

Coping Through the 2020 Holidays

Holidays, Grief, and a Global Pandemic: Finding a Way Through

You're grieving the loss of a loved one during a high-stress season while also dealing with the reality of the COVID-19 crisis. How can you possibly navigate all of these things piled on top of each other?

- First, acknowledge this year will be different.:
 - You may not function like you normally do—grief and stress impact our ability to think clearly and act efficiently.
 - Gatherings are discouraged by public health officials right now—and getting together with friends, family, co-workers and neighbors is one of the things that define the most special part of the holidays.
 - The person you're missing is not here—if this is your first holiday season without them, their absence is glaring, and even if you've been through a few cycles of special days, it's still an especially difficult time to not have them around.
- Then, consider for yourself what you might like to do to honor the holidays. Often this may look like one of the following:
 - Keep it the same: Hold onto those traditions that have always made the holidays feel special.
 - Change it up: Let go of activities that feel especially exhausting, emotionally charged, or frivolous. Keep only the things that bring joy or meaning to the season. Add a new ritual that is meaningful to your family.
 - Drop it: Do something entirely different this year if it's just too hard to think about re-creating past holiday traditions. Keep it simple—you can always go back to the standard favorites next year.
- Finally, claim your right to grieve *all of this*. You are experiencing layer upon layer of loss at this particular moment. It's not fair. It's not right. It's too much to bear. Find safe spaces or people to lament about how devastating this holiday season feels, and let it all out.
 - And also remember to allow yourself moments of guilt-free happiness and laughter if at all possible. Enjoying the things you can enjoy is a wonderful way to honor your loved one's memory if it feels right to you.

Read on for more ideas on coping through the holidays...

Caring for yourself through the holidays:

- Allow your emotions to be what they are—give them space and expression, and listen to what they might be teaching you from moment to moment.
 - You may feel a range of feelings, just as you have throughout your grieving process, but they might be heightened during this time of year: sadness, anger, irritability, anxiety, confusion, joy, envy, nostalgia, guilt, numbness, gratitude, overwhelm. All of these feelings are valid, and it can be helpful to name them—that way, you can choose how you want to deal with them and take steps to take care of yourself.
 - Be as open as you comfortably can with your feelings—this gives others permission to grieve openly too, and may even encourage deeper emotional connections amongst family. Remember that feelings ebb and flow, so it’s likely that letting emotions be freely expressed will allow them to subside more quickly.
 - When your feelings and a family member’s clash, it might be helpful to use “oops” and “ouch” to indicate you either know you’ve said something you didn’t mean to, or are feeling hurt by another person’s words or actions.
 - Emotions can be expressed in many ways other than crying. Talk to trusted friends, family, clergy, or professional counselors. Music and expressive arts are great ways to channel what’s going on inside. Writing letters or journaling can also help externalize feelings. Engaging in mindfulness exercises or connecting with spiritual practices, meditations, and rituals can bring comfort, meaning, and perspective to what you are experiencing.
- Manage your expectations for this year’s holidays. The holidays, undeniably, won’t be perfect or the same this year. That’s OK.
 - Check out this [video](#) from the creators of the “What’s Your Grief?” website for tips on being gentle with yourself.
- If children will be part of your holiday observances, consider how you want to model healthy grieving and coping.
 - Find ways to let them delight in the joy and magic and wonder of the season. Encourage them to play and be kids—while also not denying them (or yourself) the right to feel sad, cry, and be upset over their loss. Listen to what they may need (emotionally, physically, socially), and strive for a balance between structure and going-with-the-flow.
 - Involve them in all stages of planning so they know what to expect and can help make simple decisions.
 - Encourage them to find their own meaning in the season, through giving to those in need, engaging in spiritual practices, identifying core values of the holidays, or other ways of finding purpose.
 - Find more support at [The Dougy Center for Grieving Children and Families](#) or at [Good Grief](#).

Observing the holidays when you can't gather or "celebrate" in traditional ways

Do your best to **make plans well ahead of time**, and communicate your intentions to family. We encourage people to make a Plan A *and* a Plan B in case the original plans feel too overwhelming or other obstacles get in the way. It doesn't hurt to have an "exit strategy" too, so you can gracefully bow out of holiday interactions (whether in person or online) that begin to feel taxing. [Click here](#) for wise words from author and therapist Megan Devine, which may help you find permission to set boundaries when dealing with holiday expectations.

