

When celebration is tempered with grief at the holidays

November 6 2015, by Scott Gilbert



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Although many songs insist the holiday season is the most wonderful time of the year, it can be the worst for families grieving the loss of a child.

"Their grief intensifies because the rest of the world seems to be happy

and cheery and wanting to celebrate, and they may not feel like doing that," said Megan Youtz, clinical counselor with the Hummingbird Program at Penn State Hershey Children's Hospital. The program provides support for children with life-limiting conditions and their families.

"There are all these family gatherings and occasions where you are in the community or with family and yet you may feel very alone or isolated with your emotions," she said.

While some families may want a step-by-step guide of dos and don'ts to survive the season, Youtz said there is no advice that works for everyone. The most important thing is to be flexible and use your feelings as a guide.

For those grieving a loss, it's important to give yourself permission to feel whatever feelings surface. "You don't have to put on a façade that everything is OK," Youtz said.

Joan McGeary, a certified child life specialist at the Children's Hospital, said some families may find comfort in adapting cherished traditions to honor their lost loved one – such as making their favorite dish and putting out a place setting for them at a meal. Others may prefer to alter traditions and rituals in favor of something completely new or different.

"It's a good idea to have a coping plan in mind," she said. "You're still remembering the person who has died, but perhaps discovering new meaning for the holidays."

Siblings of a deceased child may want to be involved in coming up with new ways to celebrate the season and honor their missing family member.

"It can empower children to take an active role," McGeary said. "Kids are really used to routines and structure, so the first holiday without a sibling can be very difficult. It's not unusual, though, to find that the kids are the ones who get the adults through the difficult times. They have a need to focus on themselves, be kids and keep moving forward even as they grieve."

For those who know a grieving family, it's important to include them as you normally would in holiday plans and activities, but don't hold firm expectations.

"One of the challenges for people is feeling helpless because you don't know how to alleviate the sadness they are feeling," Youtz said. "There is no way to take that away, but just your being present is a support. You don't have to solve the problem."

When you ask how they are doing, use the name of the deceased to acknowledge and honor the child. Trust the judgment of the bereaved, rather than pushing them to do or not do what you think would be best for them.

And remember that it's OK to seek moments of joy and happiness. "When you have all these emotions – you are sad and perhaps angry at the loss of your loved one, missing their presence – if you think of things you enjoy and are good at (your strengths) and engage in some of those activities, it can often be very helpful," McGeary said. "I think it's really important to rely on those things when you aren't so happy."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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