

A Guide for Parents Navigating the Holidays after the Death of a Child

The holiday season is usually a time of joy, but for parents who have lost a child, it can also bring deep sadness and pain. The usual traditions and celebrations can feel overwhelming. While no guide can make the pain go away, there are ways to get through the holidays with kindness to yourself. Here are some helpful ideas for parents during this tough time.

1. Acknowledge Your Grief

Holidays can make the loss feel even harder. It's important to allow yourself to grieve. Don't feel pressured to "move on" or "get back to normal." Your grief is personal. It's okay to cry, feel sad, or not want to join in the celebrations. Be kind to yourself and understand that your grief may look different from others.

2. Honor Your Child's Memory

Remembering your child during the holidays can help keep the love and bond alive. Some parents choose to create new traditions or continue old ones in memory of their child. Here are some ideas:

- Light a candle for your child during a meal or special moment.
- Create a memory box or an ornament that represents your child.
- Make a donation in your child's name or take part in a charity event they cared about.
- Write letters to your child, sharing your feelings, and either read them aloud or keep them in a special place.

3. Consider Talking About Your Child

If you're comfortable, talking about your child during the holidays can help keep their memory alive. Sharing stories, remembering special moments, or simply saying their name can help you stay connected. It can also help others understand and support you. Talking about your child can be healing for both you and those around you.

4. Reach Out for Support

The holidays can feel lonely, especially if others don't fully understand your grief. It's important to seek support when you need it. This could be through support groups for grieving parents, counselors, friends, family, or faith-based groups. Speaking to others who have experienced similar loss can provide comfort and make you feel less alone. You can also contact the psychosocial professional(s) who knew your child, or reach out to the MCH Bereavement Program (lechildrensdeuil@muhc.mcgill.ca) for help.

5. Find Meaning in the Season

For some parents, the holidays can be a time to find new meaning or purpose. You might consider volunteering, connecting with others who are grieving, or finding small ways to practice gratitude. Some parents feel that supporting a cause or helping others in memory of their child gives their child's life more meaning.

6. Don't Let Others Dictate How You Should Feel

Grief is different for everyone, and no one knows how you feel better than you do. During the holidays, friends or family may suggest how you should cope with your loss. Remember, there is no "right" or "wrong" way to grieve. Your feelings are valid, and only you can decide what feels best for you.

Here are some things to keep in mind when others offer advice:

- **Set boundaries gently:** If someone tries to tell you how to act or feel, it's okay to say something like, "I appreciate your concern, but I'm working through my grief in my own way."
- **Don't accept judgment:** Sometimes, others might say things like, "You need to move on" or "You're not handling it well." These comments may come from a place of discomfort, but they are not helpful. Everyone's grief is different, and you don't have to listen to comments that feel judgmental.
- **Communicate when you're ready:** If you want, let others know that grieving the loss of a child, especially during the holidays, is hard. You don't have to explain everything, but it can help them understand that you are honoring your own grief.

There's no single way to grieve, especially at the holidays. By respecting your own feelings, setting boundaries, and not letting others tell you how to grieve, you can make it through this time with more peace. Your journey through grief is yours alone, and only you can decide what's right for you.