



KEYS TO RECOVERY

Understanding the Impact of Emotional Investments

By Chris Harder

We wonder why the holidays are so difficult. We may continually be on the verge of tears, go on impulsive shopping sprees, or we may want to escape alone to a dark room. Regardless of our behavior, many of us dread this season because we miss our child who has died.

Throughout our lives, we make emotional investments into people and experiences. The experiences we remember more clearly are those into which we invested more emotional energy. Have you ever purchased a new car? Hopefully you did the research to find out what make and model would best suit your needs. Was gas mileage an issue? How about the color? What level of comfort were you looking for? Making all the decisions about your new car required a lot of emotional investment. And when you drove your new car off the lot, you probably felt a great deal of satisfaction. This is one of those experiences you are likely to remember.

We make a similar investment into people. As parents, we invest an immeasurable amount of emotional energy into our children. We are responsible to care for them and provide their needs. Our children are the focus of our love and affection. We want them to have the best, so we invest our time, money, and emotional energy for many years into trying to make it happen for them.

In considering the holidays, our emotional investment may have been negative or positive. Growing up, we may have had negative experiences at Christmas time because of abuse or a parent that was absent.. Or we might have been disappointed at not receiving the gifts we wanted which could have led to anger or jealousy. These emotions could have led to negative behavior, or feelings that we may have had to stuff. The holidays are lonely for many people who are alone which often leads to depression. Because of negative emotional investments, some people may want to avoid the holidays altogether.

In contrast, perhaps our holiday experiences were positive. We visited with loving family, Santa gave us our

our every wish, we enjoyed a huge dinner, and life was good. As parents, we invest a lot of emotional energy into giving our children the best Christmas we can imagine. Some of us start our holiday shopping as early as October, so for 3 months we invest our emotional energy into finding the perfect gifts for the people on our list. For many of us, our investment into the holiday season is huge.

So, what happens when our child is abruptly snatched from our holidays? If they are away at college and can't come home, we may hope that they will surprise us and show up at the door on Christmas morning! But if our child has died, then we may be crushed with the thought that we have nothing to hope for. We may feel as if all of the emotional energy that we poured into our child, and into the holidays, has been rendered of no value. Our loss is overwhelming and it's out of our control! Until we are able to work through our grief, the holidays may have turned into the most painful time of the year for us.

So, what happens when the connection with the person we have invested so much emotional energy into is severed? Our emotional reaction is called grief. The larger the investment, the deeper the grief experience. How can we help but feel emotionally destroyed during the holidays after our child has died? If our past holiday experiences were positive, as time passes and we work through our grief, our joy and excitement about the holidays will likely return... but maybe not to the same degree as before. Part of this process will be finding a new focus for our emotional investment. It could be a greater emphasis on the religious aspect of the holidays, or involvement in a service project, or an opportunity to give a gift in memory of your child.

Understanding how our emotional investment affects our grief is helpful as we consider the impact the holiday season has on us.

STEPS TO HELP YOU WORK THROUGH HOLIDAY GRIEF: 1) To avoid feeling exhausted the day after the holiday, don't over estimate what you'll feel up to doing on the holiday. It's better to plan too little than too much and end up feeling overwhelmed. Plan for relaxation, rest and good nourishment. 2) Include a time of tribute to your child during the holiday. 3) Realize that mild depression usually follows big events. Understand that this will probably pass quickly and you may actually feel relieved when the holiday is over.

*Grief is a process. Recovery is a choice.
The way we grieve is a decision.*