December 2026 | Issue 12

Homewood Health

Life Lines

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Coping with Grief During the Holidays

The holiday season often brings opportunities for connection, reflection, and celebration. For many people, it's a time to gather with family and friends, participate in cultural or religious traditions, and look ahead to a new year.

At the same time, the holidays can bring a greater awareness of loss, change, and absence. A familiar tradition may feel different than it once did. Important people may be missing from celebrations. Life circumstances may have shifted in unexpected ways. Even positive changes, such as moving to a new community, starting a new chapter in life, or welcoming new family members, can sometimes bring feelings of grief alongside other emotions.

Although grief is commonly associated with the death of a loved one, it can also arise from many other forms of loss and transition, including relationship changes, family estrangement, health concerns, caregiving responsibilities, infertility, retirement, job loss, relocation, or living far from loved ones and familiar traditions. During the holidays, these experiences can feel especially noticeable as routines change and reminders of what has been lost—or what has changed—become more present.

In this article, we'll explore why grief can feel more intense during the holiday season, the many forms it can take, and practical ways to cope, adapt traditions, and access support when needed.

Why grief can feel more intense during the holidays

The holidays often carry expectations. Advertisements, social media, movies, and cultural traditions frequently portray this time of year as joyful, busy, and centred on family togetherness. While many people enjoy holiday celebrations, these messages can sometimes make difficult emotions feel more visible.

The contrast between what we hoped the season would look like and what it currently looks like can be painful. A chair at the dinner table may sit empty. A family tradition may no longer be possible. Relationships may have changed. Financial pressures, health concerns, or geographical distance may make it difficult to participate in celebrations in the same way as before.

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The holidays can also increase exposure to reminders of loss. A favourite recipe, a familiar song, a holiday card, or a family photograph may bring back memories and emotions that feel especially present during this season. These experiences are common. Grief often reflects the significance of what has been lost or changed.

Understanding the many forms of grief

When people hear the word grief, they often think of bereavement following a death. While this is one important form of grief, it is only one of many.

Grief can arise from many experiences of loss and change, including:

- The death of a family member, friend, colleague, or pet
- Divorce, separation, or the end of a significant relationship
- Family estrangement or conflict
- Fertility issues, pregnancy loss, or changes in family plans
- Retirement or loss of a career role that shaped identity and routine
- Changes in health, mobility, or independence
- Moving away from family, community, or cultural traditions
- Financial strain or changes in living circumstances
- Anticipatory grief while caring for someone with a serious illness

People may also experience grief related to unmet expectations or futures they had imagined for themselves. Life transitions can sometimes involve both gratitude and grief at the same time. For example, becoming a parent, moving to a new city, starting a new job, or retiring can bring positive opportunities while also involving loss, uncertainty, or change.

For immigrants and newcomers, for example, the holidays may highlight the distance between their current lives and the places they once called home. Celebrations may look different from those they grew up with. Time zone differences, travel limitations, financial barriers, or immigration processes may make it difficult to spend time with family members. Missing familiar foods, cultural traditions, languages, and social connections can contribute to feelings of grief and homesickness.

Grief experiences vary widely from person to person. Some people feel sadness. Others notice anger, numbness, loneliness, guilt, relief, confusion, fatigue, difficulty concentrating, or changes in sleep and appetite. Emotions may shift from day to day or even hour to hour.

There is no universal timeline for grief. Feelings may become more noticeable around holidays, anniversaries, birthdays, or significant milestones. Certain years may feel easier than others, while some occasions may unexpectedly bring emotions to the surface.

Caring for yourself during the holiday season

The holiday season can present unique challenges for people who are grieving. The following strategies may help:

Give yourself permission to experience your emotions

People often feel pressure to participate in holiday activities with enthusiasm, even when they are struggling. It can be helpful to acknowledge your emotions without judging them.

You may feel sadness while attending a celebration. You may enjoy certain moments while also missing someone or something important. You may feel grateful for support while wishing circumstances were different. Taking moments to pause, reflect, journal, pray, meditate, or simply notice what you are feeling can help create space for your emotional experience.

Consider what you need this year

Holiday traditions often provide comfort and continuity. At the same time, some traditions may feel difficult to participate in after a significant loss or life change.

Consider what feels supportive for you this year.

You may choose to:

- Attend some events and decline others
- Shorten your time at gatherings
- Modify existing traditions
- Create new traditions
- Spend part of the holiday season quietly
- Ask for practical or emotional support from others

Your needs may differ from previous years, and they may change throughout the season.

Plan ahead for difficult moments

Many people find it helpful to anticipate situations that may be emotionally challenging.

Think about upcoming events, gatherings, anniversaries, or conversations that may bring up strong feelings. Consider what support might help you navigate those situations.

For example, you may wish to:

- Drive yourself to an event so you can leave when needed
- Arrange a check-in with a trusted friend
- Build quiet time into your schedule
- Prepare responses to questions you would rather not discuss
- Have a comforting activity planned after a difficult day

Planning ahead can help reduce stress and create a greater sense of control during emotionally demanding periods.

Maintain supportive routines

The holiday season often disrupts regular schedules. While flexibility is important, maintaining some familiar routines can support emotional well-being.

Whenever possible, try to:

- Get adequate sleep
- Eat regular meals
- Engage in physical activity
- Spend time outdoors
- Stay connected with supportive people
- Continue activities that help you feel grounded

Small daily routines can provide stability during times of emotional uncertainty.

Finding meaning in existing and new traditions

Traditions can offer comfort, connection, and a sense of continuity. Following a loss or major life change, however, traditions may feel different. Some people find comfort in continuing longstanding traditions. Others choose to adapt them in ways that better reflect their current circumstances.

You might:

- Share stories about a loved one
- Prepare a meaningful recipe
- Display photographs or keepsakes
- Volunteer in your community
- Donate to a cause that reflects someone's values
- Gather virtually with family members who live far away
- Explore cultural traditions that help you stay connected to your heritage

A holiday tradition can be as simple as preparing a favourite recipe, calling a loved one, attending a community event, or setting aside time to remember someone who is important to you.

Looking ahead

The holidays may feel different after a loss or major life change. Traditions, gatherings, and celebrations that once felt familiar can take on a different significance. Over time, people often find their own ways of approaching the season while adjusting to what has changed.

Whether you choose to maintain long-standing traditions, create new ones, or take a quieter approach this year, your needs may be different than they have been in the past—and they may continue to change over time.

Reaching out for support

Periods of grief and loss can feel overwhelming, particularly during the holiday season when emotions and reminders of change may feel more present. Support from others can play an important role in helping people cope and adjust.

Support may come from friends, family members, colleagues, faith communities, cultural organizations, support groups, or mental health professionals. Many people find it helpful to talk with someone who can provide a compassionate, non-judgmental space to process their experiences.

If grief is affecting your ability to function, manage daily responsibilities, maintain relationships, or care for yourself, professional support may be particularly helpful. Counselling can provide a safe and supportive environment to explore your thoughts, emotions, and coping strategies. It can also help you navigate significant life transitions, relationship changes, cultural adjustment, caregiving responsibilities, and other forms of grief that may become more noticeable during the holiday season.

Your Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) can provide confidential support for concerns affecting your mental health and well-being. Through counselling and other available services, you can access professional support tailored to your needs, whether you are coping with a recent loss or adjusting to ongoing changes in your life.



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