

Communication key to coping with relationship losses during the holidays

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Credit: Anna Langova/public domain

A Purdue professor leading a team researching the experiences of loss and grief said open communication can be key for individuals coping with recent relationship losses in light of the holiday season.

The ending of romantic partnerships such as divorces or breakups are significant loss experiences, said Heather Servaty-Seib, a psychologist

and professor of counseling psychology for the Department of Educational Studies.

The experiences can be connected with secondary losses, including established holiday routines and traditions, shared friendships, financial challenges and disruption of future plans.

"If you're in a [romantic relationship](#) and the other person initiates the ending of that relationship, you have this added layer that they decided to impose this loss on you," Servaty-Seib said. In addition, the initiator can feel a sense of guilt and shame even when the ending may have been perceived as necessary or in the best interest of all.

Traditional gatherings of [family](#) and friends around this time of year can understandably highlight such endings. Talking openly about the variety of reactions – emotional, social, behavioral and spiritual – of family members who experience [grief](#) related to relationship loss is important.

And not everyone reacts or grieves in the same manner.

"Any way to be supportive to the uniqueness of someone else's grief can make a huge difference," Servaty-Seib said. "Show an openness to everything they are experiencing and acknowledge the complexity of it."

She said people tend to forget how powerful a romantic attachment can be, whether it's a long-term partnership or a person's young romance.

Through research, Servaty-Seib and her team have developed a "Gain/Loss Framework" which posits that all significant life events have the potential to involve both losses and eventual gains.

"The holidays don't stay static, so any change in how you celebrate the holidays has the potential for loss," Servaty-Seib said. "But those

changes also have the potential for gains."

A feeling of a [loss](#) of family unity because of divorce or breakup could possibly be offset by gaining additional time with other [family members](#).

Servaty-Seib disputes the idea of closure and said one thing to remember is that grief does not end.

"There's healing, but the idea that you will no longer grieve doesn't fit well when grief is a reflection of attachment and love," she said. "Those grief reactions may shift and change, but they don't really end."

Provided by Purdue University

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