

Grief at Christmas

Any 'first' special occasion can be difficult to cope with when you are bereaved. A first birthday, an anniversary, Mother's Day, Father's Day and so on can each bring their own challenges. Some bereaved people notice a dip in their coping abilities as a special date draws near. Emotions and experiences that were previously dealt with may come to the surface again and you might even feel you are 'going backwards' in your grief.

This leaflet focuses on coping with Christmas, but the suggestions might also be useful for helping you cope with any special dates or occasions that are difficult to face. While it's tempting and understandable to try to ignore these special dates, some planning and preparation can help make these days a little less difficult. It's generally better to know ahead of time how you will spend the day rather than face into it with no plan. Even if you decide to change this plan, or find it no longer suits you, you are taking control of the day rather than allowing it to control you.



Understanding your grief

There is something about Christmas that tends to make us emotional. Most of us have strong memories of childhood Christmases – both good and bad – and we recall them each year as Christmas draws near. The family memories of Christmases gone by can be overwhelming and send us into a tailspin of renewed grief. The first Christmas without a significant person may bring many challenges. Perhaps the person you have lost was the person who used to decorate the tree or make the Christmas pudding or look after some other special Christmas job. You really miss them when those traditions come around. Simple decisions such as whether or not to hang up stockings or how to set the table for one less person can lead to feelings of deep upset and loneliness.

Few people get through the Christmas season without some sadness, even if they have not been bereaved. For many people, it's a bittersweet time when they are reminded of other losses in their lives such as absent family members, a relationship that didn't work out or a longed-for child that never happened. These disappointments seem to hurt more at Christmas time particularly when it seems, from the outside, that everyone else is having a wonderful time. Whatever your particular circumstances, remember that you are grieving and that you need to pace yourself and be gentle with yourself. Remind yourself that it's only one day and you can get through it.

The following points are offered as suggestions, but remember you are the best person to decide what will work best for you.

- Plan ahead. Acknowledge that Christmas will now be different and that while you may choose to keep some traditions, others may have to be changed or dropped altogether. Ask yourself which traditions are important to you and what you can reasonably cope with this year.
- Keep things simple. Think about what is meaningful and realistic for you and discuss this with other family members. You might, for example, decide that you want to attend a religious service and visit close friends. You might decide against an elaborate dinner or putting up decorations. Each person and each family will have their own preferences and, as much as possible, these preferences should be honoured.
- Begin new traditions if you think it might help. Some people begin traditions such as visiting the grave on Christmas Eve and putting holly or ivy on it. Others light a candle or remember the person in a toast at the dinner table. Some choose to donate to a charity in the deceased person's name.

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- Let the people around you know if you are comfortable talking about the person who died, if you don't mention their name, others may assume you don't want them to mention it either.
 - Accept offers of help, both practical and emotional.
 - Plan some quiet time for yourself. Grieving is tiring and energy sapping. When you can, lie down or take a short walk. If you accept invitations, give yourself the option of changing your mind or leaving early if you need to.
 - If there are children in the family, try to include them in the planning. Ask them for their ideas on how to spend the day. Young children may need to be reassured that Santa is still coming and to know that it's okay to enjoy Christmas even if people are sad.

If you have been bereaved this year, remind yourself that the grief journey takes its own time and that most people experience days when they are coping quite well and other days when they feel ambushed by their grief. Just getting through the day can sometimes be a challenge. It may well be a very sad Christmas time for you, but even on the most difficult of days, something unexpected may happen that lifts your spirits even for a few moments – it might be carol singers, the sound of excited children laughing or a thoughtful note through the letter box letting you know that others are thinking of you at this time.

Useful Resources

Irish Hospice Foundation

Further suggested reading is available from our Thérèse Brady Library,
library@hospicefoundation.ie

Bereavement & Loss Hub

www.bereaved.ie

Bereavement Support Line

Freephone 1800 80 70 77. Available Monday to Friday, 10am-1pm. In partnership with the HSE.

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