

Coping with Grief and Loss during the Holidays

*By Deborah Schwing, MFT, LPCC
Grief Counseling Services Manager, By the Bay Health*

Holidays are usually considered a special time to gather with family and friends and recall happy memories. At By the Bay Health, we know that if you are grieving the loss of a loved one, feelings of sorrow can intensify during the holiday season. Happy memories may be dulled by the pain of loss. Sadness is a normal part of grief, so you may find that trying to live up to traditional ideals of holiday happiness can be demanding.



Here are some suggestions to help ease your stress during the holiday season:

- **Take care of yourself physically.** Experiencing the death of a loved one requires physical and emotional strength. Be sure you're getting healthy nourishment and a balance of rest and gentle exercise. Fight the tendency to rely on junk food simply because it's faster, easier or less hassle.
- **Avoid excessive use of drugs or alcohol.** While substance use may numb feelings, it only postpones experiencing painful emotions; it does not eliminate them. In fact, excessive use of drugs or alcohol may even increase feelings of depression.
- **Take care of yourself emotionally.** Accept that there will be times when you are sad or anxious. Give yourself permission to feel unhappy, and cry if you need to. Ignore advice to be strong and hold back your tears.
- **Identify sources of support.** It helps to have someone who will listen while you talk about your feelings and offer emotional support without trying to come up with answers to your problems.
- **Allow yourself to feel good, to laugh, and even have fun.** Feeling good is a reminder that you are still alive and is in no way disrespectful to your loved one's memory.
- **Lower your own expectations of what you "should" accomplish.** Remember, you are going through a physically and emotionally stressful time. Think ahead about which activities you want to attend, and know that you have the right to decline.
- **Your religious faith or spiritual beliefs may help.** It may be helpful to talk to a clergy member or Hospice Spiritual Support Counselor. However, know that it's normal to question beliefs after a loss and that you may not feel the hope and joy that faith once inspired.
- **Help children who are grieving.** A child's ability to cope depends on adults showing that it's okay to express feelings of grief, to cry, or say they miss the deceased.

- **Plan an activity to honor your loved one that you can do alone or with family and friends.** Here are some suggestions:
 - Donate the money you would have spent on gifts for your loved one to a charity or organization that was important to him or her. You or a child can write a note explaining the loving connection that prompted the gift.
 - Plant flowering bulbs or a tree in the backyard.
 - Do something or go to a special place your loved one enjoyed (watch their favorite movie, eat their favorite foods, or go somewhere they loved).
 - Set aside time for family and friends to share memories of your loved one.
 - Offer a prayer or toast to your loved one at meals.
 - Light memorial candles during the holidays.
 - Attend a public memorial ceremony, tree lighting or service of remembrance to gain comfort at a shared community gathering.

For support or more information about coping with grief and loss, contact By the Bay Health's community grief counseling program:

www.bythebayhealth.org

or griefsupport@bythebayhealth.org

Marin, San Francisco and San Mateo Counties: (415) 526.5699

Sonoma County and the cities of
American Canyon, Napa and Vallejo: (707) 931.7299

By the Bay Health is a 501(c)(3), non-profit, health care organization serving the Bay Area since 1975, with the goal of providing the highest quality end-of-life care to patients and support to their families. Its grief-counseling program for community members of all ages serves anyone whose life has been affected by the loss of a loved one.