

Dealing With Grief During The Holidays

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LEESPORT (Lancaster Co.) —

The holidays are touted as a season of joy, family togetherness, and euphoric celebrating.

But for some people, the upcoming holidays bring pain, despair, and fearful expectations.

"Nobody knows what it feels like to face that first Christmas after a loved one dies, unless it happens to them," said a grieving spouse.

"Unfortunately, it isn't just the first Christmas that is difficult to face. Sometimes the second year is even worse," said Michele Urbine.

Michele, director of training and community outreach for Fred Groff Funeral Home, works with individuals and groups to help them deal with the grieving aspect of death and coping. Michele recently presented a session on the subject at the Penn State Berks County Extension Holiday Program.

To the bereaved, Michele stressed the importance of grieving, of being patient with the process, and of reaching out, allowing yourself to be surrounded by caring people.

Michele said that friends and family need to realize that it isn't only the holiday itself that is difficult, but the fear of the upcoming day can be more painful than the day itself.

The short day hours and the long dark hours of the winter season add to the depression.

Wounds That Don't Heal

Especially difficult for parents and grandparents is burying a child or grandchild. "You expect you or your spouse will die first. But that doesn't always happen," Michelle said.

Gloria Craley knows. She mourned the loss of her daughter-in-law who was killed in an automobile accident. Troubling to the family are the questions: "Why did a young healthy mother have to die? Why did we need to lose a vital and contributing part of our family life?"

The wounds are torn afresh by watching her two-year-old grandson grow up without his mother.

Gloria finds the Christmas season especially difficult. She said that when thinking about the birth of the Christ child, one thinks of the mother-and-child relationship.

"Mothers and their children have a special bond. No one loves like Mom, cooks like Mom, hugs like Mom. . . ."

"I become depressed thinking about what to do to fill the void of his mother's death," Gloria said.

As a grandparent, Gloria said that she may have a tendency to overcompensate for her grandson's loss.

"But nothing anyone does or says can completely fill the loss of a special loved one," she said.

In time, the "relationship title" may be taken over by another. A spouse may remarry, but that doesn't mean the feelings of loss have dissipated. The presence of a new person in family gatherings may add to the turmoil of other family members.

"They don't laugh the same or do the same neat things that the lost loved one did," Gloria said. "Dealing and accepting things as they are is an ongoing job that must be worked on intensely."



For many people who have lost a loved one, the holidays are a painful reminder of their loss. Knowing that these feelings are a normal reaction to grief can help people cope.

Emotional Responses To Grief

"No one has the same experience," Michelle said. However, after much research and work with people experiencing loss, Michelle said that some of the things that the bereaved can expect include the following:

- Your grief will take longer than most people think.
- Your grief will take more energy than you ever imagined.
- You will grieve for many things both symbolic and tangible, not just the death alone.
- Your loss will resurrect old issues, feelings, and unresolved conflicts from the past.
- You may have a combination of anger and depression, such as irritability, frustration, annoyance, or intolerance.
- You will have trouble thinking (memory, organization, and intellectual processing), and making decisions.
- Society will have unrealistic expectations about your mourning and may respond inappropriately to you.

Myths People Hold

Michele said that she heard of a radio survey in which people on the street were asked how long they expect it would take them to recuperate from the death of their spouse. Michele was appalled to hear that the average answer to that question was two months.

Those misconceptions are typical of those who have never experienced the loss of a loved one.

"Intense grief can hit you temporarily, years later in life," Michelle said.

Some other myths that people hold about grief are that all bereaved people grieve in the same way and that grief always declines over time in a steadily decreasing fashion. They erroneously believe when grief is resolved it never comes up again.

Another myth is that it is better to put painful things out of your mind. Some people believe that they cannot allow themselves to

think about the deceased loved one during the holidays or it will make them sad.

On the other hand, some people believe that bereaved individuals need only to express their feelings and they will resolve their grief. It isn't that easy.

Knowing that these feelings and reactions are normal can help people cope with loss. Michelle recommends giving people time to feel emotions that are normal.

Healing Process

"I'm a big believer that prayer is big help," Michele said. "Both tears and laughter bring wonderful healing."

A tribute such as the following can help family members express emotions and enjoy memories of the loved one.

Place four candles on the table surrounded by an unadorned green wreath. When family and friends gather, each candle is lit in tribute to the loved one.

A family member could say when lighting the first candle: "This candle represents our sadness. The hurt from losing you is profound. We are forever reminded of the love we have for you."

When lighting the second candle, these words are suggested: "This candle represents our strength to challenge our misfortune, to comfort those we love, to transform our existence."

When lighting the third candle, say: "This light is for our remembrance, the many memories we hold with laughter, crying, anger, and even the crazy things we did together, the support and hope you gave us to love."

Symbolic of the fourth candle are these words: "This light is the light of our devotion. This season will be different than any other season we have experienced. You have made a difference in the life of many people. I am very grateful for the impact you made on me. A special place in my heart will hold

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