

# HOPE FOR THE HOLIDAYS

*Hospice by John Knox Village  
Bereavement Workbook*



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“How can I get through the holidays?” This question is commonly asked by bereaved people at this time of year. Without a doubt, the holidays can be difficult for those who have recently experienced the death of a loved one. They can bring feelings of sadness, loss, and emptiness, rather than joy and togetherness.

The Hospice Foundation of America suggests these guiding principles: Do what is comfortable, and discover what is right for you. With flexibility and foresight, you can find your way through to the new year. In brief:

- **Plan ahead.** Be aware that this might be a difficult time for you, and be prepared for the additional physical, emotional and mental stresses; these are normal reactions.
- **Anticipate the changes you will need to make.** Recognize that holidays will simply not be the same. If you try to keep everything as it was, you will likely be disappointed. By choosing to do things a bit differently, you can acknowledge the change in your life, while also preserving continuity with the past.
- **Be careful not to isolate yourself.** It is good to take time for yourself, but do not cut yourself off from the support of family and friends. This loss affects more people than just you. Be aware of the effect of the holidays on family members. Discuss plans. Respect their choices and needs. Be open to compromise.

This workbook contains ideas to help you manage your way through the season. The “ABC’s of Coping,” and the “Holiday Self-Care Checklist” are tools you can use to guide you through possible changes to routines and traditions.



**GRIEF TRIGGERS:** are anything that brings up memories related to a loss. They can thrust you into memories that arise spontaneously and can result in a wide variety of emotions. After the death of someone, many people, places, and things that are associated with special days such as birthdays, anniversaries and holidays become grief triggers. Be aware that these memories are **triggered** by a sight, sound, song, smell, word or even touch. Using the ABCs of Coping will help you anticipate **holiday triggers** and and plan in advance.



# ABC's of COPING

## Adapt Routines

Traditions are patterns and routines born out of cultural examples and family practices. The death and absence of a person may change the “flavor” of the holiday. Just as there is no person who can easily replace your loved one, some of the habits and activities enjoyed in the past may not happen or may look different this year. In past years, family members from several generations may have gathered together in one home, even yours, to share a common meal and participate in group activities such as exchanging presents, singing carols, watching holiday movies or sporting events, or attending an annual event or a religious service. It may be time to evaluate which family traditions to continue, and new ones you would like to begin. **REMEMBER:** This is your adjustment year. What you choose to do this first year does not have to be repeated.

- It takes more effort to implement creative change in holiday planning; but change and adjustment are essential for the bereaved.
- Exploring and thinking about your options and planning will help decrease anxiety and uncertainty about what may happen when the actual holiday arrives.
- You can choose to attend religious services on a different day or time, or to watch on TV or online. Give yourself grace to substitute spiritual music, personal reflection or prayer, at home.
- Meals together are one of the most common activities shared for a holiday. How will this routine change this year? Instead of a traditional holiday dinner, alternative options could include eating outside, eating at a restaurant, or purchasing pre-made individual meals for each family member.
- If separated in different households, infuse some holiday spirit via phone calls or video chats before, during, or after a meal. Include discussions about favorite holiday foods, recipes, or even stories about family events in the past when the beloved family member was still present.
- You may change the way you decorate or choose not to decorate your home at all this year. You can let others help, or perhaps a simple, but visible, decoration in your home will be enough during your first holiday season without that special person.
- If you decide to do holiday shopping, make a list ahead of time and keep it handy for a good day. Gift cards, catalog, and online shopping are other options available to you.
- Find new ways to involve children in the revised traditions. If you are not up to sending out Christmas cards to everyone on your mailing list this year, perhaps you can send handwritten notes of encouragement and love to some of the youngest members of the family. Or consider providing drawing paper, construction paper and stickers or crayons so children can craft personalized cards to family members whom they may not see face to face for the holiday.
- Do what is right for you during the holidays, and structure your time. This will help you anticipate, rather than just react to whatever happens. As you make plans, be flexible and allow yourself to change routines and plans, if needed.

## Be clear about your own needs

Take the time to acknowledge how the death of your loved one has impacted you. Remember, you are going through a physically and emotionally challenging time. Look ahead, so you don't set yourself up for disappointment, guilt or frustration.

