

## Holiday Helps for Grieving Families

*Between Thanksgiving and Christmas, the days become very difficult for those who have lost loved ones. It is harder still when the loved one has died close to the holidays. When it is the first Christmas without a loved one, it can become a dreaded and sometimes unbearable time for the family. At this time, a person's emotions are the most tender.*

In just a moment's time, memories of past holidays can come flooding into the mind. Just hearing a Christmas carol in the shopping mall or putting special ornaments on the tree can bring floods of tears. It seems that tapes of happy Christmases from the past flash through a person's thoughts as he or she tries to rest or sleep. The tears that come are healing tears, but the survivor does not look at them that way. He or she only wants to escape the days of memories ahead.

When a child has died, it seems the memories are the hardest. Parents may have experienced months and possibly years of dealing with terminal illness. Or it may have been the shocking reality that comes after an accident, murder or suicide. It seems that Christmas looms in front of a person as a day that will be impossible to face. Even after several years, the holidays will still bring times of sadness and tears. It seems that when the holiday itself is over, usually the survivor will breathe a sigh of relief and go on with the days ahead, but that one "day" and the emotions it brings are almost unbearable.

### **How friends can help**

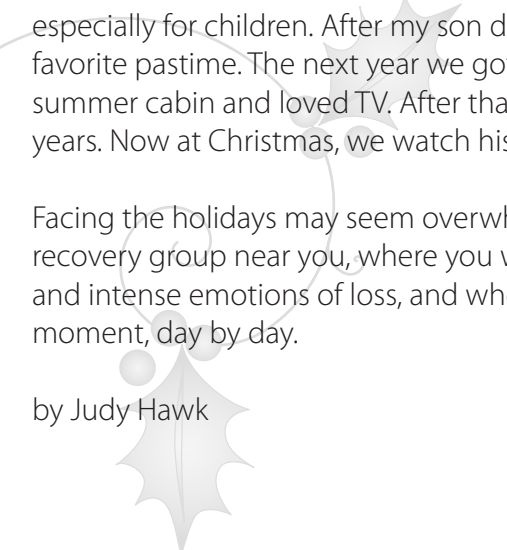
From the perspective of a survivor, I can only say that each individual finds his or her own way to get through this period of time. Friends and sometimes family cannot understand what the survivor feels or what he or she needs. The best kind of friends will remember to do little things, like sending notes, perhaps sending flowers and bringing gifts of food. One of the last things a woman wants to do after losing her loved one is to cook or bake. Christmas baking is very difficult, and the grieving person has a hard time thinking of food preparation. Gifts of baked goods, casseroles and sandwich "fixins" are always welcome.

Christmas dinner can be held at a relative's home, or everyone may want to go out to eat together. Let the family decide, but remember the one who is grieving may have difficulty fixing that familiar Christmas dinner, so relatives can offer alternatives; however, if the family wants the traditional dinner at home, then honor their desires and support them.

Short phone calls mean a lot. Usually a friend only needs to ask the person how he or she is doing. Remember, if you are the friend giving the phone call, it is very important that you mention the loved one by name. You may even be able to share a memory you have of that person. Don't be afraid to talk about the loved one. The survivor doesn't want to forget the loved one, and he or she doesn't want you to forget the person either. Try not to ask what you can do to help. The survivor will usually say that everything is fine. The best thing for you to do, as a friend or family member, is to go ahead on your own and do something thoughtful, such as bringing in food, sending a card, volunteering to watch the children, etc. Sometimes the person won't even know that there is washing or ironing to do until you come into the home and offer to take the ironing or run the vacuum.

### **How you can help your family**


It is a healthy thing for families to talk about what they want to do with their holidays. If there are small children, usually some attempt to put up a tree and decorations are important. But if the survivor does not want to do this, let someone else help put up the tree with the children involved. Some families will buy an ornament that brings a memory of the loved one and put it on the tree. Then each year they will add another. This is very healing



especially for children. After my son died, we bought an ornament with Santa Claus fishing, which was our son's favorite pastime. The next year we got Santa lying in a hammock watching TV. Robert loved the hammock at our summer cabin and loved TV. After that year we bought an ornament that reminded us of him for several more years. Now at Christmas, we watch his sons hold the ornaments, and we talk about their dad.

Facing the holidays may seem overwhelming and even impossible. Please take the time to find a GriefShare grief recovery group near you, where you will have the chance to spend time with people who know the deep pain and intense emotions of loss, and where you will learn how to grieve in a way that is healthy, moment by moment, day by day.

by Judy Hawk



To find a GriefShare group near you, visit [www.griefshare.org](http://www.griefshare.org) or call 800-395-5755.