



CALM WATERS



Center for Children and Families

COPING WITH GRIEF THROUGH THE HOLIDAYS (SEPERATIONS & DIVORCE) A WORKBOOK



How to prepare for the holiday season and cope with a death or divorce, deployment, deportation, incarceration or foster/adoptive care.

Coping with Grief through the Holidays

The pressures around the holidays can be even more challenging while grieving. Here are some tips to consider that may help as you navigate the challenges.

Plan ahead.

Anxiety and anticipation leading up to the season can be more intense than the actual holidays. Planning ahead can help lower anxiety and stress for both adults and children. If you have children, involve them in discussions about what they would like to do. This will give them a sense of control during this emotional time. Once you've decided what you can and can't do, share your decisions with friends and family.

If you are coordinating with a previous spouse, a brief email, telephone message, or conversation can insure that you don't duplicate presents or plan back-to-back feasts for stuffed and confused children. Ten minutes now can save days (or weeks) of fuming later. Work out exactly where your children will be during what times, and when, where, and how exchanges will take place. **Your children will feel more secure knowing this plan and avoid frustration and disappointment for all.**

Accept limitations.

You may not be able to do all the things you've always done. Which aspects of the holidays are especially challenging for your family? Consider scaling back or changing things you may have done in the past, and consider what has been or might be especially enjoyable or meaningful to your family.

Be informed before attending events.

Find out who will be there, how long it's expected to last, and whether you need to do anything to prepare for it. As a family, brainstorm ways you and your children want to respond to questions or offers of help from others.



Get creative with communication.

Although you may be apart, there are so many ways to communicate with loved ones during the holidays. Use technology by sending a text message, email, call, or arrange a video chat.

It is important to allow them to communicate with both parents during the holidays whenever possible. Make a plan for how and when this can be coordinated to respect the plans of both parents. If you are sharing your children with a previous spouse, be mindful of not infringing too much on their other parent's holiday time with the kids – especially if you'll be seeing them soon. Make sure your text message, emails, tweets, videos, Facebook posts etc. reinforce a cooperative co-parenting team. This means no criticizing the other parent.

Ask for help, even when it's hard to do.

If it feels right, allow people to help in concrete ways such as cleaning, cooking, baking, shopping, childcare, and running errands. If you aren't able to spend the holiday with family, reach out to your friends. Let them know that you are going to be on your own, and you may be surprised about being welcomed! Sometimes we worry about burdening others, but more often than not, they are eager to help.

Coping with and expressing feelings as they arise.

It is natural for children as well as adults to experience a wide range of emotion while grieving. As hard as this time may be, it is important to express and cope with feelings as they arise. Avoid minimizing your own and your child's feelings or trying to put a "positive" spin on their expressions. For example, saying "It's important to focus on the good times you had with your dad," is likely to communicate that you don't want your child to hear about painful things. Instead, validate and reflect the emotion by saying, for example, "It makes sense that you really miss your dad right now and wish he were here." Finding ways to positive cope with these emotions are important as well. Be sure you and your children have identified positive coping skills to use when difficult feelings arise.



Engage in self-care.

The holidays can be physically and emotionally draining, especially if you're grieving. Encourage rest and quiet play at times, and plan for healthy eating and hydration for the entire family. Always remember to take care of yourself. Give yourself a break, surround yourself with a strong support system, and take time to recharge.

Find ways to honor your grief.

Include memories of the person you are grieving in your celebration. Encourage children to make something meaningful specifically for this person. Decide as a family, where these items should be placed during the holidays. Here are some ideas to consider:

- Write a card or letter to the person you are grieving.
- Write memories on strips of paper and use them to create a paper chain.
- Hang a special decoration in memory of the person, such as a wreath or stocking. If a stocking is used, family members can place cards or pieces of paper with memories inside.
- Gift-wrap a box and make an opening in the top for family and friends to share written memories. At a special time the box can be unwrapped and the memories shared.
- Set a special place at the table during a holiday meal for the person who was not able to attend.