- Remember that the process of grief is individual to each person. Respect that, and allow yourself to adjust to the ebbs and flows of the process. Your needs will adjust to your distinct grief journey.
- Grief is the internal response to a loss; mourning is how that reaction is reflected on the outside. While you may think you will be able to do something or participate in an activity, the grief you are experiencing on the inside may decide that you are not up to that undertaking yet, causing you to change your plans accordingly – and sometimes abruptly.
- Honor what feels right to you during the holidays.

## Communicate

Talk about your grief. Don't be afraid or embarrassed to express your feelings about the loss. You will experience emotions during the holiday season. Ignoring your feelings will not make the pain go away.

- Share information about your needs with family members and friends. These needs will reflect your physical and mental state concerning your grief process and experiencing the holiday time without your loved one. Mention that your ability to actively engage in holiday “busyness” may change, which is an important and necessary part of adjustment to loss.
- Decide what you can handle comfortably. Can I participate in all, or most of, the traditions and activities we have enjoyed in the past, or do I need to let some of them go this year and/or pass responsibility to others?
- Encourage discussion among family members about how to be together, if that is possible, and mention that you may find certain activities and rituals difficult this year. Your openness will provide the opportunity for others to think about their own reactions to the holiday without that person and offer them the chance to share, discuss and plan changes that are carefully thought out and supportive of your holiday goals.
- Identify a family member, friend, neighbor, therapist, or member of the clergy who will listen to you and support you as you work your way through the holiday season. Choose someone who will not judge you or tell you how you should feel or what you should or should not do.



## Develop a Strategy

Try to plan as much as possible, even if you don't think you can. There is much in your life right now that has happened to you, beyond your control. The loss you have experienced, and all the resulting changes may have left you feeling powerless and adrift. But there are things you can reclaim, have an opinion about, and prioritize as important to you during the holiday season. Planning and preparation will offer you the opportunity to discern which activities, events and goals will bring you the most meaning and enjoyment for the energy you expend.

- Build in rest periods or opportunities to withdraw from group settings, if you become overwhelmed or exhausted. By alerting others to this possibility in advance, your change of plans will be respected and accepted.
- Rather than buying extravagant gifts for those who also are missing your loved one, consider providing a different type of gift, such as copies of pictures, or family favorite recipes. Items of clothing that belonged to that person can also be used to make stuffed animals, or ornaments, or cut into smaller pieces and placed in a frame with a description of the settings or activities your loved one was engaged in while wearing those garments.
- Consider using money that would have been spent on gifts for your loved one to buy a simple gift you know he or she would have enjoyed, then donate it to a charity in honor of that person.
- Talk to family and friends about purchasing a living tree in honor of your loved one that can be planted in a designated location and visited time and time again.
- Make a list of the things you can be grateful for. This may help if you tend to spend time remembering past holidays and comparing them to this year. It may also put a positive spin on your thinking.
- Set aside time for remembering that special person. Tell a funny story or talk about a special gift your loved one gave you.
- Set a place setting at the table in honor of your loved one or make one of their favorite dishes.
- Find things that are meaningful to you. Some families continue to hang a stocking for their loved one and fill it with messages to be read at a designated time.

## Eliminate Extras

Eliminate extras and unnecessary stress – you may already feel anxious or overwhelmed about the holiday. Sometimes our own high expectations about the holidays may increase the pain and frustration, so be kind and gentle with yourself, and remember you are grieving. If you are more realistic about what you can and want to do this year, you will find opportunities to enjoy some of the season and smile through the tears.

- Respect what your mind and body are telling you and take time to rest during the fast-paced holiday season. Don't overextend yourself. Feelings of loss may wear you out and leave you fatigued. Taking time to rest will refresh your mind, body and spirit during a challenging time.
- Avoid committing yourself to doing more than you have the physical and mental energy to handle. It is okay to say no. Let people know that by declining their offer now, it does not mean you will do so in the future.
- Pace yourself. By not trying to replicate holidays in the past, you can be patient and realistic.
- Make all your yeses "tentative" and subject to change.

