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## Coping With Grief or Sadness During the Holidays

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Thank you for joining us for this discussion of holiday stress and mood management strategies for the holidays and winter months. We'll be covering a number of the points below during the presentation and we welcome your participation—feel free to share your own thoughts about the information presented and to ask any questions about the items listed below, or other related issues.

### Overview of Holiday Stress

- Are the holidays stressful for everyone?
  - Not everyone finds the holidays to be a time of stress but a number of people do struggle with this time of the year. Perhaps one of the first widely recognized indications that the Christmas/ Chanukah season can be difficult came from the famous 1967 Holmes & Rahe study of the relationship between life events and susceptibility to illness. This scale, listing over forty stressful life events, includes the holidays as a stressful event which might trigger a period of physical illness.
  - Another more recent survey is provided below:

Dateline NBC/Prevention Magazine Holiday Stress Survey						
How stressful are the following activities?						
	Not at all	Not too	Somewhat	Very	Doesn't apply	Don't know
Christmas and Hanukkah holiday season?	37%	21%	30%	11%	1%	0%
Your last job interview?	38%	14%	25%	11%	9%	3%
Asking for a raise?	27%	8%	24%	19%	18%	4%
Getting a ticket for speeding?	12%	5%	27%	38%	15%	3%
Going to the dentist?	32%	14%	25%	26%	3%	0%

- Aren't the holidays supposed to be a joyous time of the year? In addition to the strain of coping with grief or bereavement during the holidays, why might the season be stressful?
  - Here are some of the more commonly-cited reasons for the experience of increased stress during the holiday season:
    - Disruption in normal activities, including work schedule, sleep and diet
    - The rush to decorate the house—additional strain on top of an already-busy life
    - Physical demands and fatigue
    - Embellished memories of past holiday seasons
    - Inflated expectations due to media depictions of the “perfect” holiday season
    - Financial strain
    - Struggles with bereavement, particularly during the first holiday since losing a loved one
    - Possible seasonal affective disorder
    - Resurfacing of old family conflicts

## Issues and Coping Strategies for Grief During the Holidays

It has long been observed that the holiday season poses difficulties for those struggling with bereavement and loss. A number of resources are available for those who are working to manage grief during the holidays—a brief summary of some of the more common observations and recommended coping strategies is provided below:

- Psychologist Susan Apollon, author of *Touched by the Extraordinary: An Intuitive Psychologist Shares Insights, Lessons, and True Stories of Spirit and Love to Transform and Heal the Soul*, recognizes that some people struggling with grief may wish to crawl under the covers and wait until the turn of the new year, avoiding the pain of the holiday season. "The holidays are painful if someone you love has recently died, or if you're going through a divorce, or even if your child has moved away," says Apollon. "Special days remind us of our loss. Family is supposed to be together during the holidays, and when things aren't the way they're 'supposed' to be, of course it's distressing. But you can get through the holidays," she promises. "In fact, even if your grief is very fresh, you can create a space to celebrate in your own way. The holidays will never be the same again but life is change, by its very nature. Little by little you will form a new identity and learn to connect with your lost loved one in a different way. You'll form new memories and new traditions. Apollon offers several tips for finding holiday joy, even during time of sadness and loss (for further information see <http://newsblaze.com/story/20061115094117tsop.nb/topstory>):
- Give yourself permission to cry. Apollon's mantra on dealing with grief is "face it, embrace it, and replace it." In other words, the only way to "get over" sadness is to experience it. "If you need to cry, cry, even if you're at a party and have to leave the room," says Apollon. "You might even set aside an evening to get in touch with your grief. Fix the cocoa you used to drink with your mother or go through your photo albums. It's healthier to feel the sadness and loss than to detach yourself from it. It's right and normal to grieve; just don't make it the dominant part of who you are."
- It's okay to break tradition. It's also okay to say no. You know your own limitations, says Apollon. If you simply can't face hosting your annual holiday feast, complete with dozens of relatives, don't try to soldier through it for the sake of your guests. People will understand. In fact, it's okay to leave town altogether. "Some people find it helpful to get away completely, to somewhere that doesn't remind them of holidays past," notes Apollon. "You might consider a tropical vacation, or you might take the time to visit a friend across the country. Doing something completely different can be a good coping mechanism, especially for that first tough year."
- Consciously attach a new meaning to the holidays. Holidays are difficult because they remind you that someone special to you—someone who should be there—is gone. In your mind, your daughter (or mother or husband or friend) is Thanksgiving or Christmas or Hanukkah. Without that person, family dinners and parties just don't have the same meaning. That's why Apollon suggests you find a new way to connect with the person you've lost. "Buy the gifts that you would be giving to your lost loved one and donate them to a charity or volunteer in a hospital or soup kitchen," says Apollon. "If you consciously guide yourself to attach a new meaning, one that still involves your lost loved one, you will find that you are able to create a new beginning for your holiday celebrations with that person."
- Honor your lost loved one in a way that feels comfortable to you. It's usually better to acknowledge your loss than to pretend that nothing has changed. You might light a special candle for your loved one, hang a tree ornament in his memory, or bring out a favorite photo. "Some clients actually set a place at the table for their missing family member," says Apollon. "I've even had a few tell me they received a 'message' of gratitude from their loved one for acknowledging him or her! On the other hand, some people discover that the empty chair is more upsetting than comforting. Do what feels right to you."
- If you don't want to go all out, do the holidays in a small way. You don't have to decorate lavishly or bake up your usual six dozen secret-family-recipe homemade cookies to celebrate the holidays. Instead, put up a tiny tree and pop a pack of pre-made cookies in the oven. "Recognizing the holidays in some small way can be healing," says Apollon. "It's a way of accepting the fact that life goes on and of giving yourself permission to enjoy small pleasures."

