

November 2, 2020

Surviving the Holidays 2020

I think by now it's pretty unanimous that 2020 be just a distant memory, but alas, we have a bit more to get through before then, and so I would like to offer a few gentle suggestions, if you will, for us all to get through the impending holidays. I am doing this now because it has already been coming up quite a bit in groups and anxiety has a tendency to build up. My hope is to offer some practical suggestions to relieve some of this anxiety and help us to navigate through the next few months. Keeping in mind that everyone grieves differently, it's pretty universal that the holiday season can magnify our feelings of loss and sorrow without question.

Firstly, I think it is good to have a rule in place where you don't let anyone tell you how to grieve or not to grieve, nobody can truly understand your grief because nobody else had your relationship with your loved one. Don't let anyone *should* on you.

It is universal knowledge that pretty much about 99% of the time for those who are grieving, the anticipation of a date or event is much more difficult than the actual day when it rolls around, be it an anniversary, birthday or a holiday. Please try to keep this in mind. It is very important to be aware of our inner narrative (what we are telling ourselves) as the holidays and other special dates approach. Try to tell yourself that it will not be as bad as you think it will be, and remind yourself that although this is the way you feel NOW, it is not going to be this way forever. It will change and it will soften.

I just want to encourage you that you can and will get through this. And the best way through is, rather than avoiding the feelings that are inevitable in grief, to lean into them; to allow yourself to feel whatever it is you need to feel at that

particular time. Like a wave, it will wash over us, sometimes knock us on our butts, but we will get back up again, knowing that there are more to come.

Because no matter how fast we run or how busy we keep, it always finds a way to catch up with us. Sometimes it is better to just let it catch up and allow the feelings to wash over us. I even suggest taking a bit of time each day, whether you prefer the morning or the evening, to simply sit, either outside or inside, wherever you are comfortable and wherever you prefer, and just lean in to the grief. Let it come with all the feelings that are necessary. Please don't let the fear of feeling keep you from doing so. These feelings will not drown us (although at times it may feel like it) but we need to feel them in order to heal and move forward. This may be particularly important on those holidays that we know will be difficult. If we spend a little time allowing the feelings to catch up and flow, it may be like releasing a pressure cooker so that we can get through the day.

The number one rule for anyone grieving through the holidays is SELF CARE. Please be sure to put yourself on your own list, at the top of your list. We really do need to take good care of ourselves. With that in mind, also please try to allow yourself to have a 'pass' for the holidays, a pass to do or NOT to do whatever you want and are most comfortable with, this includes any decisions regarding the COVID virus and social distancing. People need to respect your decisions and your comfort level, if they do not, that is on them.

Some of you will be with family or friends over the holidays and some will not. There are many of us who will be completely alone during the holidays because of the pandemic or other circumstances and you, above all, need to put self-care on the top of your agenda.

I understand how there may be a desire to do some, or a lot, of self-medicating during these emotional and difficult times, please try to stay aware of

your intake of alcohol, food, medication, and recreational drugs. We need to remember that the only thing that heals grief is to grieve. There is no potion, no pill, no other way through grief than to grieve. Self-medicating simply does not help, and usually makes things much worse.

One of the things that can be most helpful in navigating through these trying times is exercise, any kind of exercise. Be sure to move around in some way. Get out of the bed or off the couch and schedule at least 15-20 mins to move around, perhaps several times each day. This could be a walk around the block if it is nice enough, or around the house, or some stretching, or yoga. Getting outside has extra added healing benefits as well; we need the vitamin D from the sun, we need to breath some fresh air, to hear the birds, see the blue sky, and to move our bodies. Try to be attentive to all those things while you are doing it. We need the endorphins secreted by the brain during movement and exercise to feel better, and this moving around and distracting of the brain can offer some much-needed relief and release.

Practicing mindfulness in some way is always helpful. Be attentive to your senses and allow yourself to be aware of your surroundings and very much present to the present rather than in the past or the future. This is going to be helpful throughout the journey of grief, so if you have not looked into mindfulness meditation, perhaps this may be a good time to give it a try.

Please make sure that you are eating. I know a lot of us may have no, or very little appetite, but try to plan on preparing or ordering a nice meal that you will enjoy. For those who are staying home, perhaps you may like to cook for yourself or give it a try if it's been awhile? It may be a good distraction and a nice project. Nutrition, as we all know, is important, but also the holidays are very much centered on food, so try to treat yourself to some good, delicious food, even if you

are alone. Perhaps allow yourself the opportunity to savor the aroma and taste the food you have not enjoyed for a long time.

