

*Coping With “Special Days”
After the Death of Someone Loved
By Hamilton’s Academy of Grief & Loss*



Since love does not end with death, birthdays, anniversaries, holidays and other special days may result in a renewed sense of grief. Such occasions emphasize the absence of the person who has died and may reawaken painful emotions, leaving you feeling drained.

*Grief is like the ocean; it comes in waves, ebbing and flowing.
Sometimes the water is calm, and sometimes it is overwhelming.
All we can do is learn to swim.*

- Vicki Harrison

This booklet contains suggestions for helping to cope with grief during these special, yet difficult and often painful days.

General Suggestions For All Days

- Don't overextend yourself, but avoid isolating yourself. Be sure to recognize the need to have special time for yourself.
- Take care of yourself: Make time for relaxing; eat healthy foods; exercise; keep to your routine as much as possible; get plenty of sleep.
- Allow yourself to have fun, to laugh, and to enjoy things around you. This is not inappropriate or disrespectful. There will be times of sadness and also times of joy. Grief is hard work so take some time to enjoy what you can. One of the greatest honors you can give your loved one is to live a good life.
- Do what you can do to help control how you feel: Look at a sun-red sky. Meditate. Listen to music. Do something fun like bowling. Go see a movie with an old friend. Do whatever you used to like to do.
- Grief comes as a result of giving and receiving love. As long as you love the person who died, you will grieve for them. Our hope is that overtime that grief will become easier to carry. Don't let anyone take your grief away. Love yourself; be patient with yourself; allow yourself to be surrounded by loving, caring people.
- Concentrate on the fact that while we don't have our special people anymore, we **DID** have them. Our habit is to say, "I miss the way my son bounded in from school each day." But as time passes we can change that to, "I smile remembering the way my son bounded in from school each day." (Woodson, p. 179)
- It is okay to continue the bond you had with your special person. Talk to them-it does **NOT** mean you are losing it! Keep photos of them around the house. Tell people stories about them. These things help us stay connected to them and remember their presence they still have in our lives.



Anniversary of the Death

The anniversary of the death may bring on a tidal wave of emotions. You may find yourself reliving the last days of the death in a painful replay or countdown of those final moments of that person's life. The emotions can be powerful and overwhelming. However, it seems that the anticipation is much worse than the day itself. Some even miss the day entirely. It is okay to plan something special for this day, and often having a plan helps the anniversary not be as overwhelming.

- Plan a special day with your family or friends. Maybe take a vacation day from work, have the kids stay home from school, take a trip to the cemetery, etc.
- Look over the past year and see how far you've come. Think about how you felt the day you found out your loved one died. How are you feeling now? Taken day by day, life becomes survivable and more manageable.
- Light a memorial candle. As you light the candle, say out loud, "I light this candle in honor of..."
- Decorate luminaries in honor of your special person.
- Put a candle in the window and light it every night for a week before your loved one's death day. Arrange for other family or friends to do the same.
- Visit the cemetery, memorial site, or other place you can go to remember your loved one. Have family members bring something special or seasonal to leave there.
- Use an online site, like Shutterfly or Snapfish, to turn digital photos into a special photo album about your loved one.
- Reach out to someone else who is grieving with a letter, card, phone call, text or email.
- Host a dinner party and invite those who knew your loved one best. Have everyone bring a dish they would have enjoyed, and have everyone share a memory about the person who died.
- Write a letter to your loved one. Tell them how you are feeling, what is going on in your life, or the things you miss about them.
- Allow one hour without pain for yourself on this difficult day.



Birthdays



- Have a cake with candles. Have everyone in the family make a wish and blow out the candles together. Share the wishes if you want.
- Buy a present in memory of your person. Make it something that lives on such as a tree or flowers you can watch bloom and grow year after year. Or buy a present that you can donate to a charity that was special to your loved one.
- Combine what you would have spent for presents and buy something for the house that has a special meaning.
- Buy or make a birthday card for the one who has died. Inside tell your person something that you never got a chance to say. Write about what you're feeling, what you're doing, or anything else you want to share with them.
- Visit the cemetery and take flowers, notes, or a balloon bouquet.
- Make the day a celebration of the life of that person. Talk about the good things you remember, the jokes played, or the special moments and memories.
- If it is Your Birthday: Take a moment to imagine your loved one sitting across from you in an empty chair and tell them "thank you" for ways they were there for you on your birthday in the past.

There are some who bring a light so great to the world
that even after they have gone the light remains.

