



SEEDS OF HOPE

HOLIDAY GRIEF IN 2020: Seven Strategies for Coping



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Holidays can be ideal for keeping alive the memories of loved ones, but they can also be bittersweet experiences. In these difficult times of loss and pandemic, it's important to remember that there is no "right way" to honor a holiday. You can, with a little planning ahead, pace yourself and create occasions that you can manage in ways that match your energy level and focus. When planning ahead, you might start with these guiding tips:

1 | Lower Your Expectations

First and foremost, temper your expectations, especially during this especially challenging year. You don't need to do everything you have done in previous years. Consider your options and simplify what you can. Create a humble plan for how you will get through the holidays by being fair to your own needs and capabilities.

2 | Focus on What You Can Control and Do What Feels Comfortable

Though much is swirling around you around the holidays beyond your control, you should focus on what you *can* control and what makes you feel comfortable. Be honest with yourself in assessing your limitations -- mental, emotional, physical. You should pursue activities you feel are surmountable and that give you senses of purpose and meaning. Whether it is baking, writing greeting cards, or making handmade gifts for others, stick to what makes you feel most at ease. Hands-on activities and simple household routines are great ways to feel grounded and channel grief.

Also, avoid events that may overwhelm or burden you, such as holiday decorating or emotionally charged gatherings, even if virtual. Also, consider having a "plan B" as a backup in case you embark on an activity and suddenly feel stressed.

3 | Allow Yourself to Feel a Range of Emotions Without Judgment

The holidays typically spark a wide range of emotions for most people, and for grieving people, these feelings can be magnified. You could feel sadness mixed with joy and then guilt, all in the same minute. Try to stay away from saying "should" or "ought" with your feelings, as your emotions will likely be fluid. Instead, aim to be compassionate, accepting, and patient with yourself during this time. This nonjudgmental attitude sets the tone for other family members who can feel comforted by your gentle acceptance. Grieving adults often share such stories as, "I was able to set the table and cry at the same time." Like chewing gum while walking -- you can feel your grief and take care of things, all in the same moment.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Val Walker develops educational programs and resources that provide hope and support for our community members who are navigating the challenging grief process or in need of compassionate end-of-life care.

With a Master of Science degree in rehabilitation counseling, Val has explored the practice of comforting others since facilitating her first support group in 1993 for people living with cancer. She currently conducts groups and classes on how to build community networks and fellowships, including a course called "Staying Connected and Building Community," especially relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Val is the author of *The Art of Comforting* (Penguin/Random House, 2010) which won the Nautilus Book Award, and her contributions have appeared in numerous publications such as *Psychology Today*, *TIME*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Boston Globe Magazine*.

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4 | Creatively Honor the Memories

Devise special ways to memorialize your loved one. Some suggested holiday activities and projects include lighting candles while sharing memories and stories with family members; reading aloud your person's favorite poem or playing his/her favorite songs; making a scrapbook of photos and drawings related to your person; or dedicating a special area of your home in which you display memorabilia to honor your loved one who is no longer with you.

5 | Stay Connected with Others by Creating Your Own Traditions

Get creative about how to communicate and celebrate with family members and friends. During this pandemic year, many have adopted new and innovative ways to share life passages and special events, such as Zoom family get togethers and drive-by "parades." Stay in touch and engaged with friends and loved ones as much as possible and comfortable for you. Even a simple walk outdoors with a companion can be immensely soothing and healing.

6 | Small Acts of Kindness and Helping Others Can Feel Good

You can lift your spirits by doing little things to assist others. Indeed, helping others makes us feel less helpless. Thoughtful acts of kindness can make a difference for those who may be feeling left out during the holidays. Making donations, helping your community by volunteering (even virtually), or checking in with old friends can refocus your grief into a purposeful mission.

7 | It's Okay to Ask for Help

For many of us, asking for help may be the most difficult action to take. However, you don't need to be alone in your grief. If you have a friend or a support group to talk to or confide in, you should consider turning to them for comfort and encouragement to help get through the holidays. Or you might prefer the supportive services of a psychotherapist, social worker, or clergy person. During this pandemic year, most therapists are providing services online or via phone through secure telehealth connections.

Words to Live by for the Holidays

Suggested by Dr. Julie Morison, PhD., Director of HPA/Live Well

- **Accept imperfection**
- **Don't lose sight of what really matters.**
- **Respond with kindness**
- **Rethink solutions**

(What worked before might not work this year.)

Additional Resources

For Kids: National Alliance for Grieving Children's Holiday Toolkit
<https://childrengrieve.org/resources/holiday-toolkit>

For Women: 15 Women on How they Cope with Grief around the Holidays
<https://www.bustle.com/p/15-women-on-how-they-cope-with-grief-around-the-holidays-13208143>

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