

Healing with Haven

December 2007

Grief at Christmas

"Reprinted with permission from Grief Digest, Centering Corporation, Omaha, Nebraska, 866-218-0101."

By Janelle Bresse Biagioni, Victoria, British Columbia

Christmas is a special time of year. Although pretty packages and twinkling lights are the window dressing for this exciting festivity, it is the warmth and love of family and friends that make the holiday season so memorable. However, it can be a painful time for those experiencing the loss of a loved one.

In May 1990, my husband Gerry, age thirty-seven, survived a horrific police motorcycle crash. He sustained a severe brain injury that resulted in a complete altering of his personality.

Even though the doctors anticipated he would not return to work as a police officer, they expected to see a steady and continuous recovery.

Our gratitude for his survival was boundless and we made every second count in the months following the crash. In fact, we had already begun planning Christmas, knowing it would have a much deeper and richer

meaning for all of us. As Halloween approached, there was no reason to believe Gerry would suffer a sudden and fatal heart attack the way he did.

It was only the end of October, yet department stores glittered with shiny decorations and the staff worked diligently to jump start sales. This became quite evident when I went to purchase clothes for our ten-and twelve-year-old daughters to wear to their father's funeral. The sales clerk innocently asked if I were getting an early start on my holiday shopping. I will never forget the piercing pain in my heart as I stumbled for an answer.

I left the mall in tears, realizing just how out of sync I was with the outside world. The holiday momentum was building, and I felt like a huge black hole was about to swallow me. I wanted to scream. I wanted the world to stop spinning. I wanted to run away, to find some place that wasn't dripping

with tinsel and holiday cheer. Moreover, I wanted my family back.

The following weeks passed and December 25th approached quickly. I vacillated between wanting to dismiss Christmas and wanting to embrace it along with the typical childhood excitement that my daughters Myriah and Dale were beginning to brim with. While it was easy to sustain resentment toward the outside world, it was impossible for me to resist them. The girls made their annual wish list and

they insisted we decorate the house. Their actions made it abundantly clear that Christmas was going to happen, whether I wanted it to or not.

In looking back, I can see that my girls taught me more about grieving than I could ever have taught them. They missed their dad terribly and they knew that life would never

be the same for us. Yet, they welcomed the enchantment of Christmas with the same enthusiasm as they had in years prior, albeit in a different way. They made a choice to participate in the enthusiasm of Christmas. Being children, they may not have been aware of the implications of this choice.

Perhaps, that was the redeeming feature. By making an unconscious choice, they were relieved of any damning self-judgment that would cite disrespect to their father's memory. These little children instinctively knew their lives had to go on and they showed me that mine had to as well. They taught me that we had to forgive ourselves for being the ones left here to live.

Christmas did go on for us that year. And yes, it was very different. The three of us pulled together as a family and we developed new traditions to help face the day. For instance,

Continued on next page...



....Continued from previous page..

we hung a picture of my husband in the Christmas tree, declaring him our Christmas star. We dedicated Christmas Eve as the day to honor him by making a visit to the cemetery. It was there that I presented each daughter with one of our wedding bands as a gift from their father and me. Afterward, we returned home for a quiet evening and reminisced about our favorite family times together. The tears flowed—at times uncontrollably—but in a very healing way.

Surprisingly, Christmas Day was quite pleasant. It wasn't filled with heavy sadness or feelings of sorrow, as I had anticipated. Instead, it was teeming with love and compassion. Our extended family and close friends joined us for the day. During the traditional turkey dinner, we exchanged stories of years gone by, many of them bringing smiles and laughter to everyone.

I am thankful I opened my heart to my children and allowed them to help me embrace Christmas that year. In doing so, we renewed our strength and spirit together and we found the

courage we needed to go on and enjoy life. Two years later, we received a new family—complete with a dad and three more children. Our 'blended family' uses Christmas to celebrate the people we are fortunate to have with us in life and as a way to remember those we have lost, but hold so dearly in our hearts.

If you are facing Christmas alone for the first time, I encourage you to reach out to someone you trust and share your feelings with them. Devote a place and time before Christmas Day in which you can openly honor your loved one and acknowledge your feelings. On Christmas Day, intentionally set your focus on family and friends who not only share in your loss, but who bring precious gifts of

love and support to aid in your healing journey.

REMEMBER, YOU ARE NOT ALONE, ALTHOUGH YOU MAY FEEL THIS WAY. MANY PEOPLE HAVE BEEN WHERE YOU ARE AND WE CARE DEEPLY. 🙏



Christmas

Christmas without you, lurks outside, squatting a few hours, like steps, away.

At one point I thought maybe, if we didn't get together, it wouldn't be as bad as seeing every familiar face there...Except yours.

But I know that wouldn't be fair to your grandchildren, who love every occasion that bring them together.

Worse, it would be the coward's way out. I know you wouldn't want that.

So, in your honor as much as to honor Jesus' birth; tomorrow, we will gather as we always have on Christmas, despite you not being there except in spirit.

Tomorrow, I will share Christmas with family. We will be together, as you always wanted.

Tonight, alone, I'll let go. Embrace the sadness, shed the tears. Tomorrow, I will smile for Christmas, and for you.

