



All I Want for Christmas is
“FOR IT TO BE OVER WITH”

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“I just want this holiday to be over with.” That was my mantra months before our very first Christmas after the death of our son, Chad. I repeated it over and over again as though magically, I wouldn’t have to deal with its coming. I believed nothing could ever be the same...how could I pretend or exist in this world forever changed by death?

Although holidays aren't limited to Christmas, for the bereaved, Christmas is often one of the most difficult. Any special day that once offered celebration, gathering, or commemoration such as a birthday, or special event such as a wedding or baptism can create anxiety. Holidays were a "big deal" in our family. It was all about gathering, celebrating and strong family ties. Chad's death was the first major event that significantly altered our holiday traditions.

I understand the objections the bereaved feel with the imminent holidays. Even though it's been a long time, I still feel the tug of some of those "if onlys" as though they were new. It took me several years to adjust to change that wasn't welcome. But I've come to know the "good news" and appreciate holiday celebrations in a different way now. Grievers are capable of finding joy in the holiday experience even after the death of a loved one who was a fundamental part of their celebration.

Recently, I polled a group of over 100 bereaved and asked what their objections and concerns were to the holidays since their loss. Three major themes were vividly apparent:

1. Avoidance/Denial

There's a misconception that "if I can avoid or delay the holiday, I can avoid the pain." Our Grinch-like attitude quickly surface; and we'd just like to run away. For some people, "running away" or taking a mini-vacation the first year or two is appropriate. It allows them time to get over the immediate pain and make plans in the future. However, next year (or next month) will bring a new holiday to deal with. So it's probably wise to just face your fears right away rather than allow yourself the dread for another twelve months of anticipation.

If you can determine what you need to avoid, it can be helpful. Ask yourself questions, and give honest answers. Are you uncomfortable around a certain group of people? Is it the traditions that worry you? Whatever the fear, there are ways to modify or change what you previously did to something that causes less anxiety. Don't be the one to spoil the day for other family. Find ways to

compromise, modify, and eliminate, rather than avoid. If you are going to be the Grinch, be the one that found the happiness and beauty in Christmas.

2. Sizzling Emotions:

Ideally, we'd like to be in control of our emotions. Realistically, it might not be that easy, through no fault of our own. Holidays are filled with past memories and making new memories. Months before the holidays begin, the commercialization fills all of our senses with images and ideas that compete with our attempts to block out thoughts about what we will or will not do.

Expect surprise reactions to something you never dreamed would create a grief burst. This is the way of grief, and you typically have no way of knowing what will cause an emotional reaction. But, you can prepare for certain triggers that you know will be difficult. Try to determine what triggers may cause your emotions to erupt into outbursts, tears, or sadness (such as a song). Then, purposely plan a way to respond to each anticipated trigger.

The actual holiday is only 24 hours long...and from there the anxiety begins to dwindle. Take time to honor good emotions and remember your loved one through ritual or in a quiet moment alone. Have a get-over-it moment and then refocus and be thankful for what you have and those who care about you.

3. Objections to Change

Bereaved people will behave in one of three ways to change. (1) They will pretend that nothing changed and muddle through their celebrations as though nothing has changed. Or, (2) they will change their traditions so drastically that no one would recognize them. Or (3) families will wisely blend some of the old traditions with new traditions that make everyone feel comfortable and enthusiastic about a unique holiday celebration.

Celebrations and families are destined to change over the years, and death is just one of the factors that initiate change. Families grow, marry, move to new locations, just as frequently as families are

divided due to divorce, military service, death, college, and jobs. When you think of it that way, you can accept that modifying traditions is normal, required, and expected throughout life. There are many ways to incorporate or modify meaningful traditions that honor the past and the person who died that can be celebrated with joy and not sacrifice.

There's Good News!

Our slogan at Wings-a Grief Education Ministry is “Honoring the Past and Rebuilding the Future.” How appropriate this is when it comes to dealing with the changes of grief. The legacy of traditions, memories, and rituals you build with your family can begin with you. Every generation can take pride in designing a meaningful holiday experience that can span time and changes as they occur.

No one has the right to criticize your choices on how you celebrate; so be original and find new ways of being “family”. If you don't find your changes satisfying after the holiday, next year you can always change them again or even go back to past ways of doing things. There are no rules.

For some, there is comfort in allowing the holidays to happen just like they always have with minimal change. These folks create a welcome balance for the other bereaved who would like to disappear. There's a message of hope in their response to loss. If one or more people can cope with their loss during the holiday this year, maybe next year you will be able to do the same.

For others, it may be unsettling to participate in traditions and celebrations “the way it was” before. There is good news here also, it's perfectly acceptable to change the traditions which may mean discontinuing doing things that no longer are meaningful. It also means it's okay to create new ideas and new traditions with an updated twist. This appeals to the younger folk and can be adventurous for the more mature.

Another fact of good news is that most bereaved people can find joy, at some point. Continued feelings of pain and sadness from grief can be totally exhausting. Your waning lack of energy and spirit beckons you to find a healthier way to cope. Create moments with laughter and smiles by doing something spontaneous. You could watch a light-hearted holiday movie, chuckle over old pictures, create a cooking or crafting challenge, have an ugly sweater contest, or give a prize for the most absurd, embarrassing story. If you are concerned family or friends whose attempts to engage the bereaved fall flat, you may find that some bereaved people will feel miserable no matter what you try to do to engage them in the celebration or lighten their hearts. Don't feel responsible for their sadness or grief. Trust that you can help them the most with your willingness to companion them and listen to their pain. Each person must make their own decision to heal. You can't do that for them.

If this holiday is difficult for you, remember: You don't have to pretend to enjoy every moment of the holiday, but be open to the luxury of happiness, laughter, and good fellowship with others. This, too, shall pass. Grief is a journey that doesn't invite you to desirable destinations. Instead, it challenges you to bypass the regrets, overcome the obstacles, and take consolation in your amazing resilience.

For more tips on dealing with holiday blues, blunders, and bad experiences, read my book *When the Holidays Hurt* which is a collection of articles that help you find ways to cope and rebuild holiday traditions.



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