

Grief expert offers tips on holiday survival

November 21 2012

Ornaments glistening on a pine tree, carols filling the air, shoppers scurrying through stores and the smell of goodies baking in the oven - it's the holidays. For many this truly is the most wonderful time of the year. Still, for those who have lost a loved one, the empty chair at the table or one less present under the tree can be a painful reminder of the one who is missing.

"There are so many traditions associated with the [holiday season](#) that it can be an emotional roller coaster for someone who has recently lost a loved one," said Nancy Kiel, bereavement coordinator for Loyola University Health System. "Many people wish they could just fast-forward through the holidays, but getting through the season is possible if you give yourself permission to be flexible."

Though there will be difficult moments, Kiel offers a few tips to help make the holidays a little brighter:

- Discuss holiday plans as a family and keep in mind that it's OK to change traditions. Everyone is feeling the loss, so talk about what you are going to do and be willing to compromise. If you don't like the change you made, next year you can always go back to the way you did it before.
- Skip the mall. [Christmas shopping](#) can be stressful even when not dealing with grief. Consider giving [gift cards](#) or shop online to avoid the mall madness. Remember it's not just about the presents, but about the presence of caring and supportive people.

- You can say no. The party invitations and social gatherings might be more difficult this year. You can say no or give yourself some breathing room by asking to RSVP at a later date. If you do go, drive yourself. This will allow you the freedom to leave at your discretion. Also, try to avoid "should people" who say "you should do this or you should do that."
- Honor your loved one. Start a new tradition to honor and remember your loved one. You could light a special candle, have everyone at the [dinner table](#) share a favorite memory or all take part in a loved one's favorite holiday activity. Do something that would make your loved one smile.
- Be gentle with yourself. Do what you need to do and pamper yourself. If you need to take a nap, take a nap. Take a bubble bath to relax. Exercise is a great stress reliever, so bundle up and take a walk. Journaling also can be helpful.

"Grief is hard work and it can be exhausting, but it is something we must do," Kiel said. "If you put it on a back burner, you'll never heal. You can't go around, over or under grief – you have to go through it. So find someone who will listen unconditionally and tell your story."

Loyola University Health System is dedicated to walking alongside patients, their family and friends while dealing with the loss of a loved one. The Journey Toward Healing grief support groups offer a wide array of helpful small group sessions as well as workshops to address the needs of those who are grieving. For more information, visit www.loyolamedicine.org.

Provided by Loyola University Health System

Citation: Grief expert offers tips on holiday survival (2012, November 21) retrieved 4 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-11-grief-expert-holiday-survival.html>

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