

When You're Supposed To Be Happy, But You're Not: Surviving the Holidays

For some people, the holidays truly are a festival of joy and sharing -- parties, family gatherings, gift-giving, religious services, decorating, connecting with friends and family through cards, cooking, emails, video conferencing, social media, shopping, and travel. Others may choose more modest ways to acknowledge the amplified press of the calendar. For yet others, this time of year is full of stress or unhappiness as they battle the loud cultural imperative to celebrate, socialize and spend.

Whether it is grieving the death of someone you love, or your sense of loneliness, seasonal affective disorder, or other difficult circumstances, it is possible, with forethought, to honor your grief and still carve out a personal experience that can serve and protect you.

One of the hallmarks of grief is unpredictable changes in resilience and capacity for stimulation, so building a plan is essential. Think Stresses, Strategies and Successes.

Name what you know will be stressful for you. Big parties, spending money you don't have, facing a family gathering with the cousins who never outgrew being brats, writing out a hundred cards to tell people that your husband has died, spending a special day alone.

Think about what you think you want to do but aren't sure you can. Meeting friends for a holiday dinner, going to a family gathering, leaving for a weekend away, acting 'as if' you were happy and hoping it makes it so.

Write down what you know will be nourishing and easy. Making your famous Hanukkah potato latkes, cooking Christmas dinner, putting together a collection of special music to give as gifts, going to religious services, creating meaningful handmade gifts for the 7th day of Kwanzaa.

Regardless of your expectations, it's important to have plans so you don't find yourself without options. It's just as important to have flexibility to break or alter those plans if they move anywhere from "too much" to "devastating".

Recruit allies ahead of time. Let people who care about you know that any hour or day could unexpectedly be tough, and that you'd like to accept invitations but you need permission to cancel at any time. If being alone is a concern, sometimes even going to a movie can alleviate the sense of being completely isolated, or being with one other person.

Reframe traditions and your role. Have someone else host the big dinner. Give yourself permission to be taken care of. One grandmother whose financial circumstances had changed felt pressure to keep up with the other grandmother's generous gift giving. She announced to her granddaughter that she was now the baking grandma and she needed her help. Together they made a special chocolate chip cookie recipe and built a gingerbread house. This same woman spent her last Christmas making triple batches of her special cookies and froze them so the family could have them the next year, and her granddaughter held the legacy to continue the tradition.

For some people in grief, any recognition of the holidays may be too hard to bear. In the home of a family whose teenage son had just died, his father could not acknowledge that it was Christmastime at all, but his little sister wanted to decorate the way she and her brother always had. To compromise, her mother helped her decorate her entire bedroom with all the lights that would have gone on the tree but left the rest of the house untouched.

Look for good cheer. Unexpected moments of tenderness or laughter will surprise you; they are not uncommon in deep grief and they can soothe an empty heart. Perform kindnesses for others; they fill us in ways that our own life experience can't. Remind yourself of one good thing in your life and allow gratitude for what is. An old Hungarian proverb reminds us, *"When the bridge is gone, the narrowest plank becomes precious."*

When expectations to be other than you are bruise you and deepen your grief, you have the right and, indeed, responsibility to take precious care of your life. During the holidays, this is the gift you give yourself.