



## **COPING WITH HOLIDAYS and SPECIAL DAYS through tough times of bereavement**

Holidays and special days (like birthdays) can be an especially tough time for those who are bereaved and facing change, loss and grief - whatever their age and stage. There are lots of reasons for this.

There may be reminders everywhere of how things have changed and of the people, places or events you're missing. Memories, for example of someone who is no longer with you, may be both wonderful and painful.

Other people may seem so happy and light hearted, that you may feel isolated and perhaps also lonely. You may still feel numb or without emotion, or so full of strong thoughts and feelings that they're hard to deal with. And bereaved people often say they feel expected to join in and get into the spirit of things when they just can't. You may even feel that others are ignoring you and disregarding your personal circumstances and pain.

Because you can expect holiday times and special days to probably trigger thoughts, memories and feelings that you might find difficult to manage, it's a good idea to think about some ways to help yourself, and your family/whānau, to get through these times as well as possible.

***Here are some ideas suggested by others who've been bereaved:***

### **GRIEF HAS NO RULES**

There are no rules about how humans react to loss. There's no set road map, and different thoughts and feelings can come and go without warning at both predictable and unpredictable times. Choose to be flexible and patient with yourself, and with others who may also be grieving around you. Remember, not everyone in your family or group of friends will grieve exactly like you, so don't expect them to. Just be yourself. Grief is the process that helps us slowly, gradually, adjust to the reality of what's happened – even if we wish we didn't have to.

### **ANTICIPATION**

It's common to want to avoid thinking about upcoming holidays or special Events, but planning ahead can make a positive difference to how things turn out. Planning gives you a chance to choose how things will happen, and this can lessen the stress.

- Find a trusted friend or family member to work through any concerns you have about the upcoming days – talking about it may help.





- Before the holidays plan and make time to do some things that you really enjoy, or that relax you. Scale back on activities and things that might increase your stress load.
- Many find that making ambitious plans at holiday time makes everything much harder. Keeping plans simple may help.
- Some people say that anticipating holidays is far worse than the holidays themselves! In fact most find that the holidays turn out far better than they thought they would.

## **MAKE YOUR OWN CHOICES AHEAD OF TIME**

- Decide ahead of time what you want to be involved in, or what you'd prefer to not be a part of.
- Decide who you'd like to have with you at events you do choose to be a part of.
- Choose if there may be times you want to be on your own, rather than with others.
- Consult with your family members about how they think things could be organised. Often others' suggestions can be helpful.
- Choose if you want to keep up traditions or perhaps do something new and different to celebrate special days. Perhaps do something different this year and then follow more traditional holiday traditions another year, when things feel more settled in your life.

## **KEEP IN TOUCH**

When you make choices, it's important to keep in touch with family or friends who may be affected by your plans. This allows you to be honest about where you're at and what you need, and about why you have made the choices you have at this time. Staying in touch will help avoid confusion and misunderstandings.

## **COMPROMISE**

Because everyone is different it's likely families and friends may have differing views about how things should be done for holidays and special times. Try to respect each other's needs by agreeing to find ways to compromise. Give and take is important in healthy relationships.





## REMEMBER IN YOUR OWN WAY

Choose to find a way to mark your change or loss that suits you. This may be helpful because it acknowledges how things are for you, and can also feel a positive action to take. For example, light a candle, visit a special place, plant a tree, have a small ceremony or prayer, play special music, or make a holiday toast. These actions or rituals can be done on your own, or with others - whatever works best for you.

## ENJOYING YOURSELF IS OKAY

Some people worry that enjoying the holidays is somehow disrespectful, or makes them look like they've stopped caring about what's happened. In fact, pushing all joy from your life isn't a positive step. Rather, taking opportunities to celebrate life is what people who care about you would want for you. Grief is a mixture of so many different feelings and thoughts and reactions. Feeling good in the middle of it all is as much a part of the grief experience as anything else.

## IT'S OKAY TO SAY NO

You don't need to do things that you feel might make you uncomfortable just because you think they are expected of you. Give yourself permission to say "No", or perhaps to walk out of a room, or to leave early from something, when you need to.

If you get social invitations you don't want to accept, it's okay to decline. Just thank them for the invitation and say something like "Let's try to get together at another time." Most people will understand.

Try not to allow yourself to be isolated from others for a long time. Some have found that if they do, it then becomes more difficult to fit back into the community circles they were part of. Some people say making the effort, even when they dreaded being with others, actually paid off - and they had a better time than they expected to.

## ACCEPT AND ASK FOR SUPPORT

Contact others when you feel you need company, distraction or support.

Often those who care about you are grateful to have some way of offering the kind of support you need. They appreciate being asked to help in ways they know you will value e.g. providing transport or company for an event.

If you don't have friends or family close by, there are many different community agencies committed to supporting people through tough times. Contact them. The front of your phone book or your local Citizen's Advice Bureau can give you contacts.





Don't hesitate to ask for professional help if you feel overwhelmed or paralysed by your emotions, or if you're having extreme reactions that are worrying or even frightening you. Contact your GP or practice nurse, a counsellor, your local mental health team, a local family support agency or perhaps a telephone help line, such as Lifeline, Samaritans or Youthline.

## **BE UNDERSTANDING OF OTHERS**

How people react to loss and change is a very individual process. Keeping aware of this might help you better understand others and their reactions, especially when they may be very different from your own.

Many say that even when they're facing tough times themselves, something very positive happens in them when they actively look outside of themselves and offer others time, help and support. Some of our other Skylight articles can help you think about how to help different people through tough times. See [www.skylight.org.nz](http://www.skylight.org.nz) or phone 080 299 10.

Sometimes people are well intentioned but will still say or do dumb things. If you understand this may happen maybe you'll be better able to deal with it if it does.

## **MAKE ROOM FOR EMOTION**

Give yourself time to express emotions as you need to - bottling them up takes huge energy and may make things worse, especially in the long run.

Find out how you best express your feelings. For example, by writing, by talking with someone, by being active or by getting creative. Everyone has their own style.

Tears are positive. They may make you feel better. Just let them flow when they need to.

## **ACCEPT HOW YOU FEEL**

It's normal to have many mixed emotions during the grief process and especially in the holidays. Some find they even can feel completely numb and without emotion for a time. Accept how you feel and expect it to be very changeable. Don't try to live up to others expectations of how you "should" feel. Just be yourself.





## LOOK AFTER YOURSELF WELL

- This is a time to make sure you care for yourself - eat sensibly, drink water, get some exercise, get enough sleep and rest.
- Avoid using alcohol or drugs, or over eating, over spending, gambling or extreme behaviours, to cope with your difficult emotions. Find some other ways to release feelings. This season will pass.
- Consider exploring any faith beliefs you may have. Many find these can be reassuring and encouraging.

## FINALLY

The holidays certainly do present unique challenges for those who are bereaved. By taking time to think and plan, and by tuning into your needs, you will be able to get through them. You may even find positive experiences in them for both yourself, and your family. Go well – step by step.