Whatever you decide to do for a holiday, it is a good idea to have some kind of a plan ahead of time. It may even be a good idea to have a plan A and a plan B, just in case you change your mind. And you are allowed to do that too.

I always plan an escape if I go somewhere, either I drive, have a ride home, or I can call an Uber or a cab; it's just good to have an escape clause, it may come in handy if you become uncomfortable or tired and decide to leave earlier than you anticipated.

If you are hosting, and may be feeling overwhelmed, please don't hesitate to ask for help. The people who know us and love us are more than willing to help if we only ask. They may have no idea how you are feeling and it is perfectly ok to let them know how you are feeling, or to give them cues as to what they can do or say or not say or do to help you.

There may be some traditions that you are just not up for this year, such as decorating or sending cards, or shopping, or gift giving, or going to a church or synagogue service... even if you skip something this year, which is completely understandable and ok, it doesn't mean it has to be forever, it is for now, and whatever you decide in the future will be ok too.

Some people have shared some new traditions they have started after losing a loved one, things they found helpful:

- One idea is to have a **memory box or a stocking**. The box can be gift wrapped and have a slot to put in written down memories that are treasured by the person or the family, sometimes the children draw pictures etc. and put them into the stocking or the box.

- Some families have a **special candle** to light during a prayer or silent moment, or simple have it lit with a photo next to it throughout the holiday.
- Some say a **special prayer or poem** before the meal,
- Some simply **raise a glass and toast to our loved one.**
- Some families with children have a **puzzle table** set aside for adults and children who need to escape for a moment of quiet distraction while working on a communal puzzle.
- I know a lot of people like to change things up by **volunteering** in some fashion over the holidays, and this is almost always a most excellent distraction from grief. There may be a limit on these kinds of opportunities this year because of the pandemic, but perhaps there are some opportunities to reach out to others which distracts us from our own pain.
- **A treasured gift** - Another idea that a few people have shared with me was that instead of buying gifts, they specially chose something left behind by our loved one, an item, a piece of clothing, a hat or a sweatshirt, jewelry or whatever you may want them to have as a special gift to cherish and treasure in loving memory. This can serve two purposes, it gives a loved one a new treasure in loving memory and it helps us to let go of some of the things left behind.
- If you feel up to it, don't underestimate the healing that **prayer** may be able to afford us. Try to take some time in prayer if you are a person of faith.
- Some people in our loss of spouse groups have shared that they bought a **gift for themselves** and some even wrapped it. What a lovely gesture of kindness and compassion to yourself.

And here are a few more tips...

- Please remember that **crying** is ok and even necessary, so go ahead and cry and cry some more.
- **Naps** are pretty awesome, give yourself permission to nap if you find yourself exhausted from grief.
- A **Gratitude journal**- this can be an awesome tool if you have not tried it... Try to find one thing each day or maybe 2 to start, try to focus on what and who you have and have had in your life and what you've been given and what is good, etc. rather than what we do not have... this can pull us out of the black hole of negativity and despair. It is proven beyond a doubt, and I know from my own experience, that gratitude helps us to gain a healthier perspective on things by getting our brains out of the everything sucks mode and being too focused on ourselves, our brains and bodies need some relief.
- **Meditation**- there are lots of options online and apps available to help find a meditation you are comfortable with. The right meditation can help us relax and distract the brain from the pain and some can even help us sleep.

Lastly for this reflection, but certainly not least, is the importance of **reaching out** – it is so important to know that we can call someone to just talk or vent, someone who is willing to listen and does not want to ‘fix’ us. Don’t hesitate to call someone or facetime someone or even set up a zoom meeting ahead of time with family or friends to connect during the day or evening. Stephy’s Place will be offering certain hours on Thanksgiving on Zoom for anyone who wants to join in on a Zoom group with the companionship of one of our facilitators. We will be sending out more information about this as we get closer. You don’t have to be completely alone, please reach out and please take good care of yourselves always.

Through it all, please be kind to yourself, be gentle with yourself, be patient with your grief, and try to remember that grief is love, and our grief is as deep as our love, and it's ok.

Finally I always like to share the Serenity Prayer as a most helpful meditation:

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

Peace and Serenity, Kevin