

GRIEF & HEALING / FAMILY EDUCATION SERIES

When the Holidays Feel Different

Finding Comfort, Remembering Love, and Creating New Memories

By Ron L. Germann

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When the Holidays Feel Different



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45 years of experience serving families through funeral service.

Finding peace through Thanksgiving, Christmas, and the holiday season when someone we love is missing—or when we know our time together may be growing short.

There is something about the holidays that makes memories feel closer.

Perhaps it’s the familiar smell of Thanksgiving dinner, the sound of Christmas music drifting through the house, or the sight of decorations that have been brought out year after year. Maybe it’s a favorite recipe, a treasured ornament, or the empty chair at a table that once felt complete.

The holidays have a way of reminding us not only of the people gathered around us, but also of those who are no longer there.

For someone experiencing grief, Thanksgiving and Christmas can be especially difficult. A season traditionally filled with togetherness, gratitude, celebration, and family traditions can suddenly feel unfamiliar, even painful.

And for families facing the impending death of someone they love, the holidays can bring a different kind of heartache—the awareness that this Thanksgiving or Christmas may be their last one together.

Yet even in these difficult circumstances, there can still be moments of genuine happiness, meaningful connection, and lasting memories.

The goal is not to celebrate as though nothing has changed. It is to discover how love, remembrance, and gratitude can still have a place in a season that will never feel quite the same.

When an Empty Chair Says More Than Words

Perhaps no moment captures the absence of a loved one quite like gathering around the holiday table.

Someone is missing.

It may be the father who always carved the turkey, the mother who insisted everyone take leftovers home, the grandparent whose stories were told every Christmas, or the spouse who quietly made the holidays special in a hundred little ways.

Sometimes the smallest absences hurt the most.

The missing voice. The familiar laugh. The person who always sat in the same chair.

Family members may struggle with whether to acknowledge the absence or avoid mentioning it for fear of upsetting others.

But silence can sometimes make grief feel even lonelier.

Consider beginning the holiday gathering with a simple acknowledgment:

“We’re all thinking about someone special today. We miss them, and we wish they were here. But we’re also grateful for the years, the laughter, and the memories we were fortunate enough to share.”

There may be tears. There may also be smiles.

Both are welcome.

Remembering someone openly gives everyone permission to acknowledge what they are feeling, rather than pretending the day is untouched by loss.

And sometimes, once that acknowledgment has been made, the gathering can begin to feel a little lighter.

Give Yourself Permission to Celebrate Again

One of the most difficult emotions grieving people experience during the holidays is guilt.

How can we laugh when someone we love is gone?

How can we enjoy Christmas morning when the person who made it so special is no longer with us?

Does celebrating mean we're forgetting?

Of course not.

Enjoying life after a loss is not a betrayal of the person who died.

Love does not require us to remain unhappy as proof that someone mattered.

Think for a moment about the person you are missing.

Would they want every Thanksgiving to be filled with sadness? Would they want Christmas to become a day you dread? Would they want their memory to prevent the people they loved from finding happiness?

Most of us would hope for something very different for those we leave behind.

We would want them to gather, laugh, share meals, exchange gifts, embrace one another, and continue making memories.

There is room for grief and joy in the same holiday.

You can miss someone terribly and still enjoy the sound of children laughing. You can shed tears while hanging an ornament and smile when you remember the story behind it.

Those feelings do not contradict one another.

They are both expressions of love.

When This May Be the Last Holiday Together

Not every family facing holiday grief has already experienced a death.

Some are sitting beside a loved one who is seriously ill, receiving hospice care, or approaching the end of life.

The knowledge that this may be the final Thanksgiving or Christmas together can cast a shadow over even the happiest moments.

Families may feel pressure to create the perfect holiday, take enough photographs, say all the right things, or somehow make the occasion extraordinary.

But meaningful memories rarely depend on perfection.

Sometimes the greatest gift is simply being present.

If someone you love may be nearing the end of life, consider what would bring them comfort and happiness.

Perhaps they would enjoy having family gathered nearby, hearing grandchildren tell stories, listening to familiar Christmas music, or sharing a small portion of a favorite holiday meal.

Perhaps they would rather have a quiet afternoon with one or two loved ones.

Their energy, comfort, and wishes should guide the celebration.

And don’t underestimate the importance of ordinary conversation.

Ask about childhood Christmases. Talk about family traditions. Invite them to share a favorite Thanksgiving memory, a funny family story, or the meaning behind a treasured decoration.

If they are comfortable, consider recording their voice, preserving a story, or taking a photograph together.

But don’t allow the desire to capture every moment to interfere with actually experiencing it.

Put the camera down occasionally. Hold their hand. Sit together. Listen.

And if there are important words that remain unspoken—I love you. Thank you. I’m sorry. I’m proud of you. You made a difference in my life—consider saying them now.

You do not need a perfect speech.

