

the holiday grief guide

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A DISCLAIMER

GRIEF IS NOT A DISEASE TO BE CURED NOR AN INJURY TO BE NUMBED, AND THIS IS NOT A PRESCRIPTION. THINK OF IT LIKE A BOOTH AT A FARMER'S MARKET—TAKE WHAT LOOKS GOOD AND NOURISHING AND PASS BY THE REST.

An Introduction

GRIEF IS TRICKY. IT IS AT ONCE TOO SLIPPERY TO MANHANDLE AND TOO BIG TO IGNORE.

There are different types—grieving what you lost (a person, a marriage, a home, a job, financial security, your health) or grieving what you never had (a child, a spouse, a dream).

Grief is a process, meaning that—just like growing up, settling down, learning to drive or raising a family—it takes time and it looks different for everyone.

GRIEF MAY ALSO BE A PERMANENT STATE.

I imagine it like losing an arm. In a moment, life is changed forever. You are never going back to the way things were before. Coming to terms with that permanent change is the process of healing and rehabilitation, of learning to be in the world differently.

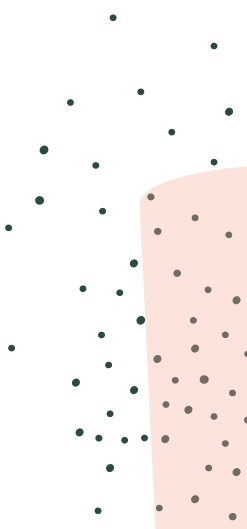
Past the immediate shock and pain, flourishing is possible again. Yet there will always be moments of stark realization—reaching for the salt with the arm that's not there—when the loss hits you afresh.

Because grief is such a profound experience with so many facets, I will refer to it differently throughout this short read. Sometimes I will speak of the loss of a loved one, sometimes I will use “it” to reference the grieving process itself. But I want you to know that it all counts. More than one wise woman has said, “This ain’t the suffering olympics.” You hurt where you hurt.


Understanding the inherent specificity of individual griefs, I do believe there are some generalizations that can be made, particularly around the holiday season. If grief is tricky always, it may be especially so during times when the whole world seems to be celebrating. Families gather together, people talk of home in loving terms, there are a hundred festivities to be attended and gifts to buy.

Thanksgiving may be on a pillow and peace on earth, but what do we do when they're far from our hearts? How do we honor grief in a time engineered and commercialized for joy?

I hope you'll come away from these pages with a few practical, hopeful answers to that question.



Maybe you're a person who can take generalized concepts and run with them toward positive change. I am not. I need to get my nose right down in the stink of the mess before I have any hope of cleaning it up. With that in mind, "The holidays are hard," ain't cutting it for me. I can't get on with ideas to honor grief without pausing first to examine why grieving is trickier this time of year.



Perhaps you will relate to some of these possibilities:



I'VE LOST SOMEONE WHO WAS CORE TO THE HOLIDAY FESTIVITIES IN MY FAMILY, AND IT FEELS IMPOSSIBLE TO CONTINUE WITHOUT THEM. NO ONE KNOWS WHAT TO DO.



THE ENERGY IT NORMALLY TAKES TO MANAGE MY GRIEF COMBINED WITH THE ENERGY REQUIRED BY THE FESTIVITIES OF THE SEASON LEAVES ME DRAINED.



THE TENSION BETWEEN MY GRIEF AND THE "PEACE, JOY, THANKFULNESS" REFRAIN OF THE SEASON FEELS TOO DISSONANT TO MANAGE.



I DON'T FEEL ESPECIALLY SAD DURING THIS SEASON, AND THAT MAKES ME FEEL INSECURE AND GUILTY.

“

I'M BOMBARDED BY IMAGES OF AND INTERACTIONS WITH FAMILIES THAT ARE WHOLE AND HAPPY, IN SHARP CONTRAST WITH MY OWN EXPERIENCE.

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MY GRIEF IS SO UNPREDICTABLE. I HATE NOT KNOWING WHAT MIGHT TRIGGER IT.

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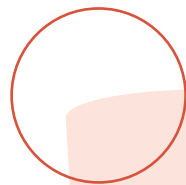
PEOPLE FORGET THAT I'M GRIEVING, AND IN THE MIDST OF ALL THE CELEBRATION NO ONE REMEMBERS TO ASK HOW I'M DOING.

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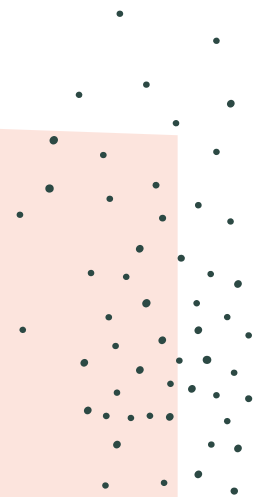
THE NOSTALGIA OF THE SEASON BRINGS UP SO MANY MEMORIES. I WANT TO TALK ABOUT MY PERSON AND HOW IT FEELS TO LIVE WITHOUT THEM, BUT NO ONE IS IN THE MOOD FOR THAT KIND OF NOSTALGIA.

“

THE EMOTIONAL INTENSITY IS TOO VULNERABLE. I DON'T WANT TO TALK ABOUT MY GRIEF, AND I FEEL TRAPPED WHEN OTHER PEOPLE BRING IT UP.



There are certainly other ways grief may show up, but these particularly common experiences will serve as our framework for examining what it looks like to honor our grief during the holiday season





Say What You Feel



Simple, but not always natural. I feel awkward talking about my brother, especially at this time of year. People are trying to celebrate. They don't want to hear about death, I tell myself. I keep quiet, not wanting to dampen the mood. But healing doesn't happen when we pretend no harm was done.

There are infinite reasons that we might not be direct about our feelings, but if the people in the room are safe, and we want to talk about our grief, the responsibility to bring it up rests with us. This doesn't have to look like breaking into sobs or hunkering down for a three hour therapy session. That's not always what we need anyway. We just want to acknowledge and be acknowledged in return. This can be simple.

"I'm sad about my mom, and I feel hurt that no one has asked me about her."

"Let's make a pecan pie. He always loved it."

Say your person's name. Say how much you miss them, how you ache to share another meal. Pass the green bean casserole and chuckle because they always complained about it. Put the vintage lights on the tree and say how happy they'd have been.

Tell the old stories. Remember out loud, with other people in the room to hear. Your person is a part of you forever. It's okay to talk about them accordingly.



Be Where You Are



We cannot avoid grief, and the capacity for joy is knit within us from the womb. Settling into that tension is the lifelong work of grieving.

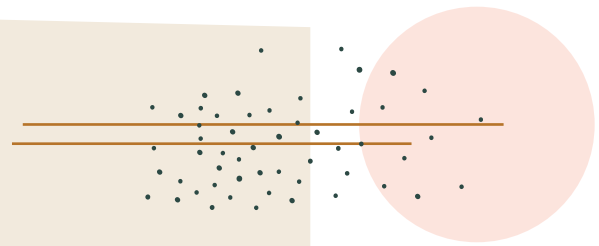
There are days in this season when everything from pulling cookies out of the oven to catching my profile in the mirror reminds me of my brother. Other days I don't think