

these as headers to columns:

1. Would the holidays “be the holidays” without it?
2. Is there something you want to do differently?
3. Do you do this out of habit, tradition, free choice or obligation?
4. Is it a one-person job or can it be shared?
5. Who is responsible for seeing that it gets done?
6. Do you like doing this?

Schedule additional activities with friends, so that the holidays are not limited to November 24 and December 25. Seek support and encouragement by talking with other people about how they negotiate difficult situations in the holiday season. Don't believe the myth that you're the only one facing relational challenges. Many people grieve during the holidays.

Talk about the loss or disappointment you're living with. A widow recently confided,

*“I just wish people would talk to me about my husband. It's as if they're afraid I'm going to crumble into a puddle of tears if his name is mentioned. So what if I cry a little. I miss talking about him. He was such a part of my life, and theirs too.”*

This woman needed her memories to

remind her of who she is. Psalm 62 encourages us with these words:

*“Trust in him at all times, you people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge.”*

#### **What can I do?**

If you know someone who is grieving...

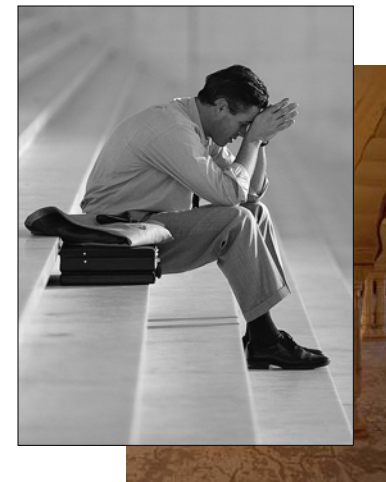
- Please don't tell us to turn off our memories, to snap out of it, or that he/she is gone and life must move on.
- Remember our love for people usually doesn't end when we lose them.
- Know that memories return at unexpected times, filling us with intense longing. We might be overcome with tears, anger or apathy.
- Please take our feelings into consideration if the plans you're making include us.

If you are grieving...

- As you plan for the holiday season, whether you feel near to or distant from God, do the best you can to put yourself in places and relationships with other followers of Jesus.
- Be honest with close Christian friends and ask for their prayers.
- Cover yourself with the truths of scripture that speak of you being chosen and loved.
- Watch for and fend off the “you'd be happier if” lies of our culture.
- Practice daily gratitude for the good gifts God has put in your life.
- Invite and watch for God's presence made real and tangible in the difficult situations you face.

## Coping with Loss during the holidays

by Linda Cutshall  
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# Coping With Grief During the Holidays

The holidays are coming. For some these are the toughest days of grief. Nothing hurts like the loss of someone you love. The pain is raw and strange, and it frightens you, and you can't make it go away. Some days are worse than others; the holidays, Thanksgiving, Christmas, birthdays, the Sunday morning journey to church alone.

I remember our first Christmas after my mother died. I couldn't dial 283-1247 anymore to arrange our annual shopping trip for gifts and lunch at our favorite café. Mom loved Christmas music, but when I played her favorite CDs the tunes left me feeling flat. My father had been



“Mr. Christmas.” He loved every tinsel strand placed on the tree...that is, when we could settle on a tree. My sister and I recall hours of trekking with Dad as he searched for the “perfect” tree. The Christmas after he died, Mom purchased a small artificial tree; her children have followed suit.

Perhaps you, too, have experienced losses that are particularly difficult during the holiday season. Many of us

live with loss, having never experienced the kinds of positive family experiences that are portrayed in Hallmark commercials.

- So how do we make our way through the absence of something we wish we had, or still had?
- How do we deal with the real or imagined togetherness of everyone else, when the lights and glitz of the season just remind us of our grief?

If you've been tempted to pull the covers over your head until you can flip the calendar to January 2, keep reading. A good place to begin is to look honestly at your beliefs about the holidays. Consider a few things I usually hear this time of year:

- Everyone has happy memories except for me.
- Because other family members pretend that “everything is okay,” I need to also.
- I need to set aside my grief and focus on positive thoughts.
- It is important for me to make everyone else happy and comfortable.

Face whether or not your beliefs are rational or irrational. With this discernment we become more capable of making good choices, choices that reflect respect for ourselves as well as for others involved. Step back from your perception of what the holidays “should” look like and instead describe what “is.” In doing this reflective, prayerful work we have the chance of experiencing greater freedom

to reshape our expectations of the holidays.

Some people think it can help to change holiday traditions a little, or to start new traditions that include the memories of a loved one. After Dad died, I suggested to our family that we enjoy Thanksgiving at a local restaurant with some close friends, rather than try to pull off the traditional feast at home.



During our Christmas celebration that year we read “Polar Express” together, honoring my Dad's love of trains and his child-like belief in Christmas.

On a practical level you can make a chart listing down the left side the activities or jobs you usually do or participate in during the holidays. Things like:

- buy and send Christmas cards
- give or attend a party
- participate in Advent worship
- see family members
- contribute time to a charity
- bake cookies, etc.

Then across the top place questions like