©Joyce L. E. Kaaihue
Honolulu, HI 2002



De-Stressing The Holidays

By Susan Marinac Cleveland, OH

©Reprinted with permission from Bereavement Publications, Inc., *Living With Loss Magazine*, Winter 2006 (888) 604-4673, www.livingwithloss.com

For many people the holiday season can mean stress and frustration instead of peace and joy. Family issues, time constraints, finances, and a sense that everything must be “perfect” can lead to feelings of depression and a sense of feeling overwhelmed. In today’s society we are so inundated with visual images of the perfect family, the perfect home, the perfect holiday gathering, that it can be difficult to set realistic expectations for ourselves. The holiday “season” begins earlier and earlier every year. Stores are creating their holiday displays well before Halloween. The season grows longer and longer every year and our patience grows shorter.

The good news is we CAN simplify the holidays, reduce our stress and create more quality time with family and friends. First, we need to set realistic expectations and not compare ourselves to others. Whatever way you choose to celebrate is right for you. Sometimes we think that we must have things a certain way because that is how we’ve “always done it”. Really, it is OK to change — and to eliminate some things — especially if they are causing stress. For example, there’s no need to spend so much money during the holidays. The things that we desire the most: love, friendship, companionship, cannot be bought. Try a gift “lottery” or a white elephant gift exchange instead of buying gifts for every member of your family this year. Or decide as a family that you are all going to donate to a charity in lieu of giving gifts. Then have a family meeting where you talk about the charity and your reason for giving.

It is unfortunate, but true that the times we are stressed tend to be the times that we don’t do what we know will help us. Even if we know what we should be doing, it doesn’t help unless we actually do it. Following are some strategies that can help us cope.

- 1. Accept your feelings.** Feelings are neither right nor wrong. They are just feelings. We need to laugh and to cry. It is normal to express your feelings and you do not have to be in a good mood just because it is the holiday season.
- 2. Reach out to others.** If you are feeling down or lonely, call a friend and go out for a cup of coffee. You may want to get involved with your church, sign up for a class or volunteer.

Even if you do not have many family members, you do not have to go through the holidays alone.

- 3. Get Organized.** Develop your holiday plan ahead of time when you are not so busy. Set aside time for all of your activities and schedule it on your calendar. Schedule in all of the preparation time you need as well. This will help to avoid last minute scrambles.

- 4. Know thyself.** Learn to say no if you need to. We all have limits. People really do understand when you cannot commit to everything. Don’t take on more than you can handle or you will become angry and resentful.

- 5. Take time to breathe.** Spending even 10 minutes alone just relaxing and focusing on your breathing can be a huge stress reducer. You can also listen to soothing music to enhance relaxation.

- 6. Move it.** Schedule time for exercise. Walking is great exercise and the perfect activity to start and exercise program. Gentle stretching before going to sleep at night will promote relaxation and help you to get a better night’s sleep. You will wake up feeling refreshed and more focused.

- 7. Delegate.** You do not have to do everything yourself. Enlist other family members to take on tasks.

- 8. ZZZZZ.** Healthy sleep habits are essential. Try to get eight hours of sleep per night and do not consume any caffeine after 3 p.m.

- 9. Healthy eating.** We are so tempted throughout this season to consume more than we are used to. Watch the sweets. Try drinking a large glass of water before the next holiday party so you will feel more full and not want to pick.

- 10. Seek professional help if needed.** If you find you have a permeating sadness that you cannot shake or if you are plagued by feelings of helplessness, anxiety or despair, you may need the advice of a professional. Talk to your doctor and he or she can assist you.

Above all, go easy on yourself. It’s okay to make mistakes. Try and incorporate one positive idea into each day and then reflect on the day before you go to bed to see how you could improve or pat yourself on the back for a job well done. If you take the time to remember what is most important and seek support if you need it, you will truly have a happy holiday. 🎁



Grief & Loss Seminar Series

The next seminar will be held on January 24th from 3pm-4:30pm @ 2895 Temple Ave, Signal Hill. Light refreshments will be served. For more information please contact Tina Stephenitch at 562-426-7500 ext 406.

Individual/Group Support

As many of you may already know, Haven Hospice offers individual support and group support to all people in the community who are going through the difficult journey of bereavement. For more information on our groups or to make an appointment for individual support please contact Tina Stephenitch, Bereavement Coordinator at (562) 426-7500 ext 406

Make a Difference in Someone's life

Do you have a few hours a week to listen, give support, or assist in the office? Haven Hospice is seeking people who would like to give some of their time visiting patients, helping in the office or doing community outreach. If you are interested in this rewarding opportunity, or know anyone who maybe interested in volunteering their time, please contact Tina Stephenitch, Volunteer Coordinator (562) 426-7500 ext 406 for more information.

Help us keep our mailing list current!

Are you moving and still wish to receive Healing with Haven? Or perhaps you no longer wish to receive our monthly newsletter? Please, call Tina Stephenitch at (562) 426-7500 ext 406.



Haven Hospice™

2895 Temple Ave
Signal Hill, CA 90755

Call toll-free at (877) 366-4466