## Find Joy

Allow the tears to come, but look for joy amidst the pain. When memories of previous years come flooding back, ask yourself what was special about that time that you would always like to remember. If you are able, share those treasured times with others. People around you will look to you for clues about your willingness to talk about the person who is gone, as a guide for their own behavior. Talking is an important piece of your grief journey. The pain becomes less sharp as we share it with other people, and you can build your own “story” about your shared life and love before the loss. You will be able to revise this collection of images, memories and ideas as time goes on, and pick out which pieces you wish to share with those you will encounter.

- Do not deny yourself the opportunity to spend time with others, in person or via other mediums, and enjoy their company and encouragement. Your loved one would want to see you smiling and happy with the love and peace that comes when you are connected to others.
- What are some of the experiences and activities that bring you joy during the holiday season? Maybe it is listening to familiar songs that elevate your mood. Do you have a special food item that is meaningful? Don't feel up to making it? Consider purchasing it or ordering it from a restaurant or online vendor. If you like the smells of the holiday season, go ahead and bring out the candles, the room diffusers, etc. that remind you of joyful times.
- Stay in the present moment as much as possible. Enjoy the special moments and allow yourself to smile and laugh, even when you don't think you can or should.
- Open yourself up to the possibility that there may be times when you are able to smile, share conversation with someone and maybe even laugh. You may cry at times, but the tears are a release and a reminder that many thoughts of your loved one are rooted in a life and relationship worth keeping close to your heart.

## GIVE THANKS

This final ABC of Coping is a reminder that there will still be many moments and actions to appreciate during this holiday season, and throughout the years to come. The cards you receive, the words of concern and support, and the offers to help, reflect your importance to those around you. You have done so for others, when they celebrated and when they faced challenges, and now it's your turn to be the receiver of compassion. You may use some of this time to reflect, learn new things about yourself, and memorialize your loved one by sharing stories and highlights from a life well-lived, remembering that hope for that future lies just around the corner.



## Holiday Self-Care Checklist

It is time to create an action plan. By completing this worksheet, you will begin to establish priorities.

### Holiday Cards

- Mail as usual
- Shorten your list
- Send a holiday letter
- Skip it this year
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

### Holiday Music

- Enjoy as usual
- Avoid holiday music
- Listen and allow yourself to cry
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

### Decorations

- Decorate a tree
- Decorate the inside as usual
- Decorate the outside as usual
- Modify/change
- Ask for help
- Let others do it
- Include special decoration for deceased
- Eliminate decorations
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

### Food

- Prepare as usual
- Change routine slightly
- Change menu
- Go out to eat
- Have food catered/delivered
- Eat alone
- Change time for dinner
- Change location of dinner
- "Dine online" with family or friends (Schedule Facetime, Skype, Zoom or conference call during mealtime.)
- Get together without a meal
- Ask for help
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

### Shopping

- Shop early
- Shop as usual
- Give cash
- Shop catalogs/online
- Ask others to shop
- Make your gifts
- Give baked goods
- Get help wrapping gifts
- Exchange gifts after the holiday
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

### Traditions

- Keep traditions the same
- Modify traditions this year
- Go out of town
- Bake the usual holiday foods
- Modify baking
- Attend religious service as usual
- Attend religious service online/TV
- Do not attend religious service this year
- Attend, but at a different time or place
- Spend quiet time alone
- Visit the cemetery
- Open gifts as usual
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

### Post-Christmas & New Year's Eve

- Spend as usual
- Spend time with friends
- Go out of town
- Avoid New Year's Eve
- Write in your journal
- See a movie
- Go to bed early
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_



**What other aspects of the holidays are a concern for you?**

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**How can you plan or prepare for this concern?**

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**What would you like to do this year?**

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*Hope begins in the dark; the stubborn hope that if you just show up and try to do the right thing, the dawn will come. You wait and watch; and work; you **DON'T GIVE UP**"*

**Anne Lamott**



## BE KIND TO YOURSELF.

Eventually, this first season without your loved one will be complete. And you will have traveled through it and come out on the other side of it. Be kind to yourself. Be patient. Be open to what happens. And be aware of the new "firsts" happening all around you as you continue your journey in the new year.

I wish you peace. And hope.

**If you find that you need someone to talk with, you may contact us directly at 816-347-2585.**

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