

Grief and the holidays

Finding a light in the darkness

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People who are trying to recover from the death of a loved one often dread an upcoming holiday. The memories of shared times together trigger renewed feelings of grief that can be as fresh and powerful as the first loss.

Understanding what you will face, sharing your feelings, and creating new traditions are some of the steps you can take to get through the holidays in a healthy way, even when you are grieving the loss of a loved one.

Remember, too, that these emotions aren't limited to Thanksgiving and Christmas. Sometimes the strongest feelings of loss are associated with anniversaries, birthdays, Mother's or Father's Day. Any celebration or gathering at which the one who died will be missed can cause us to experience a fresh bout of grief and loss.

Avoid "business as usual"

Maintaining your holiday routine and ignoring your grief may feel "safe," but it is usually not the wisest course. You may feel that by not talking about your loss you are protecting others when they are celebrating.

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This booklet is primarily intended for those who are grieving the death of one close to them. If you know someone who is grieving, you may find this information helpful in understanding the challenges that person is facing now.

But in effect, you are putting others who know of your loss in an awkward position. They may not know how to bring up the subject of your loss because they don't want to upset you. Everyone ends up suffering alone in awkward silence, wondering if they are alone in their grief.

As you approach the holidays, talking to friends and family and planning together how you will share your grief and acknowledge your loss is better than pretending everything is the same. Consider setting aside some time to honor and remember the one who has died. This provides an outlet for grief that helps you and others continue to move forward.

Don't over-extend yourself

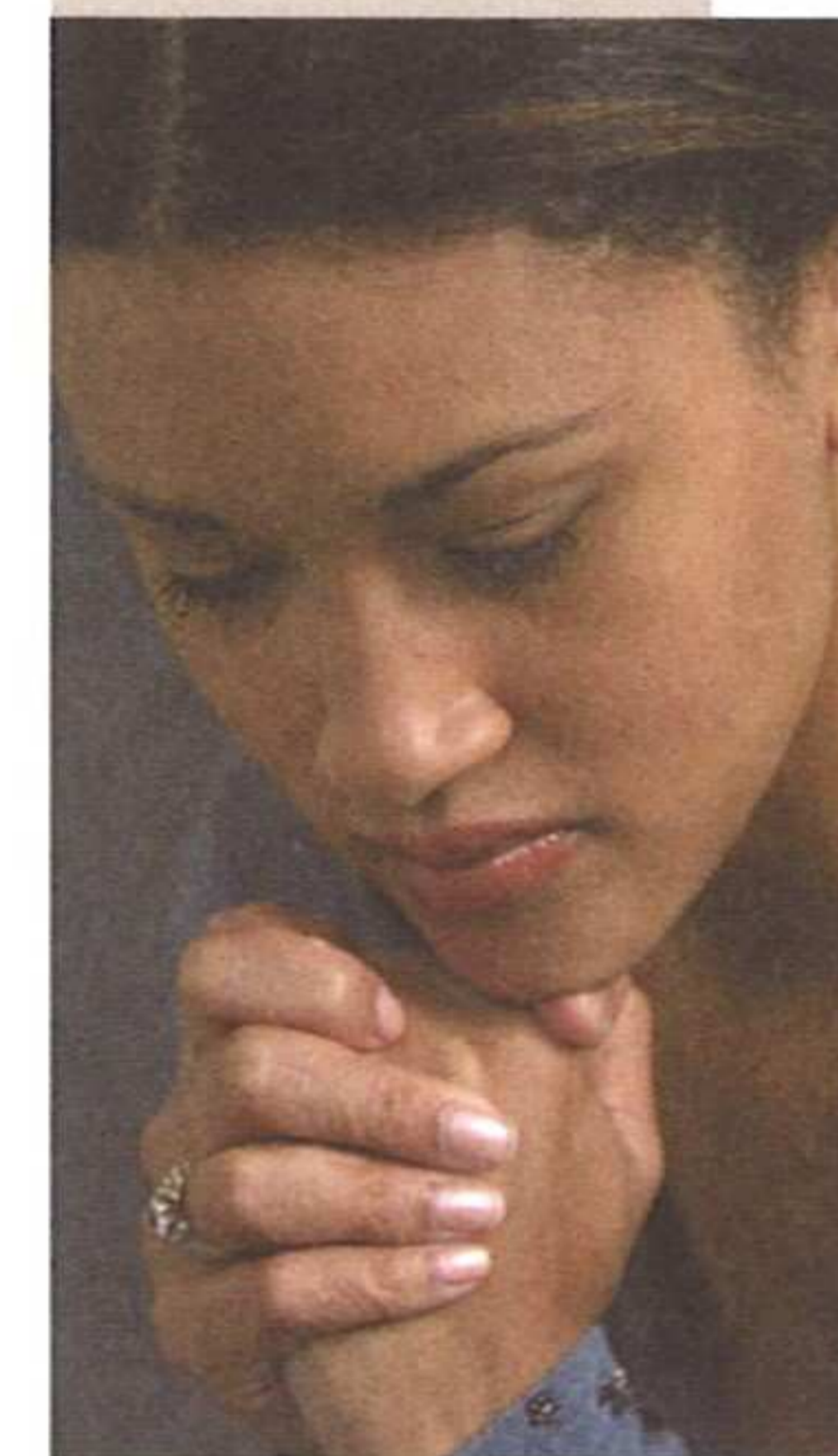
This is good advice during any holiday season, but when dealing with the death of a loved one, it is vital. Grief is hard work, and exhausting. You may find you tire easily. While it's not a good idea to go into isolation following a death, remember to respect what your mind and body are telling you about your energy levels. Recognize that you need to set aside time for yourself.

