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Stephy's Place Reflection by Kevin Keelen

The Converging Holidays

If it's not the most wonderful time of the year for you, and you dread the days ahead, you are most certainly not alone. For many people, the holidays can often loom as a horror hanging just over the horizon. These future dates can be so all-consuming that they can emotionally destroy every day leading up to them. Here are a few gentle suggestions to help navigate through the holidays:

Don't let anyone 'should' on you. It's a good idea to have a rule in place in which you do not let anyone tell you how you *should* grieve or how you should 'do' the holidays. People often like to tell us what we 'should' or 'shouldn't' be doing without having any idea how we are truly feeling or what we really need.

Anticipation- 99% of the time for those who are grieving, the approach of a date or event can be much more difficult than the actual day when it rolls around. It is very important to be aware of our inner narrative as the holidays and other special dates approach.

SELF CARE -Please be sure to put yourself on your own list -at the top. We really do need to take good care of ourselves. With that in mind, please try to allow yourself to have a 'pass' for the holidays, if need be, - a pass to DO or NOT DO whatever you want according to your comfort level. It doesn't have to be forever, just this holiday season. Allow yourself the flexibility to do things differently this year knowing it can always change.

Have a Plan- Whatever you decide to do for a holiday, it is a good idea to have a plan ahead of time (even if your plan is to do nothing, it is still a plan). 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. Having a plan can help to ease some of anxiety going into it.

Escape Clause- I always plan an escape if I go somewhere, either I drive, have a ride home, or I call an Uber or a cab. An escape plan may come in handy if you become uncomfortable, overwhelmed or tired; you may want to leave earlier than you anticipated.

Lean In- Sometimes we need to just let the wave catch up and wash over us. Taking a bit of time each day in a quiet space, outside or inside, to lean into our feelings can be helpful. Try not to let the fear of feeling keep you from doing it. We're afraid of what we are already feeling. These feelings will not drown us (although it may seem like it) but we need to feel in order to heal.

Avoid Self-Medicating- I understand how there may be a desire to do some self-medicating during these emotional and difficult times. It never helps. *We need to remember that the only thing that heals grief is to grieve.* There is no potion, no pill, no way through grief than to grieve.

Move your body - Be sure to move around in some way. Take a walk around the block or around the house or do some stretching or yoga. Getting outside has extra added healing benefits; we need the vitamin D from the sun, we need to breathe some fresh air, to hear the birds, see the blue sky, and move our bodies. We need the endorphins secreted by the brain during movement and exercise to feel better.

Mindfulness- Being attentive to your senses and allowing yourself to be present to the present moment can be amazingly helpful throughout the journey of grief.

Eat- The holidays are very much centered on food, so try to treat yourself to some good, delicious food, even if you are alone.

Ask for help. The people who love us are more than willing to help if we only ask. They may have no idea how overwhelmed we are feeling, and it is perfectly ok to give them cues as to what they can do or not do, say or not say, to help us.

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

Gratitude- A most helpful tool. List a few things you are thankful for each day. Gratitude helps to gain a healthier perspective as we may be overly focused on ourselves and our pain. What are we grateful for?

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.

Some people have shared some *New Traditions* they started after their loss:

Memory Box or Stocking. The box can be wrapped with a slot to put in written memories, notes, drawings, photos, etc.

Memorial Candle – can be lit during a prayer or a silent moment, or simply have it lit with a photo next to it throughout the holiday.

Prayers or Poems before the meal

Some families simply **raise a glass and toast their loved one**.

A Puzzle Table set aside for adults and children who need to escape for a moment of quiet distraction.

Volunteering in some fashion over the holidays is a great distraction from grief.

A Treasured Gift - instead of buying gifts, some give an item in loving memory.

Prayer is most helpful for many.

Cry - it's ok and even necessary, go ahead and cry and cry some more.

Nap- give yourself permission if you find yourself exhausted from grief.

We wish you *Peace and Serenity* throughout the holiday season!