As the Holidays Approach

As we approach the holidays, "our loved one comes alive in us again, in all the memories of past holidays- and then dies in us. How we long on these holidays to have our loved ones acknowledged. Their absence. Their presence. To have others listen as we share our memories of them. To listen to others share their memories (Woodson, 1994).

- It is best to meet the matter of holidays head-on, however painful, and to have a plan for them. Often the anticipation is worse than the actual holiday.
- Structure your holiday time - this helps you to anticipate activities rather than just reacting to whatever happens, but make sure you leave room for change.
- Talk about your grief; ignoring it will not make the pain go away.
- Holidays can be the most difficult during the first year after the death. Sometimes the following years may be less dreaded and possibly even looked forward to. But sometimes the following years can be hard as well so have a plan in place as long as you need to.
- Holidays will have different meanings for each member of the family, with each person putting a different value on each holiday. Good family discussions are important in order to discover how each family member feels about the coming holiday. For example, you may be dreading Christmas, but your child may be looking forward to the gifts, the tree and the holiday parties, and may fear that Christmas won't happen - putting added pressure on you to carry on.
- Use the following open-ended sentences to determine what's really important to you and your family:
 - The part I'm really looking forward to the most is....
 - The part I'm not looking forward to at all is....
 - To make the day still feel special to me this year, I think we should....
 - This year I don't want to....
 - This year I still want to....
- It may be helpful to make changes in holiday rituals. Decide which family traditions you want to continue and some new ones you would like to begin. Focus on what **YOU** want to do. Well-meaning friends and family often try to prescribe what is good for you. As you become aware of your needs, share them with your friends and family.

- Be flexible and patient with yourself. Try to avoid making hurried or thoughtless decisions. Set small goals. If you are invited to holiday parties and want to go, then go. If you don't want to go, that's okay, too.
- Try to concentrate on the good things. Positive thought and attitudes can make a big difference. There is a definite connection between what you think and how you feel.



- Children are often able to separate their grief from the joy of the season, and may feel guilty for looking forward to the holidays as a relief from their pain and sadness.
- Holidays are stressful even in the best of times. You may find yourself crying more and needing more love. In fact, this is a time when everyone needs more love and attention.
- Embrace the wonderful memories you have. Holidays always make you think about times past; instead of ignoring these memories, share them. Memories that were made in love can never be taken away from you.
- Spend time thinking about the meaning and purpose of your life. The death of someone loved creates opportunity for taking inventory of your life - past, present, and future. The combination of a holiday and a loss naturally results in looking inward and assessing your individual situation; define the positive things in life that surround you.
- During the holidays you may find a renewed sense of faith or discover a new set of beliefs. Express your faith. Associate with those who understand and respect your need to talk about these.

Religious Holidays

- Take time to explore what this holiday means to you with regard to your faith, as well as what it means to your family members. What traditions do you want to change? What do you absolutely want to keep the same? Communicate with your family about these things.
- Write down special memories—things you miss about your loved one or notes or pictures to them —and put them in a special Christmas Stocking, or for Easter, place them in plastic Easter eggs in a basket. Share them together at your family gathering.
- Have a tree-planting ceremony in memory of your loved one in which friends and family members mention the qualities of your loved one that live on in them.
- Make/enjoy their favorite holiday recipe or treat!
- If gift-giving is a part of your tradition, consider giving a gift to your place of worship or a favorite charity organization in memory of your special person.
- Allow the flickering candles of the menorah to remind you to focus on the light of your future and to give thanks to all of those in your life who have given you strength...those who are able to relight your flame when your grief seems to extinguish it.

Fall Festivities

- October and Halloween can stir up painful emotions for those who are grieving. From the décor to the outings, painful reminders can be found everywhere it seems. When these painful emotions emerge, take a deep breath and find happier memories to shift your focus to.
- Place a horn of plenty on your Thanksgiving table. Ask family members to fill the horn with objects representing your loved one, or write down special Thanksgiving memories you had with your loved one.
- Volunteer at a soup kitchen to give back to those in need.
- Don't feeling like cooking? Eat out, or have a potluck where others bring a dish to share.
- Give thanks for...
 - Three ways in which your loved one loved you best.
 - Whatever relief you feel at your loved one's death.
 - Your ability to produce beauty out of the ashes of your life.



