

## Living with grief...helpful choices

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Acknowledge your grief, give yourself time and space to feel and remember.

Tell your story-talk, write, draw, paint, sound record, video your story.

Keep a journal or diary. Writing your thoughts and feelings in a letter you don't post, can be very healing.

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## GRIEF at Christmas



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# Coping with grief at Christmas

Christmas and the holiday season for people who have experienced death of someone they love, is often far from a time of peace, happiness and goodwill. People who have not experienced a significant bereavement may not understand the incredible yearning, sadness, and anger that can intensify around significant anniversaries and rituals such as Christmas. In our community there is a strong sense that all grief and feelings of loss should be put aside over this time, that you are letting the side down, spoiling it for everyone else if you let people know how you really feel.

The 'enforced joyousness' can cause even more stress and heartache, as the grieving person feels a failure because they can't just put on a brave face. Most people who are grieving cannot simply shake off their grief. They may be able to hide their true feelings but at what cost? Often this added stress is the last straw and depression can set in, or as a number of bereaved people have said they 'explode'.

For many bereaved people, Christmas is a time of heartache and stress as the realities of their new life become painfully obvious. For those who are grieving, their loss is often denied or avoided in an attempt to make Christmas perfect for others. The pressure of playing happy families with families that are far from happy can be extremely distressing.

## Christmas can still be special.

Memories of Christmases past can still be sweet but the reality of the empty chair at the Christmas lunch, or not having the person squeeze your hand during mid-night Mass is painful. Christmas will never be the same after the death of someone dear to you. By acknowledging your loss and sometimes changing the way things are done, that is, the rituals around this time, surviving the Christmas season may be made easier.

'Coping with Christmas' has much to do with challenging your expectations of the 'perfect' Christmas. It is important to acknowledge that you are not totally responsible for others' happiness, but also that they cannot assist you if they are not aware of your pain or concerns. Be gentle with yourself, trying not to expect too much of yourself or those around you makes good sense, but often needs planning.

Christmas is traditionally seen as a time to spend with family and close friends. This can highlight the fact that a special person is not there. The traditions of Christmas such as, Christmas carols and gift giving, family and partner togetherness, Christmas parties and functions, church services, can give the impression that everyone else is happy except you. You may need to challenge the 'Brady Bunch' vision of families at Christmas and find a way of experiencing Christmas that has meaning for you...for some it may mean not celebrating at all.

## Coping Strategies

- Do something special in memory of the person who has died.
- Light a special candle to burn during the day or during the Christmas meal.
- Make or buy a special decoration to hang on the tree in memory.
- Make a toast to the person, share anecdotes. Don't be afraid to laugh as you remember some of the good times.
- Play a special song or music.
- Write a letter or a card to the person who has died, don't be concerned if you want to talk out loud to them...do it.
- Some bereaved parents buy a small gift for the age their child would be had they lived and put it under the tree at one of the charity, church or supermarket trees.

- Some people like to visit the graveside or a special location to sit and remember.
  - Plan your time so that you are under as little stress as possible. Plan your 'escape' if need be, don't over commit. Rehearse a simple explanation of why you may not attend a function.
  - Ask for some assistance with preparations including going shopping—many people experience panic attacks in supermarkets. If this is a problem for you, learn some simple breathing techniques to assist with the panic and take someone as support when you go out—the panic will settle with time.
  - You may need to change the routine and the traditional way you do things. Perhaps have a picnic lunch, go bush, go to the beach, change the venue spend it quietly, go to a different church service, help out at a charity lunch.
  - Let your friends and family know that you need to take things slow and that may mean taking each day as it comes.
  - Share the memories with someone else, the photos and the stories. You may cry and you may laugh, it is much healthier for you to express your feelings then push it all down.
  - Seek professional help if needed. Counselling and help phone lines are in the white pages.
  - Do something special for yourself—treat yourself to a massage, indulge in a favourite food, buy yourself a present.
  - Ensure some quiet time to if you want to you can simply sit with your memories and your grief.
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