

Name

**Will I Always Feel This Bad?**

***by Sherry Williams White***

It’s easy to understand why your grief during holidays and special days are so hard. Not only are you grieving the person who has died, but you also are grieving the loss of the holiday or special day as you shared it with that person. How you celebrate will never be the same. That is one more loss that you are grieving.

When surrounded by the sights and sounds of approaching holidays, you are reminded again and again that things have changed. Grief that had settled into a slightly more routine or comfortable place now may suddenly intensify. You may feel disconnected from the people and events around you. When you find yourself in a crowd, you may feel more isolated than ever. Loneliness you already have been feeling may become even more intense. You probably will find yourself looking longingly to the past, yearning for things to be the way they used to be. Your traditions, holidays and your life are forever changed. What can you do now?

Here are practical things you can do to make the holidays and special days not only a little easier on you, but a little more meaningful for you.

Drop before you shop.

Some holidays have a long shopping list attached to them. Chances are, you find that overwhelming at this time. Instead of searching out the perfect gift for every person on your list, consider finding one gift that fits all. For example, you can give everyone a copy of an inspirational book that has been meaningful to you. Or how about a CD that you especially enjoy? Consider giving a simple gift, such as stationery, gift certificates, or even IOUs. As surprising as you may find this, you also have the option of giving nothing. If even the simplest shopping is too much right now, give yourself the latitude to skip that chore this year. You can always pick it up again next year.

Keep the tissues handy.

Be prepared for the holiday or special day to be an emotional time for you. Don’t be surprised by tears and sadness, and don’t fight them off. Instead, carry extra tissues. Let the tears come. Tell the people you are with that you probably are going to cry, and invite them to cry with you. Don't apologize for loving someone.

Tell me again.

Instead of trying to push back memories of your loved one during this season, ask friends and family members to share their recollections of the person with you in photographs, stories, and mementos. Some families box, wrap and give each other memories of a loved one. Others collect trinkets that remind them of the loved one, put them in a shadow box, and tell the stories behind the trinkets. This kind of sharing is especially enjoyed by and healing for children.

Be patient with yourself.

You are adjusting to major changes in your life. Be kind, gentle and patient with yourself. Give yourself the time it takes to be comfortable with your different life.

Break with tradition.

If certain family traditions are making you uncomfortable this year, consider changing them or skipping them entirely. You can always pick them up again next year. If you always cut the birthday cake but are dreading it this year, have someone else do it. If you always had the family over to your house for a holiday dinner and just can’t handle it this year, move the dinner to someone else’s house or to a community center. If it just seems too hard to make your famous casserole this year, pass your recipe along to someone else. Remember, you’re not throwing your traditions out the window. You’re simply modifying them this year and allowing yourself space to heal. Next year, you might want to do everything just like you did it five years ago. That’s great. Or, you might find that you like the new traditions you started this year. That’s great, too.

Make a list.

When you are grieving, you may experience a lack of concentration, so go ahead and make lists. And while you’re making them, decide if everything on them is really that important to you. If something isn’t, mark it off. It’s normal to be distracted and forgetful as you grieve, so feel free to lean heavily on your lists.

Take control.

No doubt you feel like your life is beyond your control. After all, if you could control things, your loved one would still be alive. Using lists of all things to do, as we mentioned in the last paragraph, also can help you gain a sense of control. Make a list of small, simple things you can do, then do them and check them off the list. All of these small steps move you forward. They also help you define your “new” life. Make a list of what you want to do. What you don’t want to do. What can you delete from your “to do” list? Who can help?

Listen to yourself.

Deep down inside, even if you don’t realize it right now, you know best what you need as you grieve. Pay attention to what you find yourself wanting and to what you wish others were helping you with. As you become aware of these things, share them with your family and friends so they can support you. Ask for help when you need it. Most people are looking for ways to bolster you, and simply do not know how.

Share the love.

If it’s just unbearable not bo be able to buy a gift for your deceased loved one, consider buying one and then giving it to someone who would not otherwise have a gift.

Trust your own clock.

Other people are in a hurry for you to “get better” or to “get over” your grief, usually because they are uncomfortable seeing you in pain. You, however, know what is right for you. Use this time to look inward, to reflect, and to evaluate what has meaning for you. Many people who are grieving learn new and valuable things about themselves that enrich their lives.

Make memories gifts.

Your loved one gave you all kinds of gifts during your time together. Companionship, laughter, tenderness…what do you remember? Consider putting the memories in a gift box, using the box in decorations, hanging it on a Christmas tree, or stashing it in a special, secret place. Visit it when you need to feel close to your loved one.

Give it some thought.

Most likely, your grief makes it nearly impossible for you to observe all the rituals and traditions your family used to include in holidays and special days. That’s okay. Pick out three or five activities or rituals that are most meaningful to you and family members. Involve them in the decision, and figure out how each person can do the one thing that is most meaningful to him or her.

Just say no.

Sometimes, attending a party where everyone expects you to be up, chipper, and “over” your grief is torturous. If that’s the case for you, simply don’t go. Kindly but firmly tell your friends you will not be attending. This is especially important during a holiday season in which too many parties can run down your already tired body. You do not owe your friends an explanation when declining their invitation, but you do owe yourself the option of doing what is best and healing for you. At the same time, don’t automatically say “no” to every invitation that comes along simply because you are uncomfortable in your grief. Just as often as parties are hurtful, they are hopeful. You may be surprised at how much you enjoy being in the company of friends again. You know better than anyone what you need at this time.

Hold on to your wallet.

You can’t buy grief away, but you might try, especially during special seasons. Think twice before buying extravagant gifts. Will something simpler suffice? Are you just trying to make yourself feel better by spending money?

Make room for difference.

Everyone grieves differently. Respect and honor how someone else in your family or circle of friends grieves holidays or special days. Create new traditions that allow everyone to participate in ways they are comfortable with. Don’t impose your feelings on other grievers and, at the same time, don’t allow them to make you express your grief the way they want you to.

Look for a lift.

Holidays and special days can be especially depressing. Look for ways to lighten the load. Think of things that you enjoy and treat yourself to them. If you wait for someone else to give you joy, you most likely will find disappointment. Take responsibility to create your own healing environment. Again, be kind and gentle with yourself.

Share your special days.

You don’t have to be alone during the holidays, on an anniversary, or on any other special day. There are lots of lonely people who could use your love and care. Volunteer at a soup kitchen. Visit a nursing home. Collect toys or food for the needy. Share yourself and your love. Take care of yourself. We’ve already talked about the effects of grief on your body. You can soften them by taking good care of yourself. Take walks. Drink plenty of water. Eat healthy food that gives you extra energy. Be nice to yourself.

Hang the stockings.

Bake the birthday cake. Light the Hanukkah candles. Place a wreath on the grave. Do whatever feels right for you and your family. Light a special candle. Light a candle during the holiday season or to commemorate a special day. Do this as a celebration of the love and life you shared, not as a memory of the death. Know that you carry the light of that love within you always.

Look for Joy.

Sure you’re not going to be joyous every moment. But you can look for joy in many moments. Try celebrating what you do have as you realize what you are missing. If you find just one little chuckle in a day filled with tears, embrace it and enjoy it for the moment. If you begin to look for them, those moments may appear more and more often.