

CALM WATERS



Center for Children and Families

# **COPING WITH GRIEF THROUGH THE SUMMER (SEPARATIONS & DIVORCE) A WORKBOOK**

The pressures around the summer holidays can be challenging after a separation or divorce. Here are action items that may help navigate summer events and memories.

# COPING WITH GRIEF THROUGH THE SUMMER

## PLAN AHEAD.

Anxiety and anticipation leading up to summer events and holidays can be more intense than the actual events. 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 ensure 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 summer 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 summer trips or 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 summer events, vacations, or 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 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 vacation or holidays 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, our support network is eager to help.

## **COPING WITH FEELINGS AS THEY ARISE.**

It is natural for children as well as adults to experience a wide range of emotions 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," communicates that you don't want your child to hear about painful things. Instead, validate and reflect the child's emotion by saying, **"It makes sense that you really miss your dad right now and that you wish he were here."** Finding ways to positively cope with these emotions are important. Be sure you and your children have identified positive coping skills to use when difficult feelings arise.

## **ENGAGE IN SELF-CARE.**

The summertime 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 positive memories of the person you are grieving in your summer plans. Encourage children to make something specifically for this person. Decide as a family where these items should be placed.

### **Ideas:**

- Write a card or letter to the person you miss.
- Write memories on strips of paper and use them to create a paper chain.
- Hang a special decoration in honor of the person, such as a plant or souvenir.
- Set a place at the table during summer holiday meals for the person who cannot attend.

## **RECAPTURE SUMMER JOY.**

Have a positive attitude. Give yourself permission to enjoy the summer 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 during a summer holiday, seize the opportunity to do something you've always wanted to do.

Your children deserve their summer even if you feel cheated out of yours. Kids can feel guilty about having fun and enjoying summer break.

Remind them it is OK to have fun. They love when their parents engage in childlike attitudes about the vacations, summer events, and 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 summer, encourage them to have a blast with the other parent, even if you can't stand the prospect of being alone.

Remember, summer break can be a time of rest, growth, and fresh starts. Your time, attention, and emotional presence are much more important to your children than going on lavish vacations and summer shopping sprees.

## **CELEBRATE CHANGE AND CREATE NEW TRADITIONS.**

The summer season is steeped in holidays honoring family members and events where certain family members previously took part in vacations or traditions. This is why people who are in transition sometimes choose to ignore the summer holidays and traditions altogether. Many difficult reminders can open the door to sadness when engaging in usual traditions. Suppress the urge to ignore the summer 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 their summer events 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 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 SUMMER HOLIDAYS & VACATION

After creating your lists for each item, identify who will be responsible for each task you wish to keep/create.

## **FOOD**

What foods do we typically cook for the holidays? What are the favorite foods of the person whom 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.

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List new summer traditions you want to start.

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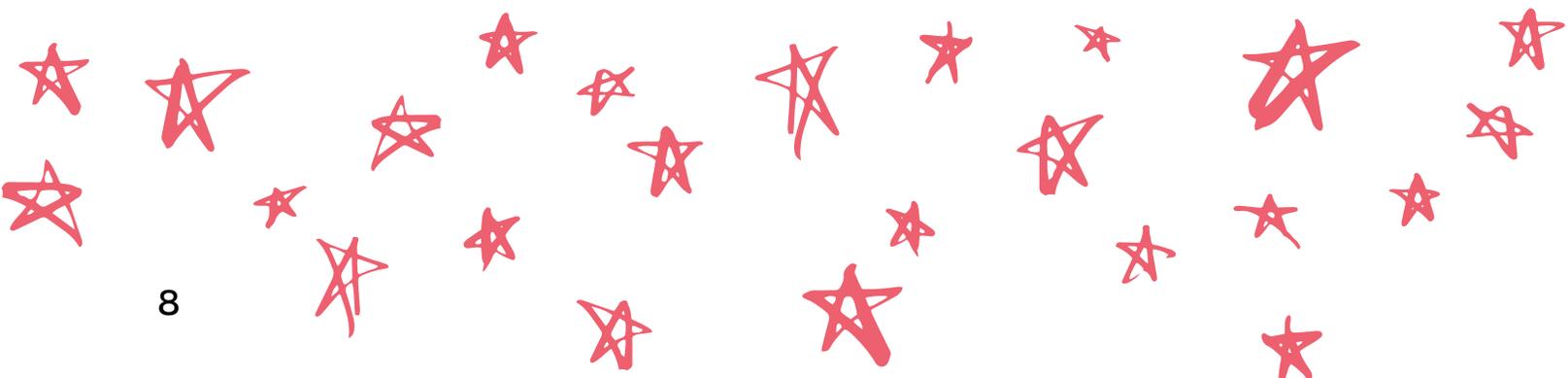
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**Food and Meal Activity:** On this page, draw a picture of your old and new food and meal traditions. What will the table look like? Who will be there? Who will sit where?



**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 person who we are grieving? What about conversations with people who do not know about our grief story?

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

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List new traditions you want to start.

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**TRAVEL**

Do we want to travel this summer? What were the favorite travel destinations of the person whom we are grieving? Do we want to travel to a place or an event to honor them?

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

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List new traditions you want to start.

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**TRADITIONS**

What summer traditions are connected to the person whom 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.

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List new traditions you want to start.

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**Traditions Activity:** Have each member in your family answer the question about their favorite tradition and which new traditions do they want to start.



**POST-HOLIDAYS**

What have you traditionally done for July, August, and the first day of school? What did the person whom you are grieving enjoy doing? Summer months can be busy, so it's helpful to have moments to honor past memories connected to the person you miss.

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List new traditions you want to start.

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Plan a family outing for under \$50.

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## REFLECTION

Just as you set aside time to have a family meeting to create a plan for the summer 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 summer holidays. It can be important to let others know what they did that was especially helpful or caring.