Christmas Grief: Tips for Enduring After a Child’s Death

No one hands bereaved parents a how-to manual after our child dies. There is no guidebook, no instructions, no correct steps to follow, no textbooks, no true, safe or money back guaranteed method or go-to referenced website to visit when we experience the unspeakable death of a child. Besides, we have not been taught what grief feels like, we don’t know how to heal from the pain and we don’t know how to live with all the changes in our world that grief creates for us.

Grief changes everything about us; our world, our beliefs, our values, our thoughts, our behaviors and our interactions with others. We want our lives to be the way they were before our loved one’s death. But personalities are different, our lives are different and other people treat grievers differently. It is within these individual changes, these differences in all of us and in our life itself seeking renewal that begins the recreation of our new self where healing begins.

Healing is not an expectation or a destination in the grieving process. Healing does not mean a cure or a need to fix something that is wrong in a person or their life. (This would attach a negative connotation of faultiness to the person or situation) Healing is not something that a person can force to occur but it must be experienced continually. The pain must be felt, the tears must be shed and then the wound that becomes the scar must be touched over and over until the frequency and intensity is not as impactful.

There are no specific cures, medicines or words to remove the pain of grief. Anniversaries, birthdays, special memories and holidays intensify the pain. And although we may have discovered daily tools to help guide our everyday grief, December seems to require special tips and ideas to navigate the days leading up to the holiday dates. The following are some helpful ideas I have compiled over the years from my own history and from those shared by other bereaved parents. These ideas seem to follow the categories of Self Care, Traditions and Honoring Your Child.

**Self Care**

* Accept support
* Allow/ask others to help with Christmas tasks (card writing, shopping, baking, decorating, child caring for certain activities or short term to care for self)
* Feel your feelings, (which means leaving the room or activity if necessary, cry, telling people how you’re feeling)
* Choose whether to participate in activities or not
* Try one new activity for the holiday season, i.e.: do something for someone else, adopt a family to sponsor for Christmas giving, sponsor gift giving for a name from a giving tree, attend a new church, volunteer for the sick, elderly, hospital, soup kitchen, humane society
* Join or connect with a bereavement support group
* Buy yourself a special gift to open on a particularly difficult day,(a shawl, candle, book, stuffed animal, clothing item to solidify your first year’s experience through grief)
* Allow yourself grief time (time to cry, feel your feelings, watch a sad movie, take a walk)
* Avoid access: food, drink, activities, spending

**Traditions: Choose to Change, Create, or Eliminate**

* Decorating: choose whether you want to decorate at all, continue as in the past or change some or create new traditions
* Food/ Eating/ Meals Choose whether to follow established traditions or create new ones. Will you bake cookies, candies, treats or not? Will you continue the serving the traditional menu or change it? Will you continue the same seating pattern or try buffet style or TV trays? Will you change the dinner hosting placement as in a different relative’s home or will you eat at a restaurant? Will you leave town altogether or celebrate in a different location?
* Activities: Stockings: Continue to hang the deceased child’s stocking in which family members place written memories of the loved one to remain in the stocking year after year (to be read at a time of the family’s choosing)
* Plan an activity your deceased child loved to do (sports game, pizza night, movie night, skating, baking cookies, etc)
* Buy presents for disadvantaged children/families, i.e.: children in hospitals, in foster care, in homeless shelters in the deceased child’s name
* Decorate the child’s headstone at the cemetery (with cards, Christmas trees, lights, stuffed animals, etc)
* Decorate someone else’s headstone at the cemetery
* Create a memorial to your child in your home, school, office, etc. This could be their own small tree with collected ornaments or memorabilia.
* Set a place setting at the holiday table for the deceased child
* Have family members share a memory of the child at a time of their choosing with all family present
* Bake cookies/treats for a needy family, homeless shelter, fire department, non-profit agency
* Participate in community-based memorial services where you can hang ornaments in public places for your child

**Honoring the Deceased Child:**

* Sew blankets or make quilts representative of your child
* Make handmade ornaments for family, friends, neighbors as reminder of your child
* Including all family members, create a memory wreath, a memory box, or memory book using pictures, memorabilia, ornaments, etc
* Decorate outdoor memorial trees
* Plant an outdoor Christmas tree and decorate it yearly
* Light a candle or candles in a wreath each day or create a routine to light the candles to honor your child
* Donate a financial amount of what you may have spent on your child in their name to children’s fund, organization or foundation
* Buy a special yearly Christmas ornament and start a memorial tree for your child
* Give gifts with memories attached of your child: pictures of the child, a tree to plant, a recipe, music, art
* Order US Postal stamps with your child’s picture on them, ([www.stamps.com](http://www.stamps.com))
* Pray. However this looks to you, it lifts you and your child.

Our lives are altered after the death of a child or loved one. Further, holidays will not be the same. They may intensify the pain causing overwhelming feelings as well as obstacles to the grief journey. One must expect sad days, good moments and difficult moments that will require gentleness, compassion, support and planning. The pain of grief will remain with us, will fluctuate and will come and go at various times. But healing the wound of grief comes as the result of change; the acceptance and welcoming of the ongoing changes inside the self and the transformation of the pain into a new presence of who we become due to our identity of a new life purpose beyond our grief.

I hope you can plant some seeds of change for yourself during this holiday season.