December Holidays

This season may be the toughest of the tough days of the year for three reasons:

- 1) It lasts so long*
- 2) It emphasizes tradition, family tradition*
- 3) It raises impossible expectations*

This time of year calls forth and intensifies all the feelings of all our special days, yet on no other day do we feel so obligated to get through our feelings without feeling them. You may feel overwhelmed with all the things you feel you have to do. But making a plan and giving yourself permission to feel however you are feeling will help you make it through.

- Talk to your family about how they are feeling about the holidays without your loved one. What ideas can you come up with **together** about how to plan for this time of year. Keep in mind that not everyone is grieving the same way, so something comforting to one, might be the opposite for another.
- Count on having an imperfect holiday season.
- Create a new holiday tradition in honor of your loved one.
- Buy a beautiful candle and light it each day through December as a symbolic reminder of the person who has died.
- Decorate a memorial ornament in honor of your loved one and hang it on your tree.
- If the traditional dinner is going to be difficult, eat at a different time or save yourself the trouble and go out to eat.
- Get active making cards for family and friends. Make a special one in memory of your loved one and leave it under the tree, on the mantle, next to the Menorah, or in a stocking. Send cards to friends of your loved one or people you regret losing touch with.




- Play your loved one's favorite holiday music.
- Take the stress out of gift shopping: skip or minimize gifts, avoid peak shopping times to avoid bumping into all those "merry" shoppers; shop online, give money or gift cards this year. Consider picking a few possessions of your loved one who died and give those as gifts.
- Ignore people who tell you what you "should" and "shouldn't" do for the holidays. When you are grieving, you know what is best for you and what you need. Don't let someone else make you feel bad for doing what you need to do to take care of yourself.
- Splurge on a gift for yourself!
- If someone offers help, say yes. People want to offer help and support, so be sure to take them up on those offers. And be okay asking for help, this can be hard but important. Ask for help with the cooking, shopping, decorating, etc.
- Donate a holiday meal to a family in need.
- Take some quiet time for yourself. With all the craziness that is the holidays take some time to enjoy some solitude. Journal, listen to music, meditate, etc.
- Enjoy yourself! While the holidays can be tough, there can also be love and joy that go along with it. It's okay to be happy. This doesn't diminish how much you love and miss your person.



*Most people want presents under their tree
My wish is different—
I wish that you were here with me*

The New Year

Leaving behind the year can be bittersweet. Moving forward into a new year without the physical presence of your loved one is a hard thing to face. You may be feeling many emotions at once—maybe you're dreading the year coming to a close, but are also ready for the painful year to finally be over. You hear others saying "Happy New Year!" and you find yourself questioning: How can this new year be happy without my special person in it? How can I be hopeful about the future?

- Honor your loved one with a candle lighting ceremony on New Year's Eve, having three candles with special meaning: a blue candle for past joys, a red candle for present courage, a yellow candle for hope for the future.
 - Make a toast for five constants in your life. For example: What are the people/places/things you can always count on?
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- Write three sentences about the New Year in which you use the word "new" in an exciting way.
 - Make a list of the gifts your loved one left you with. What physical attributes do you have from them? What morals or ethics did they instill in you? What are things they gave you that you treasure?
 - One of the best tributes we can make to our loved ones is the life we choose to live after they have died. What are things you want to accomplish this year that they would be proud of you doing?
 - Make a list of *attainable* personal goals for the New Year.
 - Consider making a Grief Resolution List, or resolutions that could help you in your grieving process for the new year. That list could include:
 - Be honest about how you are feeling, with yourself and others.
 - Start a project memorializing or in memory of your loved one.
 - Get out of the house more; join a gym, a book club, take a class.
 - Give up or minimize unhealthy habits like excessive alcohol use, or not exercising.

Mother's Day and Father's Day

These special days can be painful because it honors an inimitable relationship and keeps those who've lost a mother or father or child partially focused on someone who lives only in the past (Haley, 2015).

- Celebrate and spend time with other mother or father figures in your life. Maybe focus on those in your life that are mothers; like friends, sisters, aunts, coworkers and do something to make their day special. Send them a card or flowers telling them what you appreciate about them.
- Spend the day with others who are grieving the death of a mother or father. Perhaps you can share memories, or funny stories of past Mother's Days and Father's Days. Talk about things you would have done with them on this special day.
- If you want to lay low - plan a constructive and time consuming activity to keep your mind off the day. Cook meals for the week or deep clean your house.
- Have a movie marathon. Watch movies that have special significance to you and your mother or father. Or watch your favorite funny movies if you need a good laugh.
- Plan a self-care day. Remember it is so important to take care of ourselves when we are grieving. Here are a few ideas:
 - Take a walk.
 - Read a book.
 - Play a game.
 - Do something on your bucket list.
 - Play/cuddle with your pet.
 - Volunteer your time.
 - Go outside.
- If you have younger kids who don't remember the person who died, share stories, photos, or videos. You can even ask friends and other family members to share their memories of your person to share with the kids too.



