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Caregiving Holiday Blues

The holidays can be a mixed blessing. On the one hand, family gets together and celebrates many years of traditions. On the other, there may be stresses and strains, and the reality is not as glowing as the dreams and expectations. Add in concerns about an aging relative, and feelings of sadness can become overwhelming. Check out our tips for finding your balance between the happy and the sad.

Coping with the holiday blues



Caring for a seriously ill family member can lend a tinge of blue to the holidays.

It may be sadness that cherished family rituals are no longer possible.

Or you may be worried that this year will be the last for a sick or ailing loved one.

Perhaps the thought of visiting relatives is simply exhausting.

Here are some ways to handle these common stressors.

It doesn't have to be "all or nothing." Even if some family customs are no longer realistic, embrace what's still possible. And let go of the guilt-laden "shoulds."

- **Keep it simple.** Perhaps you still gather at Mom and Dad's, but order a precooked, take-out meal. Or have everyone contribute to the meal. Try to capture the essence in a way that no one person shoulders a big burden.
- **Focus on the most meaningful activities.** Your energy and your loved one's energy are limited! Pick one ritual that truly gives you that holiday lift.

Acknowledge the "anticipatory grief." You're not crazy if pulling out your holiday sweater brings on a bout of tears.

- **A holiday can sharpen awareness of life's impermanence.** You may feel grief about the losses you have already experienced. And grief as you realize your loved one may not be with you next year. These feelings are normal. If possible, share them with someone who understands.
- **Celebrate your loved one's presence.** Trying to "make this holiday the best" may distract you from spending quality time with your relative. Instead, take the opportunity to cherish what you have now, and revel together in shared memories of holidays past.

Maintain your normal self-care routines. In this season of extra stress, it's especially important to get enough sleep, eat sensibly, and exercise regularly.



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Addressing your losses



Holidays or not, as a family caregiver, you are likely experiencing many types of loss, each triggering normal, if uncomfortable, emotional responses.

Losing the person you love. Illness and frailty can change a person. So, too, can some of the behavior and personality changes that often occur with dementia. The absence of familiar ways to connect may bring up feelings of sadness and grieving well before your relative is physically gone.

Losing your former life. Have you had to drop everything to take care of your family member? Anger, resentment, frustration—and then guilt—are understandable responses to this very real sacrifice.

Losing your connections. Caring for a family member can be very isolating. You may feel alone with your responsibilities and feel that no one helps or understands. This experience often prompts anxiety and fear.

Here are some tips for handling these types of losses:

- **Identify each loss and be gentle with yourself.** Your emotions are perfectly normal. And even if you wish they didn't exist, the best way to deal with them is to begin by acknowledging their impact. Writing in a journal may help.
- **Talk with others.** Consider a support group—in person, online, telephone. You are not the only one having to bear strong feelings. It may help to hear from others and learn their coping strategies.
- **Control what you can.** You can't stop your relative's illness, but learning more about it and what you *can* do will help you feel less at its mercy.
- **Keep at least one thread of your "other life."** Don't abandon yourself. Make it a priority to do something each week that keeps you connected to your "old" life. You need to safeguard your future.
- **Create positive memories.** Experiment and find pleasant activities you can do with your relative now. These tender and joyful moments will be part of what you cherish when he or she is gone.

Supporting others in grief

This is a fragile time of year. The first holiday after a death in the family can be very tender indeed, for yourself and for other relatives. For instance, you may be comforting your mother as both you and she grieve your father's absence. Or you may be expecting a visit from a bereaved aunt or uncle.

Use these tips to support your loved ones through the season.

- **Speak up.** Let your relative know that you are thinking about his or her loss. And that you are aware the holidays may trigger difficult feelings. Your words give them permission to talk about what's hard.
- **Listen.** Provide opportunities for your loved one to tell you about the memories and feelings that are arising. Retelling stories is a necessary part of healthy grieving.
- **Allow.** Let your relative decide how to celebrate the holidays. Some people prefer to follow their old traditions. Others want to do things in entirely new ways.
- **Ask.** If your relative is expected at a family gathering, ask if he or she would like anything special to be done, perhaps in honor of the person who died. Likewise, ask if there is anything they particularly want to avoid.
- **Offer.** Let your loved one know that you are available to assist with shopping, decorating, or any tasks of the season.
- **Invite.** Think of opportunities for your family member to join you. Perhaps for sharing a special meal or attending a holiday concert.
- **Donate.** Make a monetary donation in memory of the loved one who died. Or ask your relative to participate with you in a volunteer project that honors the person who is gone. Giving to others is often healing.

Above all, reassure your loved one (and remind yourself!) that an upwelling of sadness during the holidays is a normal part of the grieving process.

Contact us at 707.477.0700



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