Whether gathering virtually or having a special meal with your household, don't be afraid to **speak their name**. It can be a huge relief to others to know they can also speak freely about the deceased. **Create a special place for your loved one**, symbolically: set a place for them at the table, light a candle in their honor, observe a moment of silence, give a toast, or hang decorations that honor their role in your family. Share pictures or videos of these things in virtual gatherings or on social media.

Set out photos and keepsakes that remind you of your loved one, wear a favorite piece of jewelry or clothing, listen to the music they loved, cook and bake their favorite treats. **Do things to help you feel connected to their ongoing presence in your life**, even if those reminders bring tears to your eyes and a lump in your throat.

Donate to a favorite charity or organize a food drive with a no-contact collection bin on your porch or at your workplace. Check [United Way of Dane County](#) for volunteer opportunities, including ones specific to the holidays or virtual options. In the words of Ghandi, "the best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in service to others." (If you're the one that needs support or resources, call 211 to reach United Way's community resource line.)

Organize a "**holiday lights tour**" caravan with other friends or family in separate cars. Bring a thermos of hot cocoa or other warm beverage to enjoy. Use hands-free phone options (safely and responsibly) for talking while taking in the sights, or listen to the same radio station as the other cars. Stop at the cemetery or another favorite spot to leave a holiday-themed bouquet, wreath, or home-baked treat in honor of your loved one.

Use **strips of construction paper** in festive colors to write down favorite memories or qualities of your loved one. Involve all generations! Link the strips together in circles to create a chain of remembrance to hang as part of your decorations.

Honor your needs and keep checking in with yourself—and be sure to communicate your needs to those who may want or need to know. Do your best to compromise and find ways to respect everyone's differing needs.

Practical tools and resources for easing anxiety and making healthy decisions

Anxiety is now recognized as a major piece of many people's grief experience. It certainly has become prominent as a response to the COVID-19 public health crisis, and stress in general is a common experience during the holidays. Author Claire Bidwell Smith (check out her thoughts and her book, [Anxiety: The Missing Stage of Grief](#)). Figuring out what is in our control, and what is outside our ability to control, can help us focus on what's most important. Living mindfully in the present can also ease worry for the future or distress about the past. Here are some other tools, resources, and ideas you may find helpful.

Explore public health recommendations to help you understand risks and decide what action you're comfortable taking. The [CDC](#) has helpful tips for many scenarios. Try not to let other people pressure you to participate in an activity that is outside of your comfort zone, and respect others' decisions if they seem more cautious than your own.

Surround yourself with support, and accept help when it's offered (or even better, *ask for help* when you think you might need it!). Jot down a list of things you might be able to easily delegate to someone else (you could ask someone to do one of the following: the final raking of the season; picking up groceries or a carryout meal that you've ordered online; spending an hour on FaceTime with the kids so you have a moment to yourself; text you every couple days just to check in; walk the dog once a week). People around you want to help, but don't always know how, Giving them concrete examples of helpful tasks or asking them just to keep checking in will help them give you something you actually need.

Take advantage of the many tools for mindfulness and calming activities. There are a plethora of websites, apps, YouTube videos, books, and blogs about reducing anxiety, getting good sleep, tending to the mind-body connection, and practicing self-compassion. Here are a few favorites (search online or in an app store): Calm, Headspace, HealthJourneys, Insight Timer, mindful.org, Ten Percent Happier. To ground yourself in a moment of panic, try taking 2 full breaths (fully inhale, fully exhale), then name 5 things you can SEE, 4 things you can FEEL, 3 things you can HEAR, 2 things you can SMELL, and 1 thing you can TASTE. Repeat until you feel calmer.

If your grief is feeling especially burdensome, please reach out to Agrace to schedule an appointment with one of our grief counselors or register for a group at (800) 553-4289 or [agrace.org](#).

If you feel like you may be at risk for harming yourself or are contemplating suicide, contact one of these crisis lines (or call 911) immediately:

- Journey Mental Health—(608) 280-2600 (Dane County; search for crisis lines for your county if you live elsewhere)
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline—(800) 273-2855
- Crisis Text Line—Text CONNECT to 741741
- Follow-up with your Primary Care Provider to determine a long term care plan to support your mental and physical well-being

Whenever possible, seek out beauty, joy, warmth, and connection this holiday season.