



Holidays filled with love

Every year as we close the door on ghosts, goblins and Halloween candy, the countdown begins. It's the fast-forward march to the holiday season, from Thanksgiving to New Year's, or Ramadan time, and Eids, when ordinary life turns into plans, conversations, dreams and anxieties about where you are going, who you will be with, what you'll wear and on and on... and on. For those who have suffered a loss or are far from family, thoughts about the holidays bring up not only feelings of joy but also of sadness. If you are one of those sighing in despair, take heart. It is possible to acknowledge and use those feelings to deepen the meaning of the holidays and bring about a new kind of joy.

Holiday merriment — forced and real — can also magnify feelings of grief. Whether the loss was recent or some time ago, memories collide with family traditions and emphasize the sense of loss. Don't move robotically through these occasions as if nothing has changed, — instead, create a new activity that will at once honor the missing loved one and perhaps introduce a new tradition as well. One way is to start the season by asking family and friends to talk about what they miss most about the departed person — perhaps Dad's keen sense of the absurd or Mom's unfailing graciousness. These stories can be shared at the holiday table — at Thanksgiving for instance, celebrants can tell what the person brought into their life for which they are most thankful. Another idea is to adapt a Jewish tradition that honors the lost loved one — called Yahrzeit, a long-burning candle remains lit for 24 hours around the anniversary of his/her death. You might make this a Thanksgiving tradition, lighting a candle that burns all day as a way to keep your loved one present and also to help children and grandchildren understand the concept of memorializing loved ones. (Long-burning candles are available in specialty stores and even supermarkets.) If your loss is solitary, perhaps because you're not with family at Thanksgiving, or Ramadan and Eid, or you are mourning a failed relationship or a different sadness, make your own private list of memories. You could also use your feelings as a spur to call your family or friends for connection.

SHARING YOUR SADNESS

Sadness is part of life and nothing to hide, "Feeling sad about your loss is healthy and profound," "It's a meaningful display of your love." When people hide their sadness and pretend they aren't feeling it, the internalized sorrow can lead to serious depression and even illness, says Lauren. Better is to share your feelings and work through them. If you are concerned about bringing others down, Lauren suggests finding an outlet before the festivities begin. Talk to a person or group with whom you are comfortable sharing your deep feelings. Doing so will help smooth the raw edges of



your emotions so they aren't overwhelming. Having processed some of the heaviest ones, you may even be able to focus on positive memories to share during the holiday celebrations.

FEELING CONNECTED

Directly or indirectly, holidays always focus us on family, the one that is there and the ones that are not. If you are distant from your family, literally or figuratively, you may feel despair and even panic. Holidays tend to generate reflection about your life — often in comparison to those around you. During the holidays, personal struggles may leave you feeling alone, in sharp contrast to the fairytale image of a big family table with happy people beaming at the turkey, à la a Norman Rockwell painting, that you may presume is occurring in “everyone else’s house.”

In order to feel better, you could visit residents of a nursing home, work at a soup kitchen or take food to firefighters, but it is crucial to spend at least part of a holiday with people to whom you feel connected. Instead of worrying about being left out, The advice is speaking up and asking friends if you can join them. People feel good about reaching out to others who might need emotional support — but they don't always know that support is needed. Also, many people really enjoy adding newcomers to the family/friend mix at a holiday celebration. “Trust me,” says Lauren, “good friends will be delighted to hear you would like to join them for the events they have lavished so much time and thought on.”

MAKE SPECIAL DAYS EVEN BETTER

Even without personal drama in their lives, people often complain that the holidays have become empty of real meaning. We suggest activities that can add a refreshingly personal depth. Here's what her family does: Before the Thanksgiving dinner, or Eid, or Iftar, etc., everyone writes general questions about past holidays on slips of paper to be drawn out and responded to. Possibilities include describing your most memorable Thanksgiving (searching for a turkey dinner in a foreign country, for example) or the worst culinary disaster (the turkey that stubbornly remained half raw after hours in the oven). The next round of questions can go deeper, covering topics such as your most poignant holiday memory. “By engaging in thoughtful activities like these, you can strengthen connections and get in touch with deeper emotions, which will start a tradition that can make all future holidays deeper and more memorable,”