut heart. This analogy may seem extreme, but for those of us facing holidays for the first time without that person, it seems spot-on.

At this time of the year, we’re ever aware of the changes that are occurring around us. How quickly the months pass us by. Then comes the cooler weather,



Like snowflakes, my Christmas memories gather and dance — each beautiful, unique, and gone too soon.”

DEBORAH WHIPP

rain, wind, falling leaves and, of course, snow. All of this makes us feel cold and raw, like our emotions when experiencing a loss. Tears, darkness, barrenness, loneliness, and other overwhelming emotions—we tend to feel these more when there is a change in the weather. We wonder how we’re going to get through this quagmire. We take a few steps forward. But then we’re reminded of a loved one which causes that sinking feeling of loss to surround us. Grief is painful. There are times when it can feel as if an elephant named Grief is on your chest and you’re suffocating from the weight. Sleepless nights can lead to headaches and body aches from insufficient rest, tossing and turning. It can feel like cement-weighted boots that keep you from going to your annual Christmas dinner at Grandma’s. How can you possibly manage to walk through those doors and see all of the familiar faces while the most important one is missing?

After my daughter died, I snuck out the door of my family’s Christmas gathering because I felt like I was suffocating. I couldn’t bear to engage in seemingly meaningless conversations and hear the same phrases of “I’m sure she’s better off” and “God knows what He’s doing”—or experience the whispers and avoidances from people who didn’t know what to say.

It's been several holiday seasons since that first for me, and I can still feel the racing heart, heaviness in my chest, and anxiety starting to build when I think about it. Sharing that personal information is meant to let you know that others experience it and survive. I have attended many family gatherings since then. I have skipped several. Some are still difficult, some are wonderful, and some are filled with the craziness that is sure to invade each event where my family is!

As I say to each person I encounter on their new journey of grief, own it. This is yours and yours alone. Even two parents who have buried a child will grieve that death differently. If it's too much to continue Thanksgiving dinner without your mother, then don't. Find a new way to be with the people you love. But if the thought of missing breakfast at Grandma's on Christmas morning is too much to bear, then go! Do what feels right for you. These important days will affect you in your grief. You may feel incredibly lonely. You may feel anger that there are no presents to buy. You may feel lost, as if you're a willow tree's branches swinging wildly in a storm. You may feel nothing, because numbness envelops you.

As you go through these next weeks, be kind and gentle with yourself. Do what feels right for you. Reach out to others who've walked this path ahead of you. They can be your best resources for comfort and understanding.

Mountain Valley has support groups that address different needs. Even if you aren't receiving bereavement services, it's okay to call and ask for bereavement staff support. Maybe a single phone call can get you over the hump.

I wish you a holiday season full of peace and comfort.

Tears, darkness,
barrenness,
loneliness, and
other overwhelming
emotions — we
tend to feel these
more when there's
a change in the
weather.

Supporting grieving children during the holidays

KATIE MOSER
MSW, LCSW



The best support for grieving children during the holidays is remembering to just breathe.

Give yourself and the child grace, extend patience to your family during this time, and know that your interest in reading this shows how much you care. There are different analogies we all feel connected to which help us describe our grief.

A common analogy is describing grief as a wave. Grief can be all-consuming. It can knock us off our feet, leaving us feeling like we have limited control, and an inability to stand when that wave comes crashing down. Grief looks, feels, and is triggered differently for all people. Not one person's grief is the same as another's. It's important that as adults we talk about our grief. It helps model, normalize, and validate the grief of children and adolescents whom we love. Having an environment that acknowledges the difficulties of grief but enforces safety in sharing grief, best supports the child.

You and your child have experienced a great loss. You both knew and loved this person significantly. However, your loss is different from the child's loss. Learn how to support your child through loss and grief by talking with them. Say the name of the person you both lost as often as possible. Learn each other's grief responses. And accept that often we as humans will not even be cognizant of our grief triggers in those moments.

The holidays are full of special events and traditions. These times are reminders of who's not there to celebrate the season. Often, we feel like the holidays are a trigger to intense grief responses. What are some things you can do to support your child through these moments?

You know when these events are going to occur. Prepare the child by talking through the event prior to the day of. In this conversation, discuss how you can incorporate your loved one into that event and setting. Some families do this by lighting a special candle or taking a moment of silence. Some families choose to display a picture, while others want to go around the room and verbalize a special thought or memory in honor of that person. There are no wrong ways to honor your person in these moments, but make a plan and communicate it with all involved.

In addition, make a "grief attack" or "grief moment" plan. "Grief attacks" are what's sometimes described as those grief triggers that hit us — often out of nowhere — and bring in a multitude of heavy emotions. Create a plan for the child if grief feels too hard. What does the child need from you in that moment? Maybe a grief break is needed, alone time in a restroom or bedroom. Perhaps they'd prefer their grief break to include a safe adult or friend to help talk them through their feelings. Ensure that the plan's prepared and all involved are aware of this plan. On the day of the event, do a "feelings check-in." Often, throughout grief, our emotional responses change. Your child's grief might have changed from the time you made your plan to the day of the event. The feelings check-in allows for expression of their current thoughts, feelings, fears, and grief level. Are they still comfortable with the plan created? Do adjustments need to be made?

