

The Fog Of Grief During The Holidays

Avoid the urge to isolate yourself.

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I have now spent ten difficult holidays without my late husband, and eight heartbreaking holidays without my son. The first few holidays after their loss were so painful that I don't remember much about them, other than I quickly understood that the holidays would never be the same. Holidays became something I dreaded and had to get through, rather than something I celebrated and enjoyed.

So, why am I still surprised a decade later, when my mostly healed heart, breaks back open during the holidays like clockwork? Just what is it about the holidays that brings the pain of our loss back to the forefront of our hearts? And how can we be more prepared to deal with the unexpected pain?

Our society puts a lot of money, emotion, and time, into the winter holidays. Holidays are advertised as joyous occasions where we gather together and celebrate with family and friends. Everywhere you look there are reminders that the holidays are the 'most

wonderful time of the year.’ But, after loss, holidays don’t feel so wonderful anymore. In fact, they can be downright debilitating.

The reality is that there are very few times during the year where our loved one’s absence is more deeply felt, and mourned, than during the holidays.

We need to give ourselves a break during the holidays and recognize that:

This. Is. Hard.

Society sends us the message that we are supposed to be joyful and that the holidays are a time for celebration and connecting with people we love. But, all we know is that we feel worse than ever. Nothing seems to take away the empty feeling in the pit of our stomachs and the ache in our hearts. We are required to show up to family gatherings, with a vital part of our family missing, and pretend that we are fine.

We are not fine.

We are grieving the fact that our loved one will never be a part of our family celebrations again. The reminder of our loss is never as obvious as when we are surrounded by our extended family and friends, their family’s are whole and together. Our family has an obvious vacant spot and will never be whole without our missing loved one.

Just as the death of our loved one changed the way we look at life, the holidays will never be the same again without them there by our side.

All of these emotions and feelings can be rather confusing and catch us by surprise.

While we know that we feel broken during the holidays, we don’t fully understand *why* our pain is increasing during a time when everyone else is happy and seems to be enjoying themselves. Family and friends around us don’t understand either, and they may feel uncomfortable being around our pain while they are trying to celebrate.

All of these holiday-induced emotions combine with our already fragile hearts to worsen our guilt, pain, and feelings of loneliness, putting us into an emotional fog that makes it difficult to find our way through the holiday. So, we stumble through the

holiday blindly, hoping that we come out on the other side with our hearts still in one piece.

I am finally coming to the conclusion that holidays will always be difficult, whether one year, ten years, or two decades after my loved ones died. This is the reality we must learn to live with. We will always miss them. We need to do a better job of being more aware that the holidays are a trigger for our grief, and find ways to take special care of our wounded hearts during the holidays.

Here are some suggestions that helped me get through the holidays:

1. Be kind and patient with yourself. Know that you don't have to do the hard work of healing during the holidays, you just have to get through them. We will pick back up on working to heal our grief after the holidays. Understand that it is okay to be sad. You are in pain. The pain cuts deep. We can't move through the pain until we've honored the emotions that demand to be felt.

2. Listen to what your body and your emotions are telling you. I tried to ignore these feelings of loss and sadness, and focus on the festivities. But, when I ignore my emotions my physical body sends me a reminder that, ultimately, I'm not the one in control. My body will shut itself down, making me feel physically ill and it will take days for me to recover my physical strength. Listen to the cues your body is sending you and acknowledge your emotions.

3. Look for activities and/or people that bring you some happiness. When I was in the trenches of grief, I found joy spending time with my two year old niece. Her infectious and innocent joy in life made me feel happy. Spending time with her was more effective than any antidepressant could have been.

4. Avoid the urge to isolate yourself. Loved ones may not understand the pain you're going through, but they still want to try to support you.

5. Don't overextend yourself physically or emotionally. You will find that you can't do as much as you could before. That is okay. Your priority needs to be doing damage control and protecting your emotional and physical health as much as possible.

6. Learn that it's okay to say no. Some people won't understand, and you need to know that this is not your problem. You can't control what other people think or feel. Your priority must shift to caring for yourself.

7. Find someone you can talk to about how you're feeling. If there is no one, journal your thoughts. Sometimes writing the thoughts down on a piece of paper allows them to escape from our heads and provides some emotional relief when we are feeling overwhelmed.

8. Sometimes volunteering or helping someone else in need can bring joy to our broken hearts. If you find joy in giving, find a way to balance giving to others in need, without draining yourself physically or emotionally.

9. Remember the beautiful holidays you were blessed to share with your loved ones before they died. What amazing gifts you were given. Remember and honor these times. Life is about adjusting to change. You can still find blessings in this holiday, and in future holidays. Look for those blessings.

Give yourself a gift by taking care of yourself this holiday.

Remember, it is okay to grieve, even if others are celebrating. Find the balance of honoring your emotions and recognizing the blessings that are still right in front of you, waiting to be cherished. You can get through this holiday.

Sending you strength and blessings to help you get through these difficult days.



*You can find my book, *The Other Side of Complicated Grief*, [here](#).*

You can find my Facebook grief support page, [here](#).

This post is part of Common Grief, a Healthy Living editorial initiative. Grief is an inevitable part of life, but that doesn't make navigating it any easier. The deep sorrow that accompanies the death of a loved one, the end of a marriage or even moving far away from home, is real. But while grief is universal, we all grieve differently. So we started Common Grief to help learn from each other. Let's talk about living with loss. If you have a story you'd like to share, email us at strongertogether@huffingtonpost.com.

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