If you find that you are trying to distract yourself from your grief with a holiday schedule that's even busier than usual, step back. Don't let holiday obligations postpone your need to talk about your feelings of grief.

Later in this book you will find some ideas of activities that can help you with your grieving. When you consider them, remember not to over-extend yourself.



There is no need to dread the holidays.



Recognize that you need to set aside time for yourself.

Don't worry about being cheerful

Holiday times are supposed to be times of celebration. Well-meaning people may expect you to submerge your feelings of grief and loss, and be part of the celebration. Don't ignore your feelings in an effort to please them. This year the holidays will be different for you. You are under no obligation to be cheerful.

Friends and family members may also take on the obligation of trying to make sure you enjoy the holiday season. You may find this awkward and burdensome. This situation usually ends in frustration and disappointment all around. Make it clear they are not responsible for making you happy at holiday time.

Find a new tradition

For many, holidays are stressful enough already without adding the extra task of coping with loss. Give yourself permission to make changes in traditions that do not bring you comfort. You may wish to consider starting new traditions that help you remember your loved one in a way that brings you peace or happiness.

Remember, though, that others may not be so ready to give up a tradition they cherish. This is another opportunity talk with those close to you about letting go and moving on.

The winter holidays may also be a good time to plan a spring or summer memorial planting for the one who has died. Your local park system may welcome a tree or perennial flower bed planted in memory of your loved

one. Churches, libraries and other institutions may also welcome memorial landscaping. Remember that your gift need not be accompanied by a memorial plaque to be a source of healing and remembrance for you. Even a planting in your own garden can be a healthy way to remember and celebrate a loved one.

Taking the time during the holidays to plan such an activity can give you something rewarding to look forward to.

Talk about your grief with supportive, comforting people

When you share your grief by talking about your feelings with others, it will make you feel better. This is true at the holiday season as well as at other times. But a key part of this is finding comforting, supportive people to talk to. Identify those family members and friends who understand that the holidays increase your feelings of loss, and who will allow you to talk freely about those feelings. You will soon discover who is willing to let you be yourself.

Do something for others

When you feel empty, remember that you still have something you can give to others. If you feel able, volunteering may be a healthy alternative that helps you move away from a cycle of grief and pain. (Remember, though, not to over-extend yourself!)

Hospitals, libraries, shelters and food shelves usually welcome volunteers. Talk to



Make it clear to your friends they are not responsible for your holiday happiness.



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your family and friends about participating with you, if you wish. Don't forget that this, too, can become part of a new holiday tradition.

Know your limits

Participating in events and parties is often part of our holiday routine. Don't feel that you have to take part in everything, just as you once did with your loved one. Give yourself permission to say no, or to go home early. Your hosts will understand.

If you shed some public tears, don't let it make you feel worse. Your tears may serve a healing purpose by giving others permission to share their grief as well.

Some funeral homes have a tradition of annually remembering those who have died during the past year. Often these events are held during the holidays. If you have access to such an event, go if you can. You may find such an event to be a comfort, since everyone in attendance will have also suffered a loss. Your tears will not be the only ones.

Support groups at holiday time

If you have joined a bereavement support group, you may discover that it has suspended its efforts over the holidays, the very time it is needed most. Make plans to keep in touch with one or two support group members during the holidays.

The second season

While we expect our grief to lessen as months and years go by, you may experience more acute feelings of grief during the second holiday season than you did the first year. Often the first holiday season will find you running on auto-pilot, still partially in shock over your loss.

