



Coping With the Holidays

The holidays can be a very difficult time for those grieving the loss of a loved one. It is not just in death that we mourn. When dementia or other debilitating or terminal diseases rob a loved one of who we knew them as, we grieve that loss just as deeply.

Grief can be intensified by the holidays. The season dictates joy but those who are grieving are unable to participate in these emotions. The pressure to be enthusiastic and celebratory can be more than the grieving person can bear. The expectations of the holidays that we “should” be happy, we “should” be having a good time, can increase the pain of loss and loneliness.

It may seem like the world and everyone around you is moving forward. The person in grief may be unable to give the focus and emotions that the holidays demand. By participating in festivities, the griever may feel guilty because it feels as though the loss is being denied or trivialized. Grievors may dread the holidays because everyone around them wants them back to “normal.”

When grief meets up with the holiday season, are there ways we can help ourselves through this time?

James E. Miller, (www.griefhelps.com), grief counselor and clergyman, describes some hopeful possibilities worth remembering; you may find that things turn out to be better than what you were fearing the days would bring. People report experiencing comforting moments of peace, joy, and love despite the pain they are feeling. During your grief you may feel closer to the one you love but also a closer connection with others around you.

There are suggestions from the experts on things one can do to help cope with the holidays.

Caregiver Resources:

Our Family Caregiver Specialists have identified concerns & questions that are commonly discussed in support groups and counseling sessions. Check our blog at www.nselder.org for our monthly Caregiver topic. We'll provide you with some resources & options for handling specific issues.

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- The holidays will happen regardless of what someone plans. “Canceling” the holiday is not recommended. Rather, finding a way to spend the day that suits you the best may help ease you through the time.
- Planning ahead will help. You can have several plans and change them as the day dictates. Inform others of your plans so that there are less expectations placed on you. Give yourself the permission to do only what you can manage.
- Find ways to symbolically include and memorialize your loved one to keep their spirit alive.
- Help others in need through volunteering.
- Consider a support group. Ask for and accept help.

For the caregiver who cares for someone with Alzheimer’s or any dementia-related disease, it may take some careful planning ahead to avoid a more stressful time during the holidays. Sometimes our grief is deepest when we are in the company of our loved one who no longer recognizes us. The Alzheimer’s Association is a good resource to consult for guidance on handling the holidays. Check the following websites for more information

<https://www.alz.org/care/alzheimers-dementia-holidays.asp>

http://www.alz.org/flgulfcoast/alzheimers_disease_62487.asp

http://www.alz.org/documents/midlandschapter/holiday_tips_for_caregivers_booklet_web-11.pdf

Kathy Perrella, Options Program Manager at North Shore Elder Services, discusses coping through the holidays for caregivers. “The caregiver will do themselves a favor by adjusting their own and family expectations. It is about where you and your loved one are now. You do what you can manage and you set limits and make plans according to your needs. Trying to fit too much into the day is bound to end up in disaster. Keep it simple.”

Besides adjusting expectations, the caregiver may want to discuss holiday celebrations with family and friends. People will be better prepared this way.

When it comes to maintaining traditional activities, the caregiver can change those traditions. Trying to make it the same holiday it has been in the past will only highlight the absence of someone. Can you take a past tradition and build upon it? This will create new memories. Reminiscing allows family and friends to include the person with dementia in reliving happy memories.

The Alzheimer’s Association recommends caregivers avoid situations that further confuse their loved one and to keep the routines that have been established. Keep the environment safe and calm. Remaining flexible will benefit everyone.

Think about the holidays and how you can strive to make them happier. As a caregiver, you will need the love and support of those around you. Support groups, like those we offer at North Shore Elder Services (<http://nselder.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/support-group-flyer.pdf>) and at the Bertolon Center for Grief and Healing, and church services are all resources that are highly recommended.

Virginia Simpson, a bereavement care specialist, put together a list entitled, “What Grieving People Want You to Know.” When you can’t put into words what you are feeling, it may be a good resource to refer others to. Check out her list at <http://www.drvirginiarsimpson.com/what-grieving-people-want-you-to-know/>.

North Shore Elder Services wishes everyone a happy and healthy holiday season.

- Jayne Girodat, NSES