- On the other hand, if you absolutely can't find any holiday joy, go find some other kind. Maybe you're too depressed or too angry to celebrate Christmas or Hanukkah even in a tiny way. That's okay, says Apollon. But don't deprive yourself of all joy. Go to a movie. Meet a friend for coffee. Take a long nature hike with your beloved dog. Make it a priority to do something that brings pleasure, even if it's not holiday related.
  - Learn to be conscious of the moment. Practice being fully present in the now; it truly is where joy resides. "Every day of your life, every moment of your life, you can choose joy or not," Apollon reflects. "Of course, no one feels joyful all the time, but when we learn to live in the present-to really pay attention to how food tastes or what a child's laugh sounds like or how the snowflakes look against the edge of the woods-we can savor moments of delight even in a time of grief."
  - Realize that miracles really do happen at the holidays. Here's the thing about the holidays, says Apollon. They really are magic. You knew this as a child but may have forgotten it. But spiritual occasions like holidays allow us to step outside the box we live in most of the time and let miracles in. "Paradoxical as it sounds, grief and holidays are a lot alike," she reflects. "They both help us detach from trivial things and focus on what's important, what's real. Open your mind and heart this year and see what happens. Maybe you'll feel a sense of connection with your loved one who passed on, or maybe you'll feel joy for the first time since your loss. Either one might qualify as a miracle."
- Grief counselor, Sherry Russell, offers similar advice to those struggling with bereavement issues during the holiday season (for further information see <http://www.authorsden.com/visit/viewarticle.asp?AuthorID=8848&id=16266>):
- Take time for yourself. Don't over burden yourself with too many chores. Take time to plan and time to prepare for the day. Be careful not to isolate yourself. Don't cut yourself off from the support of family and friends.
  - Let yourself rest. Practice relaxation techniques to help the stress level. Trying to weave your grief into your life is a difficult and a formidable task. You need rest to help you make it through tough times. Emotionally, physically and psychologically, the holidays are draining. You will need your strength.
  - Shield yourself. Protect yourself from events and gatherings that are too much to handle. When asked to a gathering, ask who will be there and what they will be doing. Plan as much as you can for the approaching holidays. Be aware that this may be a difficult time with difficult people. The additional stress may affect you emotionally, mentally, and physically. It is important to be prepared for these feelings. Do holiday shopping early or give IOU's out and do the shopping when you feel more comfortable.
  - Allow yourself to back slide. You can't always be making headway. Sometimes grief comes in waves. One week you feel like you are doing great and then the next you feel like you did when the loss first happened. Give yourself a break and don't demand too much from yourself. It takes time and backsliding is part of working your way through your grief.
  - Consider your own personal goals. Thinking about goals shows you are healing. Set small goals just for a day and then move on to setting a goal for next week and then next month. Goals are avenues of hope for tomorrow.
  - Cherish small delights. Take pleasure in the small delights of the day as often as you can. Laughter is a wonderful delight. Remembering a wonderful time with your loved may bring tears and laughter at the same time as well as warm your heart.
  - Keep a log of the decisions that come up in your life. Do like Ben Franklin and make a list of the pros and the cons for each decision. Also prioritize and determine if there are any things you can delegate. Imagine your decisions will affect no one but you. If you isolate the decision to that level, it will make it easier to understand the direct impact the decision will have on your life.
  - Realize that to choose something, you are usually giving up something. So decide which would you least mind sacrificing?
  - Don't second guess. Once you have made up your mind become committed to yourself and the decision.

