



THE AFTER A DEATH SERIES

When Holidays Come

No matter what time of the year, no matter what the weather or season, one holiday follows on the heels of another. Thanksgiving turkeys race Halloween pumpkins while the New Year baby sits and looks at the Christmas tree or watches a lighted menorah. The Easter bunny chases St. Paddy's Day leprechauns holding Valentine hearts while Fourth of July fireworks light up Labor Day. And that's not all there is to torture us while we grieve. We have personal anniversaries – the death anniversary – birthdays and special occasions held in our hearts.

"My best friend's husband died. I called her on the first day of hunting season to say I remembered how he loved to hunt. She was sitting on the basement stairs holding his hunting boots and crying." Holidays aren't all red and green. The blues are there, too.

Sometimes the period leading up to the holiday or anniversary can actually be worse than the day itself. Luckily, there are some things you can do that may help.

■ Recognize your feelings and confusion

You may say, feel and think:

- *I don't want to go.*
- *I don't want to ruin it for everybody else.*
- *They want me to act as if nothing happened.*
- *What if I can't help crying?*
- *They say it's time to move on and enjoy the holiday. I'm not ready yet.*

These are intense feelings and it helps to have a strategy, to plan ahead.

■ Change traditions if it fits you

Think through some of the complications of holiday bereavement. Decide beforehand who will do what. Make small or big changes according to your needs and your feelings.

"Jim carves the turkey now that Dad's gone, but we keep Dad's chair empty, his favorite sweater draped over the back and a framed photo of him at his place. We lift our glasses and toast his memory. I let it be known that I might cry and that was okay. I'd stop after a little while. For some reason, after all the planning, I didn't cry and I had a very comforting day."

One family whose son killed himself went on a trip for the holiday instead of spending it at home. Others have put up a tree and each family member made one ornament to hang on it. No lights or other decorations adorned their First Year Tree.

■ Develop a new community

If you are alone over any holiday that means something to you, invite other grievers to join you. They don't have to stay all day if they have other plans. Ask them in for a quick cup of holiday tea and a hug.

Several grievers volunteer for a special event on holidays that are hard to avoid. It may be serving a meal for the homeless shelter or visiting a care center. Be as active as you want, and if you'd rather spend the day alone journaling or listening to soft music, claim that choice as yours as well.

■ Commemorate your loved one

In addition to doing something special to recognize your loved one and your loss, such as lighting a candle that

day, you can make a Valentine donation to a center for grieving children or volunteer at a heart center, donate some green (money) to your love's favorite charity on St. Patrick's Day, and at Christmas or Hanukkah many families buy clothing in their loved one's size and donate it to a shelter.

Your funeral home personnel are likely to know of special services held during the holidays and may have one themselves. They are also likely to know of volunteer opportunities in your community. Local churches and synagogues have special events that may help during holidays. Most importantly, consider what feels right.

■ Gift yourself at any holiday

- Pamper yourself. If you're into bubble baths, make one really special.
- Rest and relax. If you need a nap, take one. Join a meditation class.
- Reward yourself. It may be breakfast in bed or a movie or some other small treat.
- Cry when you need to cry. It's not your job to take care of everyone else.
- Tend your spirit. Each day write down or notice at least one thing that brings you comfort and one thing that brings you joy.

Holidays are so-called because they are thought of as Holy Days. Grief is a holy, spiritual experience. Ask yourself what you need and what you want to do that will soothe you physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Do that which really does bring you a measure of comfort and joy.