Recapture the joy and meaning of the holidays.

Have a positive attitude. Give yourself permission to enjoy this holiday any way that you choose. You don't have to be lonely, even if you happen to be alone. If you think you're going to be alone over the holidays, seize the opportunity to do something you've always wanted to do.

Your children deserve their celebrations even if you feel cheated out of yours. They love when their parents engage in childlike attitudes about the holidays, such as "I can't believe it's over already, it seems like it just started" rather than negative outlooks such as "Thank God it's over. If it lasted one more day I'd have a nervous breakdown." If you are sharing your children with a previous spouse during the holiday, encourage them to have a blast with their other parent, even if you can't stand the prospect of being alone.



Recapture the joy and meaning of the holidays, cont.

Remember, this is a time of giving, forgiving, and fresh starts. Your time, attention, and emotional presence are much more important to your children than lavish gifts. You may be short on money but you can be long on love.

Celebrate change and create new traditions.

The holiday season is steeped in sentiment and tradition, which is why people who are in transition sometimes choose to ignore the holidays altogether. Many difficult reminders may arise that can cause difficulties engaging in usual traditions. Suppress the urge to ignore the holidays because they may seem too painful to endure. Decide what works for you and what doesn't – and edit accordingly.

It's important that children are given the opportunity to celebrate the holidays without feeling bad or feeling guilty. Involve your children in discussions about what they would like to do. You and your family may decide to keep everything the same or change everything – or you may fall somewhere in-between. Establish traditions with your children, even new ones that may be off time or different from past rituals. Your kids may not remember the details of 2004, but year-in, year-out traditions will stay with them for a lifetime.



Family Plan for the Holidays

After creating your lists for each item, go back through and identify who will be responsible for tasks you wish to keep/create, and who can help.

Food

What foods do we typically cook for the holidays? What are the favorite foods of the person who we are grieving? Who can help this year? Do we want to cook at home or go out? What will we bring to parties?

List what you normally do and star the items you want to keep.

List new traditions you want to start.



Activity:

On this page, draw a picture of these old and new food traditions. Where is this at?
What will the table look like? Who will be there? Who will sit where?



Events, parties, and family gatherings

Do we want to attend our usual parties this year? Will we host a gathering? Do we want to include the memory of the person who we are grieving? How? How will we handle conversations about the situation we are grieving? What about conversations with people who don't know our grief story?

List what you normally do and star the items you want to keep.

List new traditions you want to start.



Decorations

Do we want to decorate this year? What were past favorite decorations? Do we want to create decorations to honor the person/situation who we are grieving?

List what you normally do and star the items you want to keep.

List new traditions you want to start.



Activity:

On this page, draw a picture of these old and new decoration traditions. Consider making a wreath with elements that remind you and/or the children of special memories.

Where could the wreath hang?



Traditions

What traditions are connected to the person who we are grieving? What new traditions would we like to create? (Explore this without worrying what others will think!) How will we carve out time for ourselves and our reactions? Who can we go to for support and care?

List what you normally do and star the items you want to keep.

List new traditions you want to start.

Activity: Have each member in your family share a funny story about the person / situation you're grieving.



Post-Holidays

What have you traditionally done for New Year's Eve and Day? What do you normally do during January and February? You may want to plan a trip or some other special event for after the holidays end. January and February can be daunting months even during the best of circumstances, so it can be helpful to have something to look forward to that isn't connected to the holiday season.

List what you normally do and star the items you want to keep.

List new traditions you want to start.

Activity: Plan a family outing for an upcoming holiday for less than \$50.



Reflection

Just as you set aside time to have a family meeting to create a plan for the holiday season, it's equally important to meet and talk about how things went for each of you. Let family members know ahead of time that there will be a chance to discuss what worked, what didn't, what you want to do differently next year, and to check in about how people are doing after the holidays. It can be important to let others know what they did that was especially helpful or caring.

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