

## Anniversaries, Holidays, Rituals for Grieving Children and Families

By Robin F. Goodman

Each day can bring new challenges following the death of someone important. The bereaved face much pain and sorrow on a journey of feelings unlike any other. It is hoped that slowly, and over time, routines are established once again and the bereaved are re-engaged in life affirming relationships and activities.

But as time goes on, adults, children, families and friends face many events that are reminders of people who are no longer alive. There are various common and traditional events such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, Passover, Mother's Day and Father's Day as well as ongoing religious or cultural ceremonies. And there are many other meaningful places, activities, and days throughout the year that are personally significant such as the anniversary of the death, a loved one's birthday, a graduation or birth of a child. Even families who are at a comfortable place in their life may find certain moments provoke sadness or longing. There is no correct way to feel or handle events or ceremonies. Rather the goal is to discover the best way for you and your family to mark and manage important times throughout life.

### **It can be helpful to think of the holiday or event as having three phases.**

- **Before:** People often feel most stress as they anticipate an upcoming event. The "first" of something is also often the most challenging to approach. As a significant date or event comes into focus, it can start to loom large in people's mind. Worrying about it can lead to avoidance and thus not making plans or just thinking "I'll just get through it somehow." But it can be empowering to be prepared, make choices, and feel more in control.
- **During:** It is unlikely that reality matches one's imagination. Hence it is best to be in the moment and manage the day or activities as needed. This can also mean being prepared to change course or make alternative plans if things do not go as planned or what you need or want has changed. It can be OK to leave a gathering early, or call a friend, or go for a walk.
- **After:** Once an event or ceremony is over, there is often a sense of relief. It's important to appreciate the physical and emotional energy it takes to get through something difficult. It is also a time to assess how things went and file away what would be good to be repeated and what might be changed next time. It can be useful to plan something, no matter how small, for after the event to provide a sense of continuity and affirm life continues.

### **General guidelines for handling anniversaries, holidays, and rituals**

- **Have appropriate expectations.** If it is a recurring event, such as Thanksgiving, it's important to balance out and determine the pros and cons of trying to re-create the past and develop something new. Regardless of how hard you try, things are different and this should be recognized.
- **Give everyone the opportunity and permission to experience their own feelings.** It can be reassuring to know that it is normal to have a tough time on certain holidays and celebrations. However, it is also acceptable and appropriate to feel hopeful and enjoy the event even when someone important is being missed.
- **Trust yourself.** Others may offer well-meaning advice and suggestions but consider what is best for your own situation.

### **Be mindful of the special needs of children.**

- **Describe events for children.** In particular with religious or cultural ceremonies that are unfamiliar, it can be useful to be specific about what will take place so you and your children can decide the best way to participate.

- **Children may have specific ideas.** Children may want some things to be exactly like they were before to help them retain a sense of normalcy and security.
- **Involve children.** Brainstorm new ways to commemorate the day. Given the opportunity, children often come up with inventive and creative ideas. You may want to make a time capsule putting in things from the past and adding things for the future, or start a video scrapbook.
- **Consider sharing memories.** Special times may be a good time to share memories, photos or videos or past activities. For example, going to the person's favorite restaurant.
- **Consider a child's wider community.** For example, if a child's mother died, it may be helpful to check in with school teachers about any planned Mother's Day activities and make necessary adjustments.
- **Children can have lots of feelings.** Children can feel guilty or ambivalent about embracing new people into celebrations or enjoy themselves. People cannot and should not be replaced, new relationships take time to develop and evolve on their own. Respect and help children manage complex feelings and relationships.

### Take care of yourself

- **Be gentle with complex emotions.** If the relationship was conflicted or difficult, the holiday or occasion may trigger unresolved feelings. You now have choices about how and when to handle the past and develop future positive relationships with those who may fill nurturing roles.
- **Reach out to others.** Different people may be a valuable resource for planning and handling various situations. For example, friends and family can share in holiday preparations, spiritual leaders are useful guides for managing and understanding rituals. It may also be a time to acknowledge those who have eased the burden and sadness of difficult days.
- **Help others.** Some are comforted by helping others on special holidays, perhaps volunteering or bringing baked goods to a hospital or nursing home or being involved in other charity work.
- **Be open to change.** Relationships and life evolve over time. What worked for you, if you have children, when they were small, or when extended family were nearby may need to be revised as time goes on and new traditions are established.
- **Be good to yourself:** Know when and how to take a break. Activities that allow you to recharge should be a priority. Scented candles, tea with a friend, keeping to an exercise schedule, not answering the phone, are some of the many ways to manage stress, handle difficult feelings, and feel more in control.

Holidays, anniversaries and rituals can be comforting but they can grow and change over time. They can be seen as an opportunity to create a personally meaningful experience.

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