- Hold on to your wallet. Sometimes grief can play havoc with the purse strings. People will spend more in times of depression so be careful. It is satisfactory to give IOU's to people and you can shop under better circumstances. If shopping is overwhelming, try using catalogues or shop during off hours.
  - Change something. Changing traditions may be helpful. It doesn't mean you toss out the old completely. Small changes may make you feel more in control and less stressful. Recognize that holidays won't be the same. If you try to keep everything as it was, you'll be disappointed. Doing things a bit differently can acknowledge the change while preserving continuity with the past. Open presents Christmas Eve instead of Christmas morning. Vary the timing of Chanukah gift giving. Have dinner at a different time or place. Let the children take over decorating the house, the tree, baking and food preparation, etc.
  - Allow the tears. Certain memories will pop into your head that may bring tears of sadness or joy but definitely memories. A particular ornament may trigger a memory. A particular gathering, food or song may bring teardrops. Think if you can handle the responsibility of the family dinner, etc. or should you ask someone else to do it? Do you want to talk about your loved one or not? Should you stay here for the holidays or go to a completely different environment?
- Cynthia Bozich-Keith, a clinical assistant professor in Purdue University's School of Nursing, has provided a useful set of recommendations for managing holiday grief and bereavement (for further information see <http://psychcentral.com/news/2006/11/21/embrace-memories-to-cope-with-holiday-grief/>):
- Be gentle with yourself. Be sure to take time out to care for yourself, whether it is through pampering or just slowing down your pace.
  - Be sure to eat a nutritious diet, exercise, get adequate sleep and avoid alcohol.
  - Talk about your feelings with people you love and who love you. Allow yourself the right to talk about the person who died. The process of sharing memories may help with the healing process.
  - Set limits. Be realistic about the difference between what you want to do and what you can do vs. what you should do. "The shoulds will get you every time," Bozich-Keith says. "It's important to let go of the need to be perfect or doing it all. If you're used to doing all of the shopping, cooking and decorating around the holidays, perhaps this is the year to share those things with others."
  - Don't feel guilty if you find yourself enjoying yourself around the holidays. "It is not disrespectful to the memory of your loved one if you have a good time," she says. "Your loved one would be happy to know you are enjoying yourself."
  - Embrace your memories and find comfort in them. "This is the bittersweet part," she says. "Our memories often bring us to both tears and laughter, but they are what sustain us through the years."
  - Celebrate life. Attend a holiday or religious service if faith is part of your life. Some people find comfort in acts of remembrance such as donating a poinsettia in memory of a loved one at church or making a donation in their name to a charity. Also, recognize that it is acceptable to create new traditions.

*Dr. John Jochem is a clinical psychologist with many years experience working with adults, adolescents, couples and families. Should you have any questions about this presentation, or wish to learn more about the range of services available through Dr. Jochem's practice, Hawthorn Counseling Group, feel free to call Dr. Jochem at (847) 680-0755 or contact him via email at [jjochem@aol.com](mailto:jjochem@aol.com) .*