Life Milestones

These special days can be especially painful because we plan on our loved ones who died to be at the happiest occasions in our life: graduations, weddings, births, etc. These special occasions feel bittersweet as we remember those special people who should be there but are not.

- Carry something with you that they gave you. Having a memento with you can help you feel closer to them on your special day.
- If you are having a baby, bring a picture of your loved one to the hospital to put in your room, then put that picture in your child's nursery when you come home.
- Bring your child home in a blanket your loved one made for you when you were a baby.
- Wear a piece of their jewelry. Don't have one? Maybe you have a piece that reminds you of them in some way; their favorite color, their birthstone color, or has a charm that represents something they loved.
- Write them a letter before your big day. Tell them how you are feeling; what you miss most about them not being there. Imagine what they would say, advice they might give you. Tell them your hopes, dreams and your fears.



Ideas if you are getting married...

- Find a simple way to incorporate them on your wedding program. A 'In Loving Memory' section is a nice way to honor all your loved ones that have died.
- Leave an empty chair where they would have sat with a single rose, or something else that reminds you of your special person.
- Wear something that was your loved ones. Sew a piece of their shirt into the back of your dress or shirt, wear their wedding dress, wear their cufflinks or tie, etc.
- You could wear your loved one's pearls or wrap a favorite piece of their jewelry around your bouquet. You can make a photo charm to attach to your bouquet or other part of your wardrobe.
- Use something that day that was theirs; like their toasting flutes.
- Light a candle in their honor at the ceremony or reception.

Anniversary

The anniversary of your love story can be especially painful after the death of your beloved. Here are some ways you can remember and honor the love that you share with your partner.

One powerful exercise you could do:

- Write a letter to your beloved, beginning with how you've been doing since their death. Then:
 - Describe one of your favorite anniversary celebrations.
 - Describe how you are coping, what makes you laugh and cry now.
 - Write about joys, as well as any regrets you have in your relationship...
 - Is there anything you wish you had said prior to the death?
 - Is there anything you wish your loved one had said to you?
- Take the letter you write to your loved one's grave site (or some other special place) to be read aloud; then you could leave it there or keep it in a special place to read again; or you could burn it watching the flames as they carry your message away.
- Then write a letter from your loved one back to you. Ask yourself: how would they answer you? When finished, fold this letter into a small enough size that when you put it in a box it will rattle. Then wrap it as a gift and, when you need it, simply rattle it—so you'll know it's a gift from your beloved.



Other ideas:

- Go out for dinner with family members—specify that it's for your anniversary.
- Light a candle of remembrance.
- Look through your wedding album or watch your wedding video.
 - Don't have one? Create one!
- Set a place at the table for your partner and eat their favorite food.
- If you have a song, listen to it and let whatever emotions come, come.
- Connect with people who were apart of your wedding party.
- Visit a special place that holds memories for the two of you.
- Buy yourself an anniversary gift—something you know your husband might have picked out for you.
- “Treat” yourself to something special like a massage, manicure or pedicure.
- Buy your partner a gift and donate it to a charity that was important to the two of you.
- Have a quilt or pillow made with some of your person's clothing.

