

GRIEVING FAMILIES

Holiday Dilemmas

by J. Shep Jeffreys, Ed.D., FT

“Sleigh bells ring, Christmas cheer, carols, Thanks (?) -giving, first Passover Seder meal since Dad . . . , gather round the Chanukah table . . . , apples and honey for Rosh Hashanah, yet another Holiday without . . . , the music and decorations are everywhere, I can't get away from the pain and still I can't let go of what this Holiday time has meant to me and my family! Oh, what to do, *what to do?!?*”

THE DILEMMA: PULLED IN TWO DIRECTIONS.

The calendar can be a grieving family's worst enemy. How can we hold on to the comforting traditions we have embraced since childhood and fit them into the reality of the post-loss world? For some folks it is simply out of the question to celebrate with decorations, a tree, a menorah, a traditional meal, or religious service. “Holiday time is *family feel good* time and there is no way we can feel good now!” Others decide that they cannot sail through the holiday without the foundation our traditions and rituals provide. For some there are guilty feelings where there is a sense of dishonoring our loved one's memory if we anticipate enjoying the holidays. Know that there can be time for both holiday joy and for periods of grieving as well.

FAMILY ACTION I. We emphasize the importance of the slogan: Don't do nothing! Have some activity planned. Many families we work with are able to come to a compromise that gives all members some of what they need. The decision is best made by the immediate family as a group. This not only gives everyone a chance to participate in what to do but also gives the family the experience of developing new traditions. Time can be set aside for the family members to discuss what they each feel is different now and what they still want from the particular holiday. This activity helps to maintain a sense of who we still are as a family.

These decisions begin a process that will be useful for next year and future holidays as well. Some families may need



some help to get started with this process and call on clergy, counselors, or other bereavement specialists.

The family can review what they have done in the past for a specific holiday and decide which traditions will be especially helpful now to themselves and to their loved ones – and which can be put off until next year. Are there some particular family customs which the loved one who is gone enjoyed that can be included in honor of that person?

FAMILY ACTION II. Some of the rituals and other family actions can be altered. For example, have some friends join in for a potluck meal or have the holiday meal in a new location. Attend Passover Seder, High Holiday, Thanksgiving, Christmas or Easter dinner with another part of the family or with friends. Have some friends in to help put up holiday decorations and dress the tree or decorate a tree in the front yard this year. Some folks bring together several other family Chanukah menorahs or have even taken the holiday out into nature (hiking, camping, or other short trips away).

Incorporate memories into your holiday activities. Create a special prayer or poem of thanks and acknowledgement, a New Year's toast, group or individual letter, collage art, or a memory album. Many find solace in planting a memory garden, lighting a special candle, having a moment of silence or personal reflection, and/or making a donation to charity.

Some families have spent holiday time volunteering for preparing and serving meals for homeless persons,

or for families in the community who are unable to afford the means for a special holiday meal. Serving others gives us *something to do* and we can receive the joy of giving. Other families join community litter clean-up crews, park and stream debris clearance and provide assistance to residents of nursing homes, children group homes, and faith group and community organization outreach programs.

Finally, by exploring with their respective clergy, many families may find much benefit concerning faith-based rituals for mourning and remembering the loved one who has died. The meaning of the traditions may provide a path through the dilemma of the grieving family and the approaching holidays.

NOTE: Where a family member has become significantly depressed, or talks or behaves in an alarming way, seek assistance from a mental health or primary care medical provider.

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J. Shep Jeffreys, Ed.D., FT is a licensed psychologist and a Fellow in Thanatology. Following his son Steven's death, his work focused on helping grieving people. In addition to clinical practice, Shep is assistant professor of psychiatry at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, and affiliate assistant professor of pastoral counseling, Loyola College in Maryland. He has served as a trainer with Elisabeth Kubler-Ross nationally and internationally and as consulting psychologist for the Johns Hopkins AIDS Service. He is author of *Helping Grieving People-When Tears Are Not Enough: A Handbook for Careproviders* and *Coping with Workplace Grief: Dealing with Loss, Trauma and Change*. "My column will present material aimed at helping bereaved people understand what is happening to them, what to expect from themselves and loved ones and some ways that others have found helpful for healing." Listen to his audio series at www.Griefcast.com. www.GriefCareProvider.com jeffreys3@verizon.net

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