Sometimes the simplest words become the ones we treasure most.

When time together is limited, the most meaningful gift may not be something placed beneath the Christmas tree. It may be the reassurance that someone was deeply loved, appreciated, and never taken for granted.

Finding New Ways to Honor Someone Who Has Died

When a loved one dies, families sometimes feel caught between preserving traditions and changing them.

Should we prepare their favorite dish?

Should we hang their Christmas stocking?

Should we leave their place at the table?

Should we continue celebrating exactly as we always have?

There is no single right answer.

Some traditions provide tremendous comfort. Others may feel too painful, especially during the first holiday season after a death.

You have permission to keep what feels meaningful, change what no longer works, and create something entirely new.

Here are several thoughtful ways to honor someone you love during Thanksgiving and Christmas.

1. Make Their Favorite Holiday Dish

Prepare the recipe they were famous for, even if nobody can make it quite the way they did.

Tell the story behind it.

Maybe Grandma never measured anything. Maybe Dad insisted on making the stuffing, even though everyone secretly preferred someone else’s.

The stories are part of the tradition.

2. Create a Special Christmas Ornament

Choose an ornament that represents their personality, interests, or a cherished memory.

It might include their name, a photograph, or a meaningful date.

Each year, hanging that ornament becomes a moment of remembrance—and an opportunity to tell younger family members about someone they may never have had the chance to know.

3. Share a Favorite Memory Around the Table

Invite family members to share one happy, funny, or meaningful memory.

Don’t insist that everyone participate. Some may prefer simply to listen.

Often, one story leads to another.

Before long, a gathering that began with tears may be filled with laughter over memories that had almost been forgotten.

4. Give a Gift in Their Memory

Consider making a charitable donation, providing a holiday meal to a family in need, or purchasing Christmas gifts for a child who might otherwise go without.

Choose something that reflects the values or interests of the person you are remembering.

An act of generosity can become a beautiful continuation of their influence.

5. Light a Candle of Remembrance

A candle at Thanksgiving dinner or on Christmas Eve can provide a simple, meaningful acknowledgment of someone who is missing.

Some families accompany it with a short prayer, a moment of silence, or a few words of gratitude.

Others simply let the light speak for itself.

6. Preserve Their Stories for Future Generations

Create a small memory book containing photographs, handwritten recipes, holiday cards, favorite sayings, and stories from family members.

Invite children and grandchildren to contribute.

Over time, it can become something far more valuable than a holiday decoration—a record of a life that continues to influence the family.

7. Continue Something They Loved

Perhaps your loved one always delivered cookies to neighbors, attended a Christmas Eve service, watched a particular holiday movie, or volunteered during the season.

Continuing that tradition can be a way of keeping their generosity, humor, or spirit alive.

It need not be elaborate.

Sometimes the simplest traditions carry the greatest meaning.

Helping Children Experience the Holidays After a Loss

Children often experience grief differently from adults.

A child may cry because Grandma won’t be there for Christmas, then moments later become excited about opening presents.

This does not mean the child has forgotten or is unaffected.

Children often move naturally between sadness and enjoyment.

Adults can help by reassuring them that both feelings are acceptable.

Encourage children to talk about the person they miss. Invite them to help choose a remembrance ornament, draw a picture, prepare a favorite recipe, or share a holiday memory.

Avoid making them feel responsible for keeping adults happy.

And remember that children may ask difficult questions, sometimes at unexpected moments.

Answer honestly, in language appropriate to their age, and reassure them that they are loved and cared for.

Perhaps most importantly, allow them to enjoy the holiday.

Their laughter is not disrespectful to the person who died.

It is a reminder that life, love, and childhood continue.

When Everyone in the Family Grieves Differently

One family member may want to preserve every holiday tradition.

Another may want to skip Christmas altogether.Hel Someone may find comfort in talking about the person who died, while another finds those conversations overwhelming.

These differences can create tension at a time when everyone is already emotionally vulnerable.

Try not to interpret another person’s way of grieving as a lack of love.

Instead, talk openly before the holidays arrive.

Ask what traditions feel important, what might be difficult, and what changes could help everyone feel more comfortable.

Perhaps the family can agree to keep a few cherished traditions while introducing something new.

Maybe Christmas dinner happens at a different home this year. Perhaps the gathering is smaller. Maybe the family chooses to travel rather than celebrate in the familiar surroundings of home.

The goal should not be to recreate a holiday that can never be exactly the same.

It should be to create a gathering where people feel loved, respected, and included.

And if someone needs to step away, leave early, or decline an invitation, try to offer understanding rather than judgment.

Don’t Let the Pressure of the Season Become Another Burden

The holidays already carry expectations.

Decorations. Shopping. Cooking. Entertaining. Travel. Family gatherings.

When grief is added to those responsibilities, even ordinary preparations can feel exhausting.

It is perfectly acceptable to simplify.

