

## It Happens Every Year

It happens every year, and every year the suggestions, lists and invitations start coming from friends and family, how can I survive the holidays this year? We are running around with packages, going to events all while wondering, “how can I possibly get through these holidays without my loved one?”. We live in a society that expects us to get over our grief, move along and stop thinking about our sadness.

I can clearly remember the first Christmas without my mother. We lived in a small community in the Ottawa Valley and my father, sister and I were not looking forward to this time of year at all. Everything was different, forever changed and unknown. How were we supposed to carry on traditions when she was not here? Being only sixteen at the time, I was scared of this new world without my mom, wondering how she managed all the relatives, presents and schedules. I had no clue how much effort went into the holiday preparations.

We did many things that were expected of us that first year. Then, we realized that each one of us grieved differently and at different times. In the following years we learned to listen to each other and our hearts. No one could plan the holidays for us. We needed to do things, to remember, laugh, cry and reflect in our own way, individually and as a family. We were all learning this “new normal”.

When we have lost a loved one, memories come pouring into our minds and we become overwhelmed with every emotion particularly during the holiday season.

Dr. Alan Wolfelt is an internationally noted author, educator and grief counsellor who is committed to helping people mourn well so they can live well and love well.

He makes these suggestions for the holiday season:

1. Love does not end with death. “Holidays may result in a renewed sense of personal grief, a feeling of loss unlike that experienced in the routine of daily living. All around you the sounds, sights and smells trigger memories of the loved one.”
2. Talk about your grief. “Don’t be afraid to express your feelings of grief. Ignoring your grief won’t make the pain go away and talking about it openly often makes you feel better.”
3. Be tolerant of your physical and psychological limits. “Feelings of loss will probably leave you fatigued. Your energy level may naturally slow you down. Respect what your body and mind are telling you.”
4. Eliminate unnecessary stress. “Don’t over extend yourself. Avoid isolating yourself, but be sure to recognize the need to have special time for yourself. Don’t take on more than you can do and don’t set expectations too high.”
5. Mention the name of the person who has died. “If you are able to talk candidly, other people are more likely to recognize your need to remember that special person who was an important part of your life.”
6. Plan ahead. “Decide the family traditions you want to continue, and the new ones you would like to begin following the death of a loved one. Structure your holiday time. This will help you anticipate activities.”

7. Embrace your treasure of memories. “Memories are one of the best legacies that exist after the death of someone loved. And holidays always make you think about times past. Instead of ignoring these memories, share them with family and friends.”

(Helping Yourself Heal During the Holiday Season. 2011. Dr. Alan Wolfelt; Companion Press)

Our family is now coming up to the twenty sixth Christmas without my mother, but she remains in our stories, our hearts and in our traditions. There are moments of overwhelming emotions, and also moments of joy and laughter. Things are different. There is a new chapter in our book called life and all we can try to do is put one foot in front of the other, continue to breath and share the stories. In telling my mother’s stories, she lives on in our memories.

If you need more information or assistance in your grief journey please contact Hospice at:

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