



# GriefConnections

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## *Helping the Bereaved Face the Holidays*

William G. Hoy



Regardless of when a loved one died, the end of the year presents unique challenges to bereaved people. Many of the familiar feelings of sadness and loneliness are reignited during the fall and winter, even many years after a loved one's death. While some of these feelings are typical of this "pensive" period of shorter days and colder nights, the intensity of family-related holidays is also a major factor in year-end bereavement.

Beginning with Halloween for those whose child has died and continuing through Thanksgiving, Christmas or Hanukah, and culminating with New Year's Eve/Day and Valentine's Day, late fall and winter provide special difficulties for bereaved people. Caregiving professionals and volunteers can take a few steps now to help clients and friends negotiate the holidays in grief more effectively.

**Acknowledge the Pain.** For a couple of reasons, year-end holidays are especially difficult, most notably in the first few years of bereavement. First, these holidays are sentimental occasions with unique sights, sounds, and smells that make their appearance undeniable. Nothing screams "loss" as loudly as walking into the mall the last week of October to be bombarded by all of the Christmas decorations.

But the holidays are also undeniably difficult because of their natural association with family. In our society, Thanksgiving and Christmas are especially associated with having family together. So when a family member dies during the year, their absence is keenly felt by survivors at these times of focused family gathering. Even when family life was accompanied by abuse or other dysfunction, many people have always held out hope that "this year, things will be different." This further compounds the loss being experienced by grieving people during the holidays.

In support groups and with individuals, note the approaching holidays in late fall. Asking, "How have you spent the holidays in recent years?" can prove helpful in starting a discussion. In my experience, virtually all bereaved people dread the approaching holidays so having a care provider to acknowledge how painful they can be and to start the dialogue about what is ahead is a great gift, indeed.

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**Recommend Resources.** In the last few years, authors have written a boat-load of books about facing the holidays in grief. Recommending them to individuals and support group participants can provide a special opportunity to discuss grief during this difficult time. Here are my favorites (all of which are available through amazon.com).

*Thoughts for the Holidays: Finding Permission to Grieve* by Doug Manning (In-Sight Books, 2001, \$2.50)

*The Empty Chair: Handling Grief on Holidays and Special Occasions* by Susan Zonnebelt-Smeenge and Robert C. DeVries (Baker, 2001, \$ 9.99)

*How Will I Get Through the Holidays?* by James E. Miller (Willowgreen, 1996, \$ 6.95)

*A Decembered Grief: Living With Loss While Others Are Celebrating* by Harold Ivan Smith (Beacon Hill, 1999, \$ 13.99)

**Encourage Planning.** Because bereaved people face the holidays with a significant amount of dread, one of our jobs as caregiving people is to help them make a plan for what lies ahead. Encourage a listing of traditions in which the bereaved participated with the person who died as a first step. Then, invite the bereaved person to go through the list and highlight the activities in which he or she is interested in continuing to participate.

As the bereaved person works through this list, she will undoubtedly come upon some activities in which she just doesn't have the energy to participate this year. Help her formulate words to use in declining these invitations and negotiating with other family members who believe she should "keep everything just like it used to be." You will want to point out that we all grieve in the context of family and friendship circles, so she will want to consider the feelings of others, as well.

Also suggest, however, that there are some holiday activities in which the bereaved person may want to participate, but just in a revised form. For example, if a widower used to send out 200 holiday cards every year with his wife, suggest that he might want to pare down the list to 25 or 30 key friends to whom he writes a personal note, perhaps in addition to a photocopied holiday newsletter.

In both support groups and in individual work with clients, make sure to alert them to the inevitable holiday cards that will arrive from people who have not heard of the loved one's death. You can help group members or clients create a three- or four-sentence "template" to send in a note to people who have not heard about the loved one's death.

**Assess Support Systems.** One reason bereavement becomes complicated is because some people have little natural support system around them. Even if there are relatives close by, they are not necessarily supportive in ways that are meaningful to the bereaved person. Assess for the nature of this support by asking, "Who are the people who are most supportive to you right now?" "What are the things they do that seem supportive to you?" and "What do you wish they would do differently that would be more supportive to you?"

