

How to cope with the loss of a loved one during the holiday season, according to experts

Talia Lakritz, Insider

The holidays can be a difficult time for those grieving the loss of a loved one.

Finding meaningful ways to incorporate their memory into the festivities can be comforting.

Social media can be a source of support, but it can also be hard to look at.

It's also OK to turn down invitations if you're not feeling up to celebrating.

The holidays can be a difficult time for those who are grieving.

Whether the person who died was old, young, or not yet born, whether their death was sudden or a slow decline, whether they died recently or years ago, the season's emphasis on family, togetherness, and joy can painfully underscore who's missing from the celebrations.

Give yourself permission to turn down invitations

Especially in the first year or two after a loss, well-meaning friends and family might try to make the holidays happier for you by inviting you to their celebrations. Being around other people can be helpful, even if adjustments have to be made.

"I try to encourage people not to isolate during the holidays," said Dr. Jennifer Guttman, cognitive behavioral therapist and author of "A Path to Sustainable Life Satisfaction." "Find comfort in being with friends or other family members. Try to come up with new traditions if the past traditions are too painful. Sometimes people choose to celebrate in a new location to trigger fewer memories. Remember to engage in self-care and if some activity is too painful, speak up about it so that an alternative can be developed."

However, numerous invitations to festive events can also feel dissonant and overwhelming when you're grieving. Megan Devine, psychotherapist, grief advocate, and author of "It's OK That You're Not OK: Meeting Grief and Loss in a Culture That Doesn't Understand," says it's OK to politely decline.

"It's important to remember that you don't have to defend your reasons for not wanting to participate," she said. "It is enough to say, 'I don't have it in me this year to attend, but I appreciate the invitation.'"

Find meaningful ways to honor their memory

If you do feel like celebrating in some way, you can incorporate the person's memory into the holidays by:

- Displaying photos of them next to a menorah or other ritual holiday object
- Setting a place for them at the table
- Making their favorite foods or using their recipes
- Toasting to their memory
- Having a moment of silence for them
- Hanging a special Christmas tree ornament for them
- Donating to a cause in their name
- Posting about them on social media
- Hosting a storytelling get-together where people share memories

"None of these things are to make it feel better, but it's to acknowledge who's missing," said Devine. "I'm always a big fan of naming the elephant in the room instead of pretending it's not there."

People's posts about their holiday celebrations with family and friends can magnify the emptiness of missing someone you love. But Dr. Catherine Sanderseon, Manwell Family Professor in Life Sciences (Psychology) at Amherst College and author of "The Positive Shift," says it's important to remember you're not alone.

"It's important to recognize that the glowing holiday portrayals on social media don't necessarily represent reality," she said. "You are not alone in feeling sadness, grief, and loss - in fact, many people find the holidays really difficult, even if they aren't sharing those feelings openly on social media."

Online communities can be a source of comfort, too. Members of one of Devine's workshops maintain a Facebook group where they ask each other to light candles or share photos with a special hashtag on the anniversary of a loved one's death. Their feeds are then filled with outpourings of support on what is sure to be a tough day.

"In a lot of ways, fortunately or unfortunately, we find a lot more support online than we do in person in times of grief," said Devine. "Leaning on social media can be really helpful as a way to feel like there's a community that you have around you. Having other people to speak your person's name is powerful and beautiful."

Take your time.

"For many people, dealing with grief is like facing a fear," said Guttman. "It's important that we challenge ourselves to face our fears. Be patient, resilient and understand that it takes time for people to grieve, heal and accept the loss of a loved one. Don't be afraid to do it at your own pace, one step at time."