

Grieving during the holidays

by Dr. Laura Garcia-Browning

IT'S not always the most wonderful time of the year. Whether the loss is recent or happened years ago, the holidays can be one of the most difficult times of the year to endure when dealing with the loss of a loved one.

Ann* found that after the death of her mother the holidays became very difficult. She stopped spending time with other family members and became more and more isolated. Things that she used to enjoy—visiting friends, holiday shopping, baking for her family—became painful chores. A million times a day she would want to pick up the phone to tell her mother about something that had happened, seeing a great item on sale or hearing their favourite holiday song, before realizing with a start that her mother would not be there to answer the phone.

Ann felt lost during this time of year because the holidays had been a time when she and her mother had shared a lot of wonderful moments together. She felt the pain of loss getting worse every time she did the things they had traditionally done together. As a result, she began avoiding all of her usual holiday activities. She found it hard to talk about her mother without crying, so she became more and more withdrawn.

Ann's family noticed the change in her and urged her to seek help. Over the course of treatment Ann began to speak more openly about her mother. She embraced new holiday traditions that honoured her mother and their time together. She also reclaimed some of the traditions that had brought her joy in the past. Over time, the good memories she and her mother had shared during the holidays once again brought her more feelings of joy than of pain. Ann had learned to carry her loss in a way that she could live with.

What to do when grief strikes. The holidays are a time of challenge, but they are also



For those suffering a loss, the holidays are a time of challenge, but also a time of great opportunity.

a time of great opportunity. It is only at this time of year that we can incorporate our memories of the ones we love into the traditions that make this time of year so difficult, and so special.

Claire lost her son last year, right before the holidays. She and her husband have been dealing with grief since that time, but the upcoming holiday had her filled with dread. She was afraid that the anniversary of her son's death, along with having to engage in all the typical holiday events that her son had loved, would be too much for her to handle. This past summer, Claire found a gift that she had bought for her son prior to his death, a video game, now long out of date, that he had been really excited about. She vividly recalled the day she came across that wrapped gift. The sadness that hit her in that moment was as strong as the day she had heard about the car accident that had taken his life. Claire didn't know what to

* All names have been changed and all examples are amalgams of various people's experiences. Confidentiality and privacy are one of the cornerstones of mental health treatment.

do with that gift. Its presence reminded her every day of her loss, but she couldn't bring herself to throw it away.

Create new traditions. Honouring our loved ones' memory is one of the most effective ways to carry grief with dignity and skill. Writing a letter to your loved one or visiting a place where you feel connected with them are effective ways to give voice to feelings of grief. Engaging in a new holiday traditions, whether privately or with trusted friends or family members, can also be a very effective plan.

Claire and her husband, in consultation with their treating psychologist, decided to take the gift to her son's grave. They each wrote and read a short passage about how much they loved and missed their son. Afterwards, Claire found that she felt more peaceful than she had in months, so much so that she and her husband decided to engage in a similar ceremony every year.

Ann also implemented her own coping ritual. She found that visiting her mother's favourite outdoor space and voicing the events of the holiday, just as they had done in the past, helped her feel more connected and eased her feelings of sadness.

There are a multitude of traditions and rituals that can help with healing. Be creative and do what feels right for you and your family.

Reach out to friends & family.

Grief often brings on the desire to isolate ourselves from the world, to pull the blinds, turn off our phones, and be alone. Although no one can replace the person we have lost, there are others in your life who can offer you support, and now is the time to reach out to those people.

Tune in to your own feelings. Do you feel better or worse after a day of isolation? Who in your life lifts your spirits after you spend time with them? Who makes you feel more drained after an hour? Your emotions are an excellent barometer of what you need—keep a list of the people and activities that brighten your day, and of the ones that increase feelings of sadness. Now is the time to be brave and engage in new activities and reach out to new people. Finding out what works for your own individual needs requires creativity and courage.

Hearing the cry for help—in others and in ourselves.

The holidays are a difficult time for many reasons. Often, like with Ann, traditional activities spark painful memories of the people

we are missing. For others, such as Claire, we get stuck thinking about what 'should have been' and grieving for future holidays and events that can no longer happen. Feelings of sadness following the loss of a loved one are an important and difficult part of the healing process. Honouring and voicing these feelings is essential to our wellbeing.

At times though, grieving can become a more overwhelming and consuming process. If the days turn into months or years, and feelings remain as intense as before, if isolation from other loved

ones has become a normal part of your day, if sadness is a constant companion, or if you find yourself unable to enjoy any of the activities that used to bring you comfort, then it may be worth considering seeking help and support from a professional who is trained to help you cope with loss. Making that call for help can be one of the best ways to deal with grief during the holidays and throughout the year.

In addition to social supports, there are also a variety of professionals trained to help during these difficult times. Clinical psychologists offer a unique set of skills to help individuals cope with traumas and an empathic ear to help support

an individual through their healing journey. There are support groups offered in Vaughan through Bereaved Families of Ontario (<http://www.bfoyr.com/>). They also offer specific support sessions on dealing with the holidays, one-to-one meetings with trained facilitators, and telephone support.

Hospice Vaughan offers many services including: Emotional support for all loved ones; Trained volunteers to visit with clients and give emotional support; Help with practical, day-to-day needs like shopping, appointments and outings; Telephone counselling in crisis situations; Respite care, to give at-home caregivers a break; Sympathetic listeners who can talk about and hear about dying; Sensitivity to personal, cultural and religious values, beliefs and practices; Counselling to help to adjust to change and loss; Ongoing bereavement support after the death of a loved one; and Referral services and programs within the community (<http://www.hospicevaughan.com/programs.html>).

Additionally, Wellspring also offers a variety of services for individuals coping with the loss of a loved one due to cancer (<http://www.wellspring.ca/Sunnybrook/About-Us/Overview.aspx>).

There is a lot of help available; the key is making the call to get the help you need. **W**

• Dr. Laura Garcia-Browning works privately at the office of Dr. Arbus, Dr. Weidenfelder and Associates at their private practice office in Maple, Ontario. They are located at 9983 Keele Street, Suite 105 and can be reached at 416-801-8889. Their website can be found at www.psychologyhelps.ca.



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