

FACING THE HOLIDAYS;

Supporting Children After the Death of a Parent

By Margo Requarth, MFT
margo@HealingHeartsPress.com



The first year following any death can be especially difficult as families chart their way through holidays, birthdays and annual events that evoke memories both painful and joyous. Often the approaching day creates increasing anxiety as family members struggle with how to acknowledge a day that was special in the past, but may now be a reminder of what has been lost.

In my capacity as the director of a children's bereavement program, I have talked with many bereaved parents who want to provide their children with a semblance of happiness, normalcy and fun, but find it difficult imagining how to celebrate in a time of darkness. Sometimes just finding the strength to get through the days, weeks and months following the death precludes having the energy to prepare for a special holiday.

That being said, it is important to find a way to acknowledge and observe holidays and other special occasions. Ignoring an approaching holiday creates more anxiety and disappointment than does facing it squarely. Since many holidays have become large-scale media and commercial events ("Just Nine Shopping Days Till Christmas!"), they can't be escaped anyway.

Most children rely on holiday traditions. They want to know that even though their parent has died, the family will still find a way to celebrate Christmas, Hanukkah or other seasonal events. While acknowledging the special day will be different, family members can be encouraged to blend familiar traditions with newly created rituals that commemorate the day and also promote healing.

Meeting as a family is the best way to plan holiday events. Talking together and brainstorming—encouraging each family member to participate in the discussion—helps families acknowledge the reality of the death. It is also an opportunity to connect with one another at a difficult time. Some families decide they want to celebrate the day somewhere else, feeling a change of scenery might be beneficial. Other families prefer to find a way to include past rituals, feeling that consistency and the familiar are more soothing. Not everyone is likely to agree, but a family discussion will give each family member the opportunity to express his or her needs and wishes.

Eleven-year-old Michaela, a youngster I interviewed for my book, *After a Parent's Suicide: Helping Children Heal* shared her family's ideas. "Last year after Daddy died, Grandma took us to Hawaii for Christmas. We all talked about it and it seemed like a good idea, because everyone was so sad," she reported. "Hawaii was pretty fun, but we didn't have our tree or our stockings. It was fun to play on the beach, but it was too sunny. I missed the snow, and I missed waking up before everyone else and going downstairs to see all the presents. We still got presents and that was good, but I missed being home. I missed Christmas day with our cousins, but most of all, I missed Daddy. This year we decided we are going to stay home. It won't be the same without Daddy, but I think it will be okay."

Michaela's mother added, "I [decided I] couldn't be home for the holidays last year. I felt guilty about not giving the kids a traditional Christmas, but I just couldn't imagine dragging out all the decorations or shopping for everyone. Even thinking about getting a tree and decorating it threw me into a panic. My husband always did that. He was a chef and he always cooked a big dinner for all the relatives. Having Christmas the old way seemed beyond anything I could manage. I think this year we can ease back into it and figure out some new traditions. I hope so, anyway."

Often, other family members or friends will offer to host holidays or help you create new rituals. You may feel confused about how to proceed. Trust your instincts. You can always try something different next year. Don't be surprised if your children are inundated with gifts from family and friends looking for a way to express their own feelings of sadness and helplessness. While gifts don't make up for the absence of a beloved parent, the gesture is sincere, and your kids will enjoy the presents nevertheless.

If possible, try to find a way to bring memories of the parent who has died into the holiday event, since he or she is on everyone's mind anyway. Children I have talked with have come up with the following ideas:

- Hang up the missing parent's stocking (if he or she had one) and fill it with greenery or candy canes. Some children like to make a stocking if one isn't available, choosing to decorate a commercially made felt stocking or create one from construction paper or felt.
- Pick out a favorite photo or possibly a holiday picture from a prior Christmas or Hanukkah and place a candle next to it. Allow anyone to light the candle at times during the holiday season when they are thinking of their loved one. Young children will need assistance with lighting the candle. Safety rules about not leaving candles burning during family absences or at bedtime need to be acknowledged and observed.
- Decorate a box with seasonal wrapping paper and cut a slit in the top. Ask people to write down memories of the person who has died, then place them in the box. Set aside a time to read all the stories.
- Pick out a special ornament each year to commemorate the deceased parent.
- Make an ornament out of construction paper with a picture of the parent on it, and then have it laminated.
- Suggest that each family member do something special to honor the missing parent. Write it down and put it in an envelope to be placed on the tree or near the menorah. Examples might be donating a gift to an organization that serves the needy, singing in a holiday choir, making a financial contribution to a charitable organization, working in a soup kitchen or food bank, or cooking something special that the parent who has died used to cook or enjoy.
- Since the Hanukkah tradition is about finding light in the darkness, some Jewish families create a ritual around the lighting of the menorah. They share memories with each candle lighting, and talk about ways to bring light to the current dark time.

What is important is deciding for yourself what fits for you and your family. That can change as the years go by. You may find it hard to believe you will ever be able to truly "celebrate" holidays again, but you will. Combining the support of family and friends with the healing balm of time, you will find new ways to mark these days and open yourself again to the simple joys of celebration.