

Grieving During the Holidays Is Challenging, But You're Not Alone

The following is a message from the Mayor's Suicide Prevention and Mental Health Task Force.

As an important part of its annual effort to promote well being and good health during the holiday season, the Mayor's Suicide Prevention and Mental Health Task Force would again like to remind the Somerville community that health issues related to depression or grieving can be especially acute during the weeks between Thanksgiving and the new year. Each year at this time, the Task Force therefore renews its message to anyone coping with grief, depression or other personal crises that help is available.

The death of a loved one – whether it is of a friend or family member – often is felt deeply during the winter holidays. Death and loss can come in many forms: accident or illness, suicide, drugs, and, for members of our armed forces, through combat in Iraq or Afghanistan. It can be difficult to find a way to honor those friends and loved ones we have lost while also finding meaning, and even joy, in the spirit of the many different holidays we celebrate at this time of year. We may experience guilt about enjoying the season, feeling as if we are betraying those for whom we grieve. We may feel unable to take part in family rituals, such as decorating the Christmas tree or lighting the Menorah, because we are overwhelmed by memories of doing these things with those we have lost. Depression and sadness can create a sense of personal failure at holiday time, making these emotions even stronger and more painful.

Grief does not take a break for the holidays. As we move toward the busiest time of the holiday season, be sure to take time for yourself - to cry, feel sad, talk with a friend or trusted adviser, or to just be alone. Remember you have choices. If you want to decorate, cook, bake or shop for the holidays, that's fine. If you don't want to, that's okay, too. Ask for help if you need it. Parties, community events, and other celebrations may feel overwhelming. Remember that it is all right to turn down an invitation.

Across the board, experts in grief and loss agree that the best thing for families and friends to do is to talk about the friend or loved one they have lost. Many families try to behave as if nothing is different when in reality so many things have changed. Many families

copied with grief and loss during the holidays find that some traditions are comforting to them while others are simply too painful. Consider asking yourself or having a conversation with your family members or friends to review family traditions. Here are just a few questions you may wish to explore: Which traditions do we definitely want to continue or put on hold this year? How can we comfortably acknowledge the loss of our loved one? Is there, perhaps, a new tradition we would like to start, that honors our family and our lost loved one?

There are many ways to honor a lost loved one. Anticipate that children and teens will need more time and attention during the holidays. It can take many years for you and your family to find the best combination of rituals and traditions that lead to a joyful celebration of your holiday. Talk about things that may come up. Trust that your instincts will guide you in doing what is right for you. Here are some suggestions, excerpted with permission from the Cove Center for Grieving Children, to handle grief and loss during the holiday season. As you review these, please remember there is no fixed formula for grieving:

- Understand that kids may feel guilty about having a good time. Use phrases such as, "Your brother (or other deceased family member) would want you to have fun," or "Dad would love to know you enjoyed that so much," to reassure them that enjoying themselves is OK.
 - Bring out holiday photos and talk about how it used to be when the loved one was alive. Encourage children, other family members and friends to talk about what they miss.
 - Take a walk. Encourage children or other young people to run, play and be noisy.
 - Prepare a memory meal of the loved one's favorite foods. Serve it to your friends and/or family and talk about your loved one.
 - Go shopping and purchase a holiday gift of the person you've lost, and then donate the item to someone in need.
 - Collect stories from friends and family members about the person who is gone and assemble a memory book for the family.

- Make a memory ornament, perhaps with the person's picture, and hang it on your Christmas tree.
- Buy a big candle and light it every day, sharing holiday memories of the person who died.
- Encourage children, other family members or friends to write a letter to the person who died, telling them about what has been happening in their lives.
- Send photos of the lost loved one to their family members, perhaps with a story or an acknowledgement of what that person meant in your life.

Remember that the loss of a loved one affects many people in the community. Consider how you might open up your home and your holidays so that the friends, neighbors and colleagues of the person you have lost can feel welcomed when visiting and sharing their positive memories with you and one another. This is particularly important when a young person with strong friendships has died. Adolescents and young adults find great comfort in their groups. If the experience becomes too overwhelming reach out to a loved one or visit your health care provider or one of the many mental health agencies in your community. You are not alone.

Above all, be kind to yourself and your family during the holidays. Every winter tradition – from Hanukkah to Santa Lucia Day to Solstice to Christmas and beyond – focuses on finding light in the midst of darkness. Grief comes at a time of great sadness and darkness for so many families. The winter holidays can also contribute to the healing process.

Special thanks to Kim Nagle, Executive Director of the Cove Center for Grieving Children, (203.634.0500 or 1.800.750.2683) for her permission to excerpt their materials for this article. It was provided by Noreen Burke, Somerville Health Department Director and Mayor's Suicide Prevention Task Force Co-Chair; Dr. Karen Hacker, Institute for Community Health and Task Force Co-Chair; Tammy Freitas da Rocha, Somerville Cares About Prevention (SCAP) Director; Silvana Castaneda, The Family Center, Inc. Clinical Director; and Dr. Dana Gordon, Somerville Mental Health.