

Grief and the holidays

A guide for those grieving the death of a loved one



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Grief during the holidays

Holidays can be a time of laughter, music, and festive gatherings, but they can also be a struggle when you're grieving the death of someone you love. You may feel like avoiding the holidays completely, or making some changes in the way you participate in the holidays.

It's important to take care of yourself during the holidays. Allow yourself to do the things that feel right to you, and let yourself say "no" to the things that don't feel right. Whatever you choose to do, we wish you peace, and the opportunity to spend time with people who bring you comfort.

This booklet includes information we hope you'll find helpful. If you have any questions, please call the Bereavement Program Coordinator, Kaiser Permanente Home Health and Hospice, for your area.

- King County (north of I-90):
206-326-4549
- King County (south of I-90),
Pierce County, Kitsap Peninsula:
253-274-4627
- Snohomish and East King counties:
206-326-4549

Planning ahead

Before the holidays, give some thought to what makes the season meaningful to you. Are there things you used to do that may still bring you comfort? What are your priorities? What feels overwhelming?

You may want to involve your family and friends in helping you plan for the holidays. Share any anxieties and other feelings you're having. Ask directly for what you need, and give yourself permission to make choices based on those needs.

Making some changes to your usual holiday activities may be helpful. Some options you try may work for you, while others may not. Think of it as a work in progress and continue experimenting until you find a mix of activities that gives you some peace and joy.

Remembering the person who died

Ways you might honor and celebrate the life of your loved one during the holidays could include:

- Lighting a memorial candle in your home or place of worship
- Buying a special holiday decoration to remember the person
- Donating to a charity or organization in their memory
- Attending a meaningful service
- Joining a support group where you can share your memories and feelings
- Taking flowers, an ornament, or some item with special meaning to the cemetery, mausoleum, or the place where your loved one's ashes were scattered
- Preparing a special meal and sharing it with others who were close to your loved one
- Having a holiday toast in honor of the person

Doing things for others

Sometimes helping others can make the holidays more meaningful. You might try:

- Volunteering a little time each week to one or more organizations that you believe in
- Sending a card to a friend or family member you've lost touch with
- Caring for your community in some small way, like picking up some litter on the sidewalk or in the park
- Calling someone who may also be having a hard time during the holidays

Decisions you may need to make:

- Whether to accept or decline party and dinner invitations
- If you want to cook or bake
- If you'd like to decorate the house
- Whether you'd like to continue your usual holiday traditions, forget them this year, or come up with new ones
- If you'd like to visit the resting place of your loved one over the holidays
- What will be best for you
- If you have children, what will be best for them

The chart on the following pages gives you space to consider which holiday activities you'd like to continue, and which you'd like to skip.

Holiday Activities

	Continue?	Continue with changes? (What type of changes?)
1. Decorating the house	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
2. Lighting candles	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
3. Baking cookies, etc.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
4. Exchanging cookies	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
5. Shopping for presents	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
6. Having a holiday party, dinner, or other event	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
7. Exchanging gifts with family	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
8. Exchanging gifts with friends	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
9. Sending cards	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
10. Attending religious or spiritual services	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
11. Listening to holiday music	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
12. Other activities:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	

Ideas for coping with grief during the holiday season

Try to be gentle with yourself. Healing takes time. Try not to have unrealistic expectations of yourself.

Accept your feelings. It's important to allow yourself to feel whatever emotions come up. It's okay to cry or feel depressed. It's okay to be angry, or to feel a sense of relief about the death. Whatever you feel is a natural part of grief.

Identify your support system. Finding people who are supportive can be a real comfort. Asking them for help is an important step toward caring for yourself.

Share your feelings. Express your feelings to those who can support you. Sharing your grief can be a relief.

Be attentive to your physical needs. Try to take care of your body by eating balanced meals, getting enough sleep, and moving your body each day. Making these things priorities will help your recovery.

Be attentive to your emotional needs. Pay attention to how you feel. Look for simple things you can do to nurture yourself. Give yourself credit for making it through each day.

Avoid alcohol and drugs. They may numb your feelings but they can't cure grief. Instead, they can complicate your grief and make it last longer.

Give yourself permission to change your routine. Experts agree that grieving people should avoid making big life changes. On the other hand, small changes may help you move through the grief process. It may sound silly, but rearranging the furniture in the house, changing your schedule for eating meals and going to bed, or going to new places to shop or eat can be small steps toward building a new life.

Identify your trouble spots. Birthdays, anniversaries, special holidays, and even certain times of ordinary days may be difficult for you. Special places may also be uncomfortable reminders for you. Knowing what times and places are hard for you can help you prepare to face them in the best way possible. Giving yourself permission to feel your feelings as they come up is also very helpful.

Write in a journal. Writing about your feelings can help you express painful emotions in a non-threatening way. As time passes, you may want to go back and re-read some of the things you wrote. This may give you some insight into your healing process.

Where to get help

Grief support services

Kaiser Permanente Home Health
and Hospice Bereavement
Program Coordinator

- King County (north of I-90):
206-326-4549
- King County (south of I-90),
Pierce County, Kitsap Peninsula:
253-274-4627
- Snohomish and East King counties:
206-326-4549

Individual counseling and other resources

Kaiser Permanente Behavioral
Health Services

- First-time appointments:
1-888-287-2680 or 206-901-6300
- Follow-up care:
Contact your provider's office or call
1-888-287-2680 or 206-901-6300

Suicide prevention

Call 911 or the National Suicide Prevention
Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 immediately if
you're having thoughts of harming yourself
or others.

Online resources

grieving.com webhealing.com
aarp.org dougy.org
griefwatch.com griefworks.com
lifewords.com widownet.org
thecompassionatefriends.org

Information on health topics

kp.org/wa

kp.org/wa