

*Love and Loss*

*Holidays and Grief*



**Understanding Grief at the Holidays  
to Help Yourself and Others Who Grieve**

# Grief and Loss

Grief is universal, but it is also unique. It is ultimately personal. Your grief is unique to you. No one has the right to tell you how to grieve or how to cope with your situation.

**Grief is NOT** an illness or disease that needs to be cured, or being broken like a toy that needs to be fixed.

**Grief IS** the feelings we have in response to the death of the one we love. Grief is an expression of feelings such as intense sadness, anger, numbness, confusion and devastation.

At the center of grief is pain, the pain of a broken heart.

*“Daddy, my heart is broken, it’s cracked in half.  
And Josh’s name is written on the crack.”*

*—Caring Place participant*



The absence of the presence of our loved one is overwhelming—an absence that shouts so loud that nothing else can be heard; an absence so blinding that nothing else can be seen.

*“At some point ... your grief may be so all-encompassing that you wonder how the rest of the world can continue to function. You will marvel that buses are running, telephones are ringing, newspapers are being delivered, and people are eating meatball sandwiches. Meanwhile you feel that you’ve been swallowed up by a whirlpool.”*

*—Elizabeth Mehren*

The death of the one we love changes us and changes our lives. Everything is different.

Life seems to have become one loss after another. With the death of a spouse, for example, we face the loss of our loved one. Then we discover the loss of companionship, the loss of parenting together, the loss of feeling known and accepted.

Further losses pile on top of these losses. We find the loss of self, of our identity, the person we knew ourselves to be before the death. Ultimately life itself has changed—there is the loss of the life we knew.

**Nothing is the same:**

- We have lost the one we love
- We have lost ourselves as the person we were
- We have lost the life we knew

These losses can be overwhelming—draining us. We want our loved one BACK; we want ourselves BACK; we want the life we had BACK.

*“The presence of that absence is everywhere.”*

*—Edna St. Vincent Millay*

## *Grief and Love*

We grieve because we loved (and love still) and were loved. Grief is born from the loss of a love relationship. At the heart of grief are the feelings of missing our loved one and longing for their presence. Grief only comes to those who love and have opened their hearts to love.

*“To love is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken.” —C.S. Lewis*

The way to protect ourselves from grief is not to love anyone—not even a pet. Grief is rooted in love.

Grieving is allowing the pain of our losses to enter into our hearts. True healing begins at the moment we can face the reality of our losses and broken-heartedness.

It takes courage to know our wounds and to feel our wounds and our sorrow. But in that courage, we find the freedom to cry in anguish, or to shout in protest. As we journey in grief we discover that while death has taken our loved one from us, the love lives on inside us.

*“What we have once enjoyed and deeply loved we can never lose, for all that we love deeply becomes a part of us.” —Helen Keller*

# *Grief and the Holidays*

Holidays and other special days intensify the grief, intensify the pain that is felt every day, the already painful feelings of sorrow, sadness, anger and loneliness. Holidays remind us of our losses and of the empty space in our hearts.

*“I’m reluctant to admit that it gets harder every year—because every year is a painful reminder that my husband is not here, and then he’s still not here, and he’s not here yet again.”*

*—Caring Place parent*

Holidays are important because of the meaning we give them. A holiday is a day that has special meaning for us and our family.

Holidays can make us feel out of sync with the world around us. As everyone else (we think) is enjoying life and family, we experience the coldness of our grief and longing.

*“The second year was harder than the first. There was more numbness the first year. Now that I’m out of that fog, I feel the pain more intensely. The first year, everything was a blur. This year, I’m more aware of the loneliness. I guess she really is not coming back.”*

*—Caring Place parent*

Although holidays and special days do occur throughout the year, many holidays cluster together at the end of Fall and the beginning of Winter. This season is so full of reminders that the atmosphere and the anticipation are heightened—and the pain of grief can be as well. These holidays are so public. Everyone is aware that it’s the holiday season. No other time of year evokes such strong images of family togetherness.

*“I wish I could turn the calendar from October to January.”*

*—Caring Place parent*

The holidays become a continual reminder of the absence of the person who died and that nagging sense of someone missing—or something missing from our lives.

*“It’s been four years since my husband died, and this is the first holiday we could exhale and it didn’t hurt.”*

*—Caring Place parent*

The compounding of our losses continues during the holidays. We feel the loss of our loved one on this special day, the loss of companionship on this special day, the loss of our selves, our identity, as we once knew ourselves on this special day, the loss of life as we once knew it on this special day.

