



# The Mulberry Report

Solutions For Life

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## Facing the Holidays After the Death of a Loved One

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“Since my husband died a few months ago, I dread the holidays.”

To say that after the death of a loved one that you do not look forward to the holidays is not uncommon and in no way reflects on you or how you handle grief. It is probably a universal phenomenon that persons who have experienced the death of a loved one will be faced with an upsurge of grief during certain anniversaries or holidays. Birthdays, wedding anniversaries, and especially Thanksgiving and Christmas are considered special events in a person's life, and when you can no longer share them with a loved one it brings feelings of sadness and grief.

Everybody experiences grief in his own way, at his own pace. There is no cut and dry schedule for recovery. Grieving does not follow a stable, step by step progression in a predictable, sequential way from one level to another, decreasing steadily in intensity, going from high to low in a straight line. Typically, people experience ups and downs, good days and bad for months after the loss. Moreover, there will be certain occasions, including holidays and anniversaries when the feelings of grief will come flooding back. At these times it is very common to have feelings such as missing the person, of sadness and loneliness. These feelings can lead to crying, irritability, difficulty concentrating, and, perhaps, a desire to be alone.

It is important to remember that these reactions are normal and to feel this way does not mean you are slipping backward in the grief process. These intermittent surges of grief do not have to be looked at as obstacles to your recovery – as long as they do not unduly interfere for too long with your functioning or reduce your ability to enjoy life most of the time.

Holidays, such as Thanksgiving and Christmas, can be especially difficult for persons who have experienced a death. In our society, holidays are supposed to be family times, celebrations that you share with your loved ones. So it is not unusual to feel an emptiness, a big hole in your heart because a significant person is absent.

Be aware that although your grief may surge at this time, there are some things that you can do to help you cope with the holidays. The following are some considerations:

- Realize that the anticipation of pain at the holidays can be worse than that felt on the actual day. Instead of getting caught up in how bad it's going to be, try to focus on your options and make plans for the event.

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- It is very important that you use your support system at this time. Especially try to be with people who validate you and do not judge you for not being as strong as they think you should be.
- Be open to the possibility of changing some of the customs and rituals of the past to accommodate the absence of a loved one and adjust to your own feelings of comfort. If, for example, you and spouse always went to a Christmas eve church service together and now you can't bear the thought of going alone, it's OK not to go. But perhaps you could develop a new memorial ritual, for example, lighting a candle at the dinner table.
- Think through for yourself and talk to your loved ones about what is important for each of you. With understanding, negotiation and compromise, perhaps everyone can obtain much of what they want and need.
- Be aware of the pressures, demands and fatigue that come with creating a successful holiday celebration. It can be healthy for you to acknowledge that you can't do it all by yourself and ask others to do more. Perhaps you could ask a family member to host the big meal.
- Accept the fact that your loved one's absence will cause you pain no matter what you do. This is normal and natural. You can allow yourself to have the cry you need and the tears do not have to ruin the holiday. Let the tears and sadness come and go throughout the day if it helps.

It is good to reminisce about other holidays you shared with the deceased loved one – especially the joy-filled memories. Talk about the deceased. This is an important step in the grieving process. At the same time be sure you have some fun. Having fun at the holidays does not mean you don't miss your loved one and does not betray his or her memory.

You might consider doing something for someone outside the family. Reaching out to another person or family can give a great deal of satisfaction. For example, give a donation in your loved one's name. Or give food to a needy family for Christmas dinner.

Finally, make time to take care of yourself on these occasions. And remember, although the holidays will involve some pain, and you will miss your loved one, you are going to be OK.

Mr. Wannemuehler began his clinical social work career at St. Mary's Hospital prior to joining the Mulberry practice group in 2003. His specialty area is marital counseling. His professional career covers 30 years.