

# MANAGING GRIEF AT CHRISTMAS



When someone important in a family has died, Christmas can feel very different and it can be hard to manage. Christmas is a very family focused holiday, and after a bereavement, this can highlight the gap in a family even more.

For many grieving families, Christmas can feel like a struggle with a strong sense that things can never be the same again. In particular, facing the first Christmas without that special person can be especially painful, although Christmas can be a painful time even if the bereavement was a long time ago.

Families that we work with tell us that the run up to Christmas, as well as the day itself, can be very hard to deal with. It can feel as though the whole world is happy except for you. It can be hard to find the energy bereavement and positivity for Christmas planning – the shopping for presents, the food preparations, the sending of cards and taking part in festivities. For families who are struggling, it can be very hard to support children who are also grieving.

## What can you do?

It is important to make time to acknowledge your feelings. In order to support your children, you also have to take care of yourself. The Christmas period usually means that normal routines are disrupted, and this can make it easier to forget to look after yourself.

Trying to keep to regular patterns of sleeping and eating are small things that can make a difference. Also consider:

- Try to be with family and friends who understand and will accept you however you are; who will allow you to laugh, cry and remember as you need to
- Try not to expect too much of yourself; grieving is exhausting and, especially in the early days, can leave you with little energy for much else. Christmas comes with a lot of pressure even when everything is running smoothly. Be kind to yourself and try to minimise pressure and expectations
- Accept offers of help where you can; family and friends will want to support you, and accepting offers from people to cook for you, take the children out, decorate the house etc. will help you and those around you

## Further things you might want to consider:

- **Whether to celebrate** - some bereaved families find that they do not wish to celebrate Christmas at all, whilst some find that simply maintaining their routine and celebrating as normal is the best tribute they can pay their loved one. Where children are involved, it's worth acknowledging together that things are different, and sharing as far as possible how this makes the individuals in the family feel. You can then plan together for the type of Christmas that feels manageable. Remember that many children gain comfort from routine. You might decide to modify the way you celebrate Christmas and still make it meaningful to you and your child. The best way to find out what your child needs or will find most comforting is to ask them.

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## Further things you might want to consider (continued):

- There are many different ways to mourn - remember that there is no right or wrong way to grieve and there is no set timetable for a person to grieve. Everyone grieves differently. As long there is enough love and support available, grieving actually helps a child accept their loss and move on with their life. Grief is a normal and natural reaction to an experience of loss such as a death of a loved one.
- **Remembering your loved one** – it may feel important to make a special effort to remember the person who has died. Visit a significant place, hang a special decoration on the tree, light a candle in their memory – these are just some of the things families have done together and found comforting. Families may have photos or particular memories which they treasure; sharing these may be something that brings them together. Families may choose Christmas day to start a memory jar with special memories of their loved one; they could each write a special message to their loved one which they make into memorial bunting; they may decide to start a family memorial journal, and each write something in it on Christmas day. We can help with other ideas for remembering your loved ones
- **Communication** - encouraging children to talk openly about their concerns, listening respectfully to what they have to say and sharing your own thoughts can really help. If your child becomes overwhelmed with sadness, try to stay with them and acknowledge their feelings. Show them that you understand and are there for them. Some children may not be able to verbalise their feelings, so having them draw or write down their thoughts and feelings may help.
- Remember that children can feel very isolated with their feelings - especially if they feel that none of the adults around them are particularly upset. Try not to hide your feelings from your children as this will only teach them to deny their own feelings. Your child needs to know that it is not their fault if the adults around them are sad or angry. Explain to them that you may not be in the best physical and/or emotional state during this time, but it is not because of anything they did.
- **Remember, children's emotions can change very quickly** - let your child know that it is acceptable to happily unwrap their presents one moment and then cry or feel sad the next. It can be confusing experiencing both feelings at the same time, so it is important to help them understand that it is normal and that they are not expected to feel any particular way. Some children may feel guilty because they feel happy or excited despite their loss. Remind them that expressing joy and being happy doesn't mean that they miss the lost loved one any less.



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## Concluding thoughts

Facing Christmas whilst grieving can be a daunting prospect. For some children, Christmas after a loss of a loved one may initiate renewed feelings of grief. With adolescents, all the things that usually make it difficult for parents to communicate with them under normal circumstances are often exacerbated while grieving. Great patience and love is required to get through this time. Doing what works for you and your family at a time of bereavement is what matters the most. As far as you can, try to work out which arrangements will best suit your needs and the needs of your children who share your loss.

Remember that as time passes, special occasions like Christmas can help us to begin to focus on happier memories of good times shared in the past.

If you would find it helpful to discuss your concerns and how you can plan for Christmas whilst supporting your children, then we'd love to hear from you.

