

Holiday HEALING:

Tips for Getting Through Your First Holiday After Losing a Loved One

According to the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC), approximately 2.5 million people die each year in the United States. Each of those 2.5 million people has someone who will mourn their loss this year.

"Grief often gets worse or even revives during the holidays, especially the first holiday season after a loss," explains **Psychotherapist Ann Herrold-Peterson, LCSW, BCD**, from Dean Health System. "People don't really know how to handle it."

As the holiday season moves into high gear, the team of providers in Dean's Psychiatry Department offers its support and guidance for those going through this difficult transition.

Your Personal Grief Journey

"The most important thing to remember is that grief is a journey," Ms. Herrold-Peterson reassures. "Everyone's grief journey is on a different schedule. There's no right or wrong way to experience grief, cope with grief or express your grief."

She suggests the following strategies to ultimately respect and honor your own feelings and the feelings of those around you during this holiday season.

- * **Pay attention to your own needs first.** "I realize this sounds very simplistic, but it's something people often forget," reinforces Herrold-Peterson. "People can get so lost in preparing for the holidays and in doing for others that they forget to take care of themselves." She suggests simple things like getting enough rest, eating properly and asking for help if necessary.
- * **Surround yourself with the right people.** "We all have a variety of people in our network of friends and family who fulfill different needs," explains Herrold-Peterson. "It will help to be around others who are empathic and supportive."
- * **Have realistic expectations.** "Give yourself permission to let go of some of the high expectations you have for yourself," urges Herrold-Peterson. "Right now, you're beginning to re-define yourself in the world without that other person, and that takes some work."
- * **Be flexible.** "If you make a commitment, and then when the time comes you just can't,

be flexible enough with yourself to admit it," advises Herrold-Peterson. "Most people will understand."

- * **Keep a journal.** "Sometimes people find it helpful to write their thoughts in a journal," shares Herrold-Peterson. "It's a way to listen more carefully to your own needs and feelings. Journaling also offers an opportunity for people to see the progress of their grief journey over time." Another option is to write a letter to the person who has died. Address it to that person and share with them what you are experiencing. These tools provide a way to get some of your feelings out, especially if you have no one else to talk to.
- * **Accept your emotions, whatever they may be.** "It's important to remember that the full range of emotions is normal throughout the grieving process," says Herrold-Peterson. "That includes sadness, anger and confusion, but also happiness and humor." This may be especially important to remember during the holidays, when there can still be much to celebrate and enjoy.

Helping Each Other

It can often be extremely difficult to help someone you love go through their grief journey, especially if you are grieving the same loss. Ann Herrold-Peterson has some additional thoughts for friends and families to help each other throughout the process.

- * **Respect each other's separate needs.** Each member of the family may have a different idea about how to best manage getting through the holiday traditions and celebrations. "Try to let go of trying to please everyone," Herrold-Peterson explains. "Compromise when you can and make room for individual differences."
- * **Allow for change.** "Family traditions can take on a life of their own," shares Herrold-Peterson. She suggests finding ways to keep the essence of your family traditions, but to consider ways to change where it makes sense. Making changes, and yet finding time to share memories, may be a good way to give voice to what everyone is thinking. It also offers a positive way to connect through your shared grief.
- * **Avoid making assumptions.** "People tend to make assumptions about what others need," says Herrold-Peterson. "But since grief is such an individual process, people are often at different points along the journey." For example, one person may want to talk about

their loss and the person they miss. In the same situation, another person may want to talk about **something else** for a while, so that **everything** in their life isn't defined by that loss. Herrold-Peterson suggests simple communication. "Ask each other: **help me understand what you need and what is best for you right now.**"

Moving Forward

Ann Herrold-Peterson reminds us that grieving is a process – a journey – that sometimes comes with roadblocks.

"It's time to get some help when you just feel stuck," she shares. Initial suggestions might be joining a local grief support group, reading a book on grieving, or turning to your church community. "Remember that grief and depression can look very much alike. If you have persistent difficulty with sleeping, appetite and mood, or lose interest in things, it might be time to consult your physician or a mental health professional."

"It makes a big difference when you can talk to someone without having to please or take care of the other person," she explains. As a therapist feel that it's an honor to walk along with people on their journey through grief toward healing." "We can help. You don't have to keep feeling stuck."

If you would like more information about **Dean's Psychiatry Department** visit: deancare.com

Let's Talk Health

Managing Migraines & Holiday Headaches

Wednesday, December 3
Presentation 6-7 pm, Screenings 7-8:30 pm
West Clinic, River & Savannah Rooms
Madison, WI

'Tis' the season for a few extra headaches, but what if you suffer from migraines year-round? **Mary Dominski, MD** discusses the differences between common headaches and migraines and explains the symptoms of each. Get a-head of the game and find relief!

Private, complimentary migraine screenings will be available following the presentation until 8:30 p.m. The presentation is open to all and is sponsored by Dean Foundation.

Reservations for the presentation and screening are suggested by calling **(608) 250-1119**. Space is limited, so register now!

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