



3 Cs of Coping with the Holidays

Kenneth J. Doka (Courtesy Hospice Foundation of America)

With the rollercoaster-like emotions of grief, the holidays can be an especially tough time. We remember the Chanukah that Aunt Sophia danced in the snow, the Christmas that we received a bike, the Thanksgiving when the turkey was undercooked. These memories remind us of our loss. Other reminders such as cards addressed to the person who died, holiday movies, gifts that seem perfect, can make us feel out of sorts with the season. Everyone else seems so happy and joyful.

The holidays are a tough time to grieve. Knowing that does not make them any easier, but at least it may help us understand and accept our reactions and tap into the things we can do to help ourselves cope with the holidays.

CHOOSE: During the holidays it is easy to drift into activities that increase our pain. But we do have choices. We can decide what activities we wish to participate in, who we want to be with, what we want to do. After her husband died, June was invited, actually pressured, to join her sister-in-law for the holidays. She decided that she would retain the freedom to choose where she wanted to be on Christmas until that morning. "I never know how much energy I'll have, or how I feel until that day," she explained. On Christmas morning, she decided to have dinner with a few women she had met in a local widow's support group. She chose to go to her sister-in-law's house for dessert.

One of the choices we may want to consider is how to mark the loss during the holidays. During the holidays we feel the presence of that person's absence. Finding ways to recognize and acknowledge that individual can bring a positive focus to our grief. This may be done in a number of ways -- lighting a candle, creating a ritual, placing a memento on a tree, a moment of silence or a holiday toast are simple ways to acknowledge the loss.

COMMUNICATE: It is important that we discuss our choices with others, especially those who are affected by them. They have needs as well. Their ways of dealing with grief may be different. June, for example, talked with her sister-in-law, explaining her feelings and asking if she could make a decision that day. Once her sister-in-law understood June's feelings and needs, she was willing to be flexible. Marcy's family had to have a considerable discussion over whether or not they would have a Christmas tree after the death of one of her children.

COMPROMISE: Each of us deals with loss in our own particular way. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. When we communicate, we may find that our feelings and needs, the very ways that we cope, will differ. We need to find space to compromise. For example, some people in Marcy's family saw the Christmas tree as an important tribute to their late son and brother. Other family members saw it as disrespectful. They talked through each point of view and decided that this year they would have a small tree, not in the central living room but in the family room. Those who wanted to help decorate could, but those who chose not to would also be respected. All could deal with their loss in their own way.

Nothing changes the fact that the holidays can be especially difficult while grieving. But as we choose our actions, communicate our choices with others, and find suitable compromises, we may find that they are bearable. And that gives us renewed strength and hope.