Other Special Days

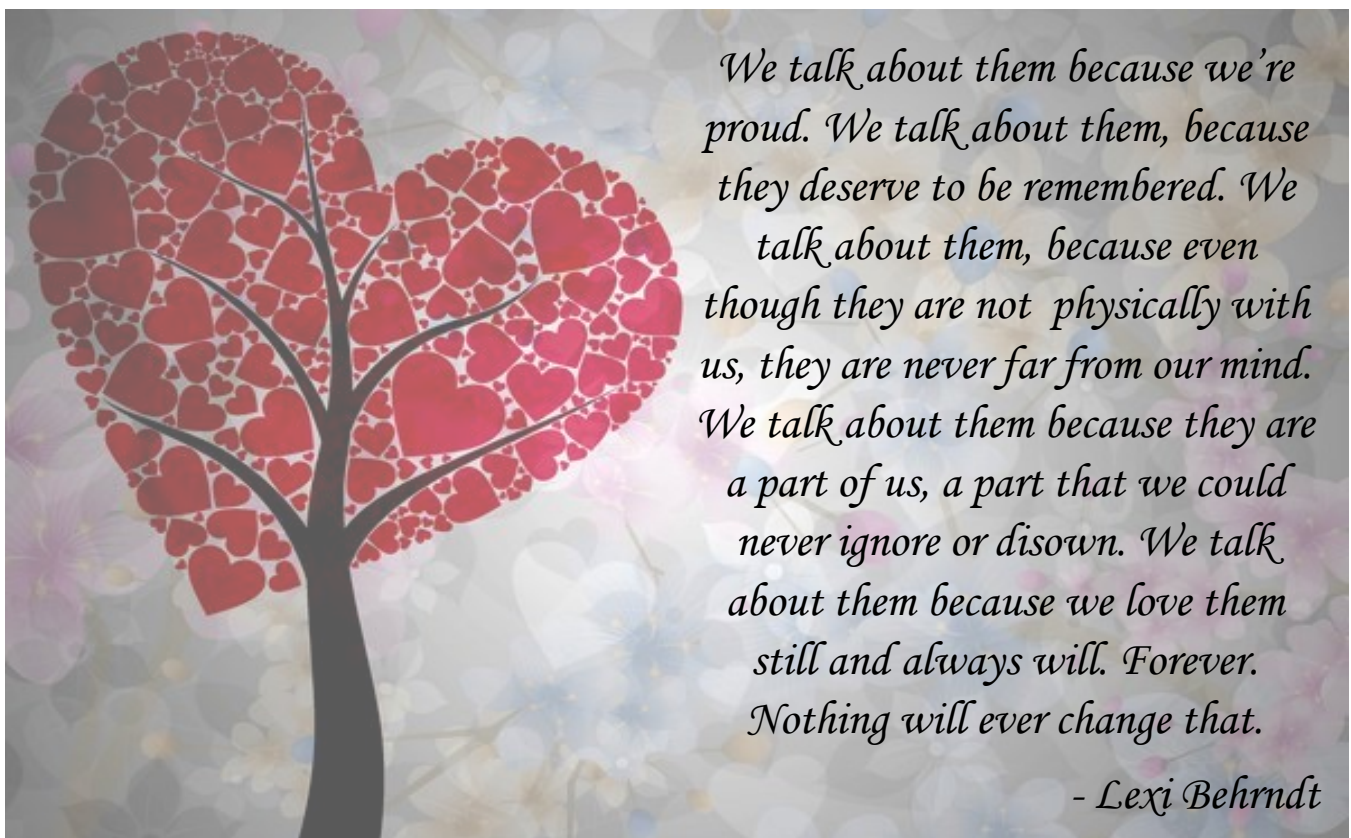
Some of the special days contained in this booklet most likely are already on your radar of days that might be tough for you. Here are a few more to consider that might not be, but can cause grief feelings to resurface:

- **Social Media “Special Days”** - There seems to be a National (fill in the blank) Day for everything! As soon as you see your social media feed with happy pictures posted, it can be a painful reminder of what you have lost. If one of these days catches you off guard, mark it on your calendar for next year so you can be prepared and make a plan.

Take some time to think about your loved one and the fond memories you shared.

Perhaps you need to give yourself permission to stay off of social media for the day or perhaps you want to take the opportunity to share a memory of your loved one.

- **The changing of the seasons** can be a particularly difficult time for some griever for many reasons. Sometimes it is because of the changes in weather that can deeply affect our emotions. Other times it's because of the special and traditional seasonal activities you used with your loved one that renews the pangs of grief.
- Even a **new sports season** can cause our grief to resurge if our loved one played or was a fan of that sport. Watching these sports might make you feel closer to them.



We talk about them because we're proud. We talk about them, because they deserve to be remembered. We talk about them, because even though they are not physically with us, they are never far from our mind. We talk about them because they are a part of us, a part that we could never ignore or disown. We talk about them because we love them still and always will. Forever. Nothing will ever change that.

- Lexi Behrndt

The reality is you will grieve forever. You will not 'get over' the loss of a loved one; you will learn to live with it. You will heal and you will rebuild yourself around the loss you have suffered. You will be whole again but you will never be the same again. Nor should you want to.

-Elisabeth Kübler-Ross

Resources

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offers to our community...

- Grief Information and Resources
- Grief-Related Education
- Grief Support Services

Because death and grief experiences are different for every individual,
the Academy offers a wide variety of resources for all ages.

For more information...

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