

Coping with grief at Christmas

For some people, Christmas is not the season to be jolly. For some people, this Christmas will be filled with sad memories of someone close who is no longer here... facing your first Christmas without someone you love can be a very lonely and daunting time.

There may be expectations that you will put up the Christmas tree, come along to Christmas parties, send out cheery messages, go Christmas shopping and join family and friends for Christmas dinner... especially because others want to see you coping and moving on.

But when you're grieving this can be really difficult. You may have no inclination or energy to 'pretend' that you are looking forward to Christmas when in truth you wish things were the way they were last year - when you were still together with your loved one.

On the other hand, some people want to handle Christmas time by doing things in the same way as always - not changing anything and keeping to the same routines and family rituals. Keeping to the familiar gives them comfort.

Here are some tips if you're facing the dilemma of how to handle this Christmas:

- Give yourself permission not to do the things that you're finding hard to do - writing Christmas cards, putting up the tree, going to Christmas parties - it's alright to let these go this year or next, until you can cope with social events again.
- Make a point of remembering your loved one in a special way - light a candle for them on Christmas Day, place an ornament on the Christmas tree to symbolise them, buy a gift for a needy child or family in place of the gift you would have bought. Have their photo close by, serve their favourite meal or wine and raise a glass in remembrance - all of these are ways you can keep them close and recognize the bond you've shared. Make a speech. Say their name. Talk about them.
- Allow yourself to grieve - the days leading up to Christmas (and other significant days on the calendar) can heighten your grief. Seeing other couples and families together just hurts. Seeing the empty place at the Christmas table will be hard to bear. It's alright to cry and let people know that it's not easy living without someone special. Try not to bottle up your feelings. Now's the time to tell a close friend that you're struggling to put on a happy face.

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There are memory triggers everywhere of a missing face, an empty chair and silent thoughts of the way Christmas used to be.

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And, if you know someone who is grieving this Christmas, give them a call, write them a special card, send a text, invite them over for a quiet get together, speak up and acknowledge their loss, and have the courage to mention the name of their loved one and let them know that you understand that it may be a hard time for them because it's Christmas.