As the event unfolds, remember that feelings of joy, gratitude, and excitement are all okay. You have permission to feel happy about this day. Also, know that feelings such as dread, fear, anger, and sadness, are also okay. You have every right to feel these emotions all at the same time, as well. Your child's likely also feeling these different emotions and may not be able to express that to you. Therefore, supporting your child in these moments could look like an easy and validating statement such as, "I feel angry that (name of the person) isn't here to celebrate this day with us. I also feel thankful that you're here, and we can experience this together. Sometimes feeling happy to enjoy fun and special days makes me also feel guilty, because your (person) isn't here." That statement could be very therapeutic and powerful to your grieving child, validating and giving them permission to feel a wide range of emotions.

Many parents and guardians of children have expressed fear that their child's not grieving because they're not crying or sharing their emotions. If your child doesn't cry and doesn't speak of their emotions, that's also okay. Children have a desire to please the adults in their lives. Children want to protect our feelings and often don't cry or talk about their grief because they don't want to make you sad or uncomfortable. Don't take it personally if your child doesn't grieve in a way that makes you comfortable. It doesn't mean that you're doing anything wrong. It likely means that your child's trying to protect your feelings. In these situations, I strongly encourage you to continue attempting the conversations I described earlier. If your child doesn't want to engage in those conversations, that's fine. Your attempting this conversation tells them that you strongly care about them, and that they have permission to express their grief when they're comfortable.

Lastly, find a moment during the holiday season to reflect on past holidays. Lean into the difficulties of missing your loved one and find support for yourself and your child during this season. Maybe you decide to call in a pizza delivery and watch your loved one's favorite movie. Or maybe you encourage time for you and your child to journal together, a reflection of your person. Perhaps you and your child write a letter to your person, or your child draws a picture and helps you write a letter to your loved one. Remember: whatever you do, whatever you feel, is okay, especially during the holiday season.



Coping with the new normal during the holidays



BRIAN G. CHILTON, PhD
Asst Director of Family Services

For most of my life, my grandparents served as the patriarchs and matriarchs of the family, especially on my maternal side. My grandfather was a beloved pastor in our community. He was at the same church for 27 years. His parishioners loved him and valued his insights. Every Christmas, Grandpa's church would hold a Christmas program and hand out paper bags full of fruit, nuts, candy, and Juicy Fruit chewing gum. He'd always make sure that he grabbed enough treat bags so that everyone had their own at Christmas time.

In 2016, Grandpa died just months after having to place my grandmother in a nursing home due to Alzheimer's. In 2017, Grandma also passed. For a few years after their passing, the family met for Thanksgiving and Christmas. But eventually, when COVID hit, the holiday get-togethers disbanded. Quite honestly, I haven't seen many of my relatives since then.

The same held true for my paternal side, only the events happened two decades prior. The biggest disappointment on my paternal side is the loss of the fun we used to have when we played board games and card games. That was more fun than opening presents. Now, the holidays are shallow compared to the fun times we had decades ago.

The holidays are meant to be a time of celebration. Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, whereas Hanukkah is an eight-day festival commemorating the miraculous burning of the oil lamps in the Temple during the Maccabean revolt against the Seleucid Empire in the 2nd century BC. Although these events are celebratory in nature, they often bring a great deal of sorrow for those who are grieving or have experienced loss.

So, how can we navigate the sometimes-challenging holiday season while acknowledging our grief? I've found that the following seven things have helped me during the holiday season.

“ I find that it's the simple things that remind you of family around the holidays.”

—AMY ADAMS

1 Find your anchor. This is so important. Your anchor is what gives your life meaning, value, and purpose. What is it that keeps you grounded? For me, my faith in God serves as my anchor. Because of this, I'll focus my attention on books and programs that elevate and uplift my relationship with God. Your anchor may be in something else. If your anchor was found in the person you lost, consider other anchors in your life. Perhaps your anchor is in a hobby or activity you enjoy. If so, make sure you participate in your anchored activities during this time.

2 Connect old traditions with new ones. We had many beloved traditions that we enjoyed with my grandparents. Playing games was one of them. My grandfather was one to be watched with a careful eye when playing the game Aggravation. I sometimes think they named the game after the way he played the game — because he'd sure aggravate you. After their passing, my immediate family tries to make time to play the games that we enjoy together. We also have made it a holiday tradition to ride around looking at Christmas lights.



3 Carve out a time for remembrance. As you enjoy the holiday season, be sure to take time to reflect on the lives of those you've lost. By doing so, we connect our present with our past.