Also, you may not receive the same level of emotional support during the second holiday season that you did the first time. This is not because your family and friends don't care. It's just that they may not be aware of how you feel.

Don't be afraid to call on those close to you for support. Remember, they may be experiencing the same feelings of loss.

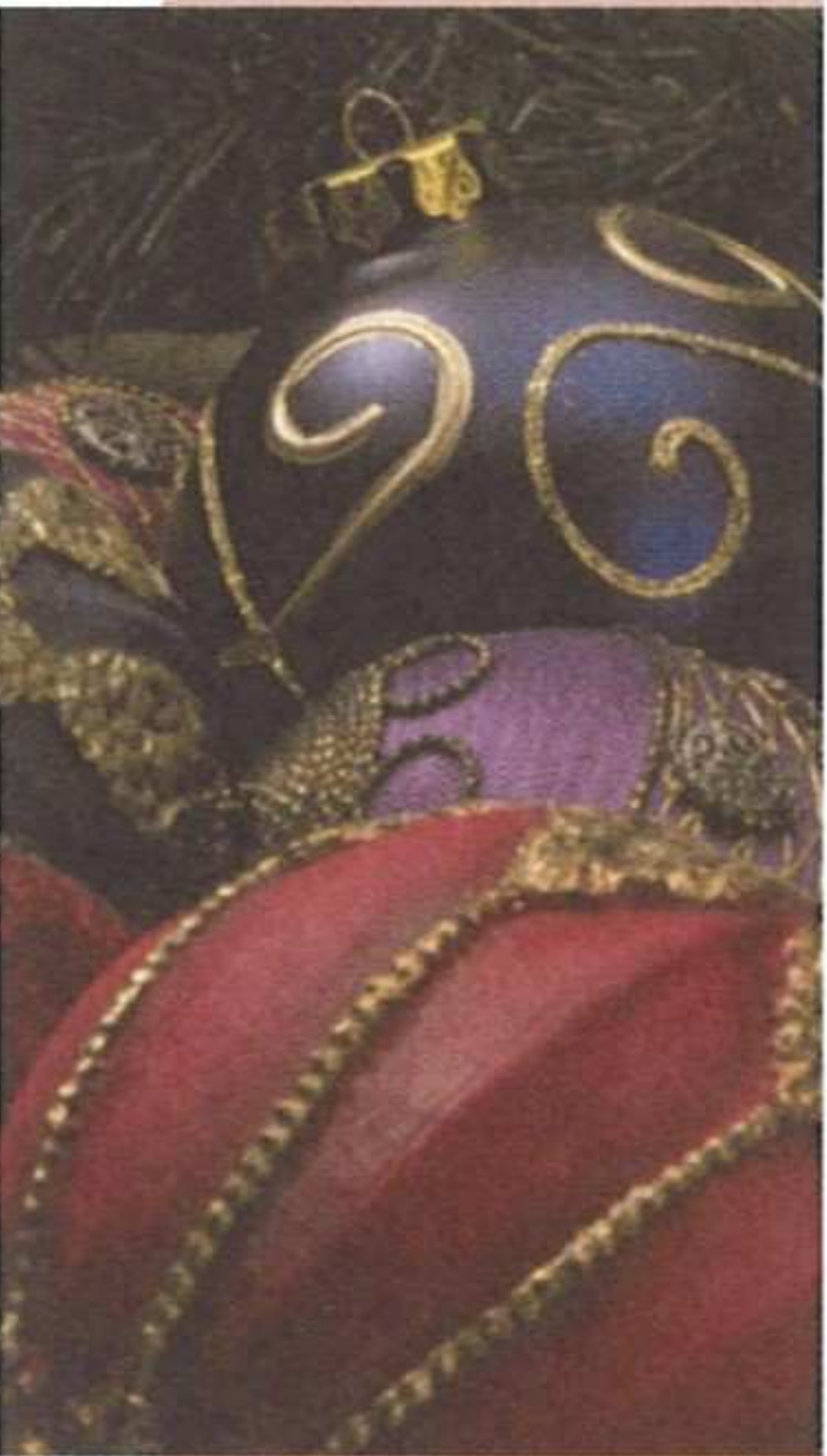
Hope for the holidays

Under normal circumstances, we all expect holidays to be joyful times, and your holidays will be again, too. Holidays are vital times of healing. The time will come when the memories of your loved one are a source of comfort for you, not a cause of distress.


Enjoying the holidays does not mean you have to forget a loved one who has died. You know you will never forget. When your thoughts and memories of your loved one fill you with joy, rather than pain, you will know that healing has begun.

About the author:

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