*“I haven’t felt like myself since my husband died. It takes a lot for me just to get out of bed in the morning. But I have to get the kids off to school. After that, I’m so drained. Now that the holidays are here, I don’t know if I have the energy to get through it all.”* —Caring Place parent



The losses continue to pile up. We face the loss of the holiday like it used to be, the loss of (some of) the traditions and rituals that used to make the day so special, so meaningful, the loss of dreams, plans, expectations, and hopes.

Holidays intensify the loss of the life we knew.

The holidays can serve as a reminder of how things are not the same. The life we knew is gone. What is normal now is to feel the apprehension, the dread and the numbness as we seek to function or even wonder what our life might be.

However many years it has been since the loved one died, the holidays will not be the same.

*“The fact that our son will never again share the holidays with us; never again open presents with us; never again enjoy the holiday meal with us—it is that NEVER AGAIN that is so painful to bear.”*

—Caring Place parent

We know in our heads that the person is gone, but it takes much longer to take in the enormity of their absence in our hearts. “The longest journey we’ll ever have to take is the journey from our head to our heart.”

In grief, this is a long and painful journey. We must grieve, acknowledge and feel the loss of our loved one, the loss of ourselves, the loss of life as we knew it.

*“The best way is always through.”* —Robert Frost

# Helping Yourself At the Holidays

Grief does not take a holiday, even at the holidays. During this time, it is still important to accept the reality of our losses and express our feelings about those losses.

During the holiday season, it's important that we take care of ourselves. Like on an airplane, when we're told to place the oxygen mask on ourselves first, and then help the children in our care, it's vitally important to take care of our own needs.

*“Compassion for myself is the most powerful healer of them all.”*

*—Theodore Isaac Rubin*

For healing, it's important to have a safe space to mourn our losses. And it's important to find a safe person to share our feelings and to remember our loved one with. It is difficult to mourn alone.

*“Give sorrow words...” —William Shakespeare*

Ignoring our feelings won't make them go away. Healing comes through embracing our memories and sharing them with people we trust, and acknowledging the loss and the feelings we have about the loss.

*“Tears and sadness are as much a part of the holiday as other festivities. Tears are a visible testament to the enormity of loss. They are not cause for shame, and are never to be discouraged or ridiculed.” —Clare Petersberger*



At holidays, we need to make room for our feelings: both sadness and gratitude. The two go together—we are sad because we are grateful for someone whose love we shared.

Life isn't either/or—joy or sorrow; sadness or gratitude. They exist together. We have gratitude in sadness because in grieving our loved one we realize with both our head and heart that we have been blessed to have a love relationship; blessed to know that love lives on inside us; and, blessed that our loved one is always a part of us. Always.

*“When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight.” —Khalil Gibran*

# *Helping Someone In Grief At the Holidays*

We can give special gifts to those who are grieving at the holidays. The gifts we can give include:

- Not barricading ourselves from their grief
- Being with them just to be with them
- Listening to them
- Remembering their loved one
- Mentioning their loved one by name
- Empathizing with their pain at the holidays—and beyond
- Supporting them in their grief journey however they choose to grieve

Your compassionate presence may be the best present a grieving person receives.

## *The Journey of Grief*

Grieving is a difficult, difficult journey. The holidays (and the anticipation of the holidays) make this difficult, difficult journey even tougher.

We must make this journey ourselves—each of us—but we need others to support us on the journey of grief.

*“You alone can do it, but you cannot do it alone.”  
—O. Hobart Mowrer*

The journey of grief continues, through the seasons, throughout the year, throughout the holidays.

We need to remember that our grief is important. Grief is born out of giving and receiving love. At the holidays especially, we need to not let anyone take our grief away—we need to remember to be kind to ourselves.

A companion brochure, *Coping With Grief At the Holidays* is also available through the Caring Place.

## *About the Highmark Caring Place*

The Highmark Caring Place is dedicated to children and their families who have experienced the death of a family member.

The services are free of charge to the families.

The Caring Place is a safe place with safe people where children and families can know that they are not alone in their grief, share their feelings and experiences in an atmosphere of acceptance, see that what they are going through is normal, and know that hope and healing are possible.

At the Caring Place, children and adults receive encouragement and support from other children and adults who have experienced the same types of losses. Through the meetings they discover what is lost, what is left, and what is possible.



A Center for Grieving Children,  
Adolescents and Their Families

1-866-212-4673

[www.highmarkcaringplace.com](http://www.highmarkcaringplace.com)