4 Set boundaries. Go easy on yourself, especially after sustaining a loss. It's perfectly acceptable to set boundaries. Don't think you must attend every activity during the holiday season. You may need to communicate with your family that you need some time away this holiday season.

5 Engage in shared activities with the one you lost. Part of your remembrance activities may include participating in activities that you used to love doing with your loved one. One family said that they loved painting rocks with the one they lost. They made it a regular activity, and the activity brought them a great deal of joy.

6 Reflect on your blessings. I've often found that focusing on the blessings of life can alleviate feelings of grief and abandonment. Some have mentioned they keep a blessing jar. Anytime something good happens, a member will write out their blessing and place it in the jar. At the end of the year, the family will read all their blessings from the past year. This helps them remember all the good things that have come to them.

7 Give back. You don't have to look hard to find someone who's going through a time of tragedy. As you manage your grief, consider giving back. You may have a lot to offer others who are experiencing the same emotions you are. There's something about giving to others that lightens our spirits and invigorates our souls.

There are probably many other practices that could be mentioned, but these seven things have helped me find a new normal. The loss of family activities was another form of loss that we suffered after losing our grandparents. However, that doesn't mean we haven't found some continued sense of enjoyment during the holidays.

In the end, there are no right or wrong ways to grieve. Find healthy ways to express yourself. Give yourself permission to experience the emotions you feel even during the holiday season. Know that you're loved and important.





Grief support groups

NORTH CAROLINA

SURRY COUNTY

2nd Thursday of each month @ 11:30am

December 14th

Union Hill Friends Church
2315 Red Brush Road, Mount Airy, NC 27030
Fonda Younger: (336) 789-2922

2nd Thursday of each month @ 11am

December 14th

Mountain Valley Elkin office
968 N Bridge Street, Elkin, NC 28621
Kelley Tolbert-Holbrook: (336) 526-2650

3rd Monday of the month @ 10am*

December 18th

*Regular schedule: 4th Monday @ 10am
Mountain Valley Pilot Mountain office
129 Veterans Drive, Pilot Mountain, NC 27041
Jessica Simandle: (336) 583-8589

4th Thursday of each month @ 6pm

December 28th

Mountain Valley Elkin office
968 N Bridge Street, Elkin, NC 28621
Kelley Tolbert-Holbrook: (336) 526-2650

YADKIN COUNTY

1st Thursday of each month @ 11am

December 7th

SECU Hospice Care Center
243 N Lee Avenue, Yadkinville, NC 27055
Melissa Causby: (336) 679-2466

3rd Thursday of each month @ 6pm

December 21st

SECU Hospice Care Center
243 N Lee Avenue, Yadkinville, NC 27055
Melissa Causby: (336) 679-2466

WILKES COUNTY

3rd Monday of each month @ 6pm

December 18th

Reins-Sturdivant Funeral Home
270 Armory Road, North Wilkesboro, NC 28659
Kelley Tolbert-Holbrook: (336) 526-2650
Melissa Causby: (336) 679-2466

VIRGINIA

HENRY COUNTY

1st Wednesday of each month @ 2pm

December 6th

King's Grant Retirement
350 Kings Way Road, Martinsville, VA 24112
Shannon Roberson: (888) 789-2922

2nd Tuesday of each month @ 10am

December 12th

The Community Fellowship
2674 Virginia Avenue, Collinsville, VA 24078
Shannon Roberson: (888) 789-2922

PATRICK COUNTY

3rd Thursday of each month @ 2pm

December 21st

Stuart United Methodist Church
101 East Blue Ridge Street, Stuart, VA 24171
Shannon Roberson: (888) 789-2922

GRAYSON COUNTY

3rd Monday of each month @ 2pm

December 18th

Mt Olivet United Methodist Church
Community Building
(gray building next to church)
6926 Carrollton Pike, Galax, VA 24333
Jessica Simandle: (888) 789-2922

No RSVP needed

Please attend the group nearest you.

Meeting dates and times are subject to change

For more information, please call
the group's bereavement coordinator



The Humble Have
BENEFITING
MOUNTAIN VALLEY
HOSPICE SERVICES

VISIT OUR PREMIER NONPROFIT SHOPS

705 West Pine Street
Mount Airy, NC 27030
(336) 789-1230
Tues - Sat, 10 - 5

38 East Cheek Street
Sparta, NC 28675
(336) 372-4545
Tues - Sat, 10 - 5



**BENEFITING
MOUNTAIN
VALLEY
HOSPICE
SERVICES**

+ December 2023 grief support group schedule

When grief hits the holidays Supporting grieving children during the holidays Coping with the new normal of the holidays

INSIDE:

to the NEW Moments Matter,
our bereavement newsletter

WELCOME

105 North Crutchfield Street
Unit 2
Dobson, NC 27017



Nonprofit Org.
US Postage
PAID
Elkin, NC
Permit #82