



COUNSELING PARTNERS OF LOS ANGELES

MANAGING GRIEF DURING THE HOLIDAYS

PARENT NEWSLETTER



When you've lost someone you love, the year that follows is inevitably a year of firsts without that person. Celebrations like the first Christmas, Thanksgiving, birthday or Mother's Day without someone who played a major role in your and your family's life will be especially hard. This is also true for personal milestones, like graduations and first days of school, many of them involving children. What's the best way to face these days when, rather than feeling festive, you're feeling the loss most keenly?

Depending on the occasion and your grief, you may even be wondering if you should skip the day altogether. Trying to ignore important occasions can also be painful, so that probably isn't the best strategy. For families coping with bereavement, it isn't uncommon to experience moments of joy along with some sorrow on significant days. Thinking ahead of time about how to make the day easier for your family can help.



4 TIPS FOR MANAGING GRIEF DURING THE HOLIDAYS

01 ACKNOWLEDGE EMOTIONS

First, acknowledge that this will likely be a difficult day for your family. Recognizing this is important. Sometimes families — both parents and children — feel they need to put on a brave face when they are feeling sad. But it is okay to feel sad and show grief. “As a rule of thumb, avoidance is a bad idea because it makes us feel worse in the medium and long term,” notes Jamie Howard, a clinical psychologist and director of the Trauma and Resilience Program at the Child Mind Institute, “Our emotions don’t really respond well to being closeted. They find a way out.” Hiding your own grief can also make your children feel like the sadness they may be feeling is bad. However, try not to let children see you at your most upset moments, as they may begin to worry about you or feel insecure. Let the children know that however they are feeling is fine, and they don’t need to hide it. If they want to say, “I really miss him,” that’s okay. On the other hand, kids also shouldn’t feel that they are expected to be miserable all day. It is common and healthy for kids to go in and out of grief, and take comfort in playing. Younger children in particular, who might not realize the significance of the day, will probably want to play and have fun, and that’s fine, too.

02 MAKE A PLAN

Dr. Howard says it’s a good idea to make a plan for how the day will look, and to share that plan with the kids. Making it somewhat predictable, so they know what to expect, who will be there, and what it will be like can make everyone feel like they have a little more control. If you are churchgoers, you might plan to go to church first thing and then go home and have breakfast. Or maybe you’ll wake up, make pancakes together and then take a walk. If people are coming over for lunch, let the children know who will be coming over. Then maybe next on the schedule they’ll have some free time to play or hang out before dinner. Do what you can to include favorite traditions when you are planning your day, too. It may feel bittersweet, but people find comfort in traditions, and they can help the day feel special.

03 MEMORIALIZE

Remembering is part of grieving and part of healing, so think about doing something to memorialize your loved one. It will be sad, but Dr. Howard says it can help in the grieving process. In the case of a deceased parent, for example, maybe that means taking the occasion to talk to the kids about how special their mother was, tell favorite stories, and let the kids know that some of the things that she taught them will be with them forever, even though she isn’t here now. If she really liked flowers, maybe you could plant some flowers in honor of her. If she liked to collect things, maybe you could put her collection in a place you’ll pass by frequently, and think of her.

04 ASK FOR HELP

One very important consideration when making a plan for the day is for parents and caregivers to consider what they can get through emotionally, and what might be helpful to them. Parents should certainly ask for other family members and close friends to be on hand to support them if that would be useful. Maybe a relative could help make dinner, play a game with the kids, or even just be present to backstop or take over if a break is needed.