No one grieves well when left to grieve alone. We are not made for the isolation that bereaved people often face during the holidays, and one of your most important contributions might be to help him or her find meaningful ways to serve others, especially if the bereaved person has no family or close friends living nearby.

In our hospice, we had a widowed bereavement group leader who always held both a Thanksgiving and Christmas potluck at her home on the actual holiday, and found that from five to ten people would usually attend. Others visit a nursing home on the holiday or find other meaningful ways to serve others.

The best gift we give to bereaved people as the holidays approach, however, is our acknowledgement that these days are difficult. In the midst of a social network that is always encouraging people to cheer up and put on a happy face, our acknowledgement and the direction we can provide often spells the difference between languishing through the holidays or growing through them.

The Author: William G. Hoy is a counselor, author and educator with more than 25 years of experience in walking with the bereaved and equipping the professionals and volunteers who care for them. Dr. Hoy directs the counseling program for Pathways Volunteer Hospice and teaches in the graduate program in bereavement at Marian University. He blogs at [www.griefconnect.wordpress.com](http://www.griefconnect.wordpress.com).

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### ***My First Christmas in Heaven***

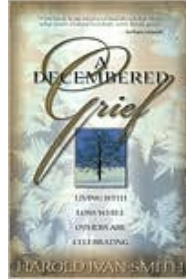
*Author Unknown*

*I see the countless Christmas trees around the world below  
With tiny lights, like Heaven's stars, reflecting on the snow  
The sight is so spectacular, please wipe away the tear  
For I am spending Christmas with Jesus Christ this year.  
I hear the many Christmas songs that people hold so dear  
But the sounds of music can't compare  
with the Christmas choir up here.*

*I have no words to tell you, the joy their voices bring,  
For it is beyond description, to hear the angels sing.  
I know how much you miss me, I see the pain inside your heart  
But I am not so far away, we really aren't apart.  
So be happy for me, dear ones, you know I hold you dear.  
And be glad I'm spending Christmas  
with Jesus Christ this year.*

*I sent you each a special gift, from my heavenly home above.  
I sent you each a memory of my undying love.  
After all, love is a gift more precious than pure gold  
It was always most important in the stories Jesus told.  
Please love and keep each other, as my Father said to do  
For I can't count the blessing or love he has for each of you  
So have a Merry Christmas and wipe away that tear  
Remember, I am spending Christmas  
with Jesus Christ this year.*

### Library Notes



“A Decembered Grief—Living with Loss While Others are Celebrating”, written by Harold Ivan Smith. An excellent resource to help those who are grieving while facing the holidays.

To purchase a copy of “A Decembered Grief”, stop in or call the Special Memories Card & Gift Shop located at Phillips Funeral Home, 17 W. Pulteney St., Corning. 607-936-9212

### Support Groups

#### **Loss of a Spouse Support Group**

For more information, contact Sandi Follette at the Grief Center of The Southern Tier at 607-936-9077.

#### **Loss of a Loved One to Suicide**

For more information, contact Sandi Follette at The Grief Center of the Southern Tier at 607-936-9077.

#### **Compassionate Friends Support Group**

Last Wednesday of each month at 7 pm at Our Saviours Lutheran Church, 2872 Westinghouse Road, Horseheads. If you are interested in joining the group, contact Joann at 562-8090 or by email at [jmorgan55@stny.rr.com](mailto:jmorgan55@stny.rr.com).

#### **Abortion**

*Forgiven and Set Free*—a post-abortion class. For more information contact Victory Highway Wesleyan Church at 607-962-7000.

#### **Infant Loss**

The SHARE Infant Loss Bereavement Support Group meets the third Thursday of every month at 7 pm in the Clute Education Building at Arnot Ogden Medical Center and is for parents, grandparents, family and friends of persons who have lost children through miscarriage or stillbirth. Contact Maryanne Amisano at 607-562-8856 for more information.

For more local support groups go to [www.phillipsfuneralhome.com](http://www.phillipsfuneralhome.com).

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