You do not have to decorate every room, prepare an elaborate meal, attend every gathering, or maintain every tradition.

Choose the things that matter most.

Accept help when it is offered.

If attending a large celebration feels overwhelming, consider spending part of the day with family and reserving some quiet time for yourself.

If being alone feels especially difficult, reach out to someone you trust before the holiday arrives and make a plan for companionship.

And if your grief becomes persistently overwhelming, interferes significantly with daily life, or leaves you feeling hopeless, consider speaking with a grief counselor, hospice bereavement professional, or other qualified source of support.

There is no prize for enduring grief without help.

Turn Remembrance Into Gratitude

Thanksgiving offers a particularly meaningful opportunity to look at loss from another perspective.

We often think of gratitude as appreciation for what we have.

But gratitude can also mean appreciating what we had.

The years shared with a spouse.

The love of a parent.

The laughter of a child.

The wisdom of a grandparent.

The friendship of someone who made ordinary days extraordinary.

When we lose someone, it is natural to focus on everything we will never experience with them again.

The birthdays they will miss. The Christmas mornings that will never be the same. The conversations we wish we could have one more time.

Those losses are real, and they deserve acknowledgment.

But there is another side to the story.

There were Christmas mornings we did share.

There were Thanksgiving dinners filled with laughter.

There were hugs, conversations, family vacations, celebrations, ordinary afternoons, and countless little moments that became part of our lives.

The pain of losing someone is often so great precisely because the gift of having them in our lives was so meaningful.

Gratitude does not erase grief.

But it can help us remember that the story of someone we love is much larger than the sadness of their death.

Their life deserves to be remembered, not only their absence.

A Simple Holiday Tradition: The Gift of One Good Memory

Consider beginning a new tradition this year.

At Thanksgiving or Christmas, invite everyone who wishes to participate to write down one happy memory of a loved one who has died.

It might be something funny, a lesson they taught, a family adventure, or an ordinary moment that still brings a smile.

Place the memories in a special box or jar.

During the gathering, read a few aloud.

Save the others for future holidays.

As the years pass, continue adding memories.

Children may eventually contribute stories they heard from their parents. Grandchildren may discover details about a grandparent they never knew. Family members may remember moments that had faded from everyday conversation.

What begins as a way to cope with loss can gradually become one of the family’s most treasured holiday traditions.

And instead of associating Thanksgiving or Christmas only with the pain of someone's absence, future generations may begin to associate those days with the warmth of remembering them.

The First Holiday Is Not the Final Chapter

The first Thanksgiving or Christmas after a death can be especially painful.

So can the second, the fifth, or a holiday many years later when an unexpected memory brings tears.

Grief does not follow a calendar.

There is no deadline by which the holidays must become easy again.

And there may always be a moment when you look across the room and wish, with all your heart, that someone was still there.

But over time, something meaningful can happen.

The memory that once brought only tears may begin to bring a smile.

A familiar Christmas song may remind you less of the day someone died and more of the wonderful years you shared.

A favorite recipe may become an opportunity to laugh about the person who taught you to make it.

The empty chair may never feel entirely ordinary, but the love that once filled it can continue to fill the room in other ways.

Healing does not mean forgetting.

It means learning how to carry love forward, even when the person we love can no longer walk beside us.

This Holiday Season, Give Yourself One More Gift

Whether you are facing your first holiday without someone you love, remembering a loss from many years ago, or spending precious time with someone whose life may be nearing its end, remember this:

You do not have to choose between remembering and celebrating.

You do not have to choose between tears and laughter.

And you do not have to make every moment happy for the holiday to be meaningful.

Allow yourself to feel what you feel.

Speak the names of those you miss. Tell their stories. Prepare their favorite foods. Hold the people who are still with you a little closer.

If someone you love is nearing the end of life, make room for meaningful moments now, without demanding that they be perfect.

And when an unexpected moment of happiness arrives, welcome it.

Because perhaps one of the most beautiful ways to honor someone we have lost is to continue experiencing the very things that made life with them so wonderful.

We cannot always choose who will be with us around the holiday table. But we can choose how we remember those who once sat beside us.

Let their memory bring more than sadness.

Let it bring gratitude for the years you shared, laughter for the moments you enjoyed, and love that continues long after goodbye.

And perhaps, when this holiday season has passed, you will discover that alongside the sadness, you have created something else worth carrying into the years ahead.

A new memory. A meaningful tradition. A moment of peace.

And the comforting realization that although someone you love is no longer present in the way you wish they could be, the love you shared remains very much a part of your life.

At MyPrePlanning.com, we believe that remembering a life is about more than acknowledging its ending. It is about honoring the relationships, experiences, traditions, and love that made that life meaningful. Through thoughtful conversations, compassionate planning, and the preservation of treasured memories, we can help ensure that the stories of those we love continue to enrich the generations that follo