



Re-Creating Holiday Traditions Ideas for Families Facing Loss and Transitions

For families in transition, the holidays often represent one of the most difficult times of the year. Inevitably we are surrounded by reminders of “the holiday season” in public places, on TV and on the radio. The lights, music, gifts and evergreen may seem out of sync with internal feelings and/or may trigger painful memories. As tempting as it may be to deny the existence of the holiday season, avoid it completely, and somehow emerge in January, this fantasy is futile. So the question becomes not how to avoid or deny, but rather:

How can we help ourselves through the season, explore short-term and long-term priorities, and gradually learn to make holidays meaningful once again?

Clarify priorities and reduce stress:

- **Inventory your holiday preparation.** What is important? What is not necessary? Eliminate unnecessary pressures on yourself and others. Shift the focus to things that are really important to you and your family.
- **Resist overextending or over-committing.** Be realistic to avoid feeling that you have failed.
- **Inventory your holiday traditions.** Do you have family traditions? Is it important to carry them on this year or is this a good time to begin some new ones? Reevaluate, consider, and discuss ways of keeping traditions you find meaningful in ways that may alleviate some of the pain. Attempt to merge traditions in blended or newly formed families.

Focus on what is most helpful and most meaningful for your family at this time.

- **Give yourself permission to create meaning in your own way.**
- **Give special consideration to activities that are significant to both you and your family.**
 - If Christmas or Hannukah hold religious significance for you, allow time for honoring that significance in your activities.
 - Create a ritual to honor someone who has died or someone who is not able to be with you this year.
 - Hang a stocking in which everyone can place notes, poems, photos, drawings.
 - Light a candle during meals or significant gatherings.
 - Include an activity in that person’s honor/memory (snow angels, sledding, reading a treasured book aloud...).
 - Have an interactive card, mural, or chalk board where people can jot down passing thoughts, feelings, and sentiments.
- **Don’t hesitate to do whatever makes the holidays more meaningful and more bearable for you.**
 - If you thrive on the busy-ness and the meaning of bringing a large group of family and/or friends together to get you through the day – then by all means, DO IT!
 - If you want to hang a stocking of a deceased loved one, then do it!
 - Where is it that you feel most alive – most content – most centered? In the outdoors? In yoga? In a church service? Dancing? Drawing? Baking with the kids? Knitting with friends? Sledding? Meditating? How can you integrate this into your holidays?



- **Allow yourself to do things differently if it would be easier.**
 - Go to a different church or attend an alternative gathering.
 - Open presents at a different time (i.e. Christmas Eve instead of Christmas morning)
 - Have a small dinner instead of a large one.
 - Have dinner at a different time and invite the family for dessert in the evening.

Take care of yourself.

- **Create space to honor your grief and your pain.** Do whatever helps with this: talk, cry, write, look at photos, play music, visit special places. Remember it is ok to cry.
- **It is ok to talk with others** about your loved ones and your experience. Others may not bring up painful subjects believing that they are protecting you. If you desire, break the silence and mention it yourself. Assess your support, work to clarify your needs, and allow yourself to lean on others.
- **Take time to be with others and love them, but also give yourself permission to spend time alone.** Carve out space to grieve and validate the changes – time to cry, time to contemplate.
- **Find a creative outlet.** Write, draw, dance, sew, photograph, design, build, sing...
- **Let go of pleasing everyone else, and do some things that are especially meaningful to YOU.** Think about blatant self-care. What could bring you even the tiniest bit of comfort, peace or beauty? A daily bath? A walk with a dear friend? Reading silly books or magazines? A precious flower? Polishing your toenails? Listening to favorite music? Visiting a museum, library, café or other special place?

Recognize that our greatest joy may come in doing something for someone else.

- **If you are a parent, try especially hard to bring your children into the planning of the holiday and make it positive for them.** Include them in your grieving activities. Listen to them, talk to them, be with them. When asked directly, kids often have clear ideas about how they wish to acknowledge people they care about who are not present during the holidays.
- **Great pleasure can come from helping others.** If you have the energy, sort out old clothes and household item and donate them to a shelter, group home, or thrift store. Think about making cookies for someone who has been especially supportive to you. Write a note to someone who has been on your mind and loves mail. Donate a can of food to the Food Bank.

Written by: Tina Barrett, LCPC and Melanie Trost, LCSW of Tamarack Grief Resource Center incorporating ideas from Johnson, W.Y. (1991). The Holidays: A mixture of love and pain. Thanatos, p. 28-29. Specializing in bereavement camps, Tamarack Grief Resource Center honors and strengthens individuals and families throughout their journey with grief.