



Counselor Connection

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Coping with Loss through the Holidays

Dr. Alan Wollfelt, Clinical Psychologist and Grief Educator, defines *mourning* as a "shared social expression of loss" and, *grief* as the "internal experience of loss." Grief may be experienced after many kinds of loss, such as death of loved one, relocation, serious illness, divorce, suicide, infertility. Some of the internal experiences of grief have been described as: anxiety, fear future loss, sadness, numbness, shock, loneliness, difficulty concentrating, anger, guilt, relief, insomnia, appetite loss, and fatigue. Each of these physical, emotional, and cognitive reactions is useful. They invite a person to adapt to the reality of their loss by slowing down. Yet, people typically try to avoid negative feelings by keeping busy and avoiding reminders of their loss.

Instead of keeping grief with them, how can one mourn loss during the holidays? When others are engaging in family traditions that may include togetherness, meaning, and joy, a bereaved person is experiencing cutoff from their loved one, loss of meaning, and sadness. When someone is hurting, others may try to take away that hurt by telling someone how to "let go" or "get over it." Here are my thoughts on mourning during the holidays:

1. *Listen to your body*: If you are tired, slow down. If you are energized, do more.
2. *Decide what traditions you want to stop and start this year*: What do you want to do with the empty chair? Is there an activity that you want to do in honor of your loved one?
3. *Find someone/way to share your memories/loss*: Journaling? Counseling? Support Group? Scrapbooking? Others?
4. *Accept each person's grief as unique*: It's ok to cry when others are happy. It's ok to talk about what you miss when others are enjoying themselves.

A bereaved person is trying to adapt to the reality of the loss, redefine who they are without that person, and develop a new relationship to the deceased. Accepting grief as is and allowing oneself to mourn (i.e., open, personal contact with others) will lessen one's grief over time. Look for others who are stepping up to be a support and/or resource, not just during the holidays but all year long.

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1. *Mourning Loss through the Holidays*
2. *Grief Resources & Holiday Traditions*
3. *Newsletter archive updated*

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To schedule a professional consultation, call 816-373-6761 (ext 2).

Grief Resources:

Center for Loss (<http://www.centerforloss.com/bookstore.php> , books by Dr Wolfelt)

Grief Share (<http://www.griefshare.org/>, support group and curriculum)

Gentle Willow: A Story for Children About Dying by Joyce Mills, PhD (for children)

Tear Soup: A Recipe for Healing After Loss by Schwiebert & DeKlyen (for children)

Holiday Traditions:

The Little Things are the Big Things by Lorle Campos (www.onceuponafamily.com)

Simplify the Holidays (<http://www.newdream.org/holiday/index.php> , tips to reduce stress and make your holidays more meaningful)

Make Stuff.com (<http://www.make-stuff.com/holidays/christmasindex.html>, ideas on making gifts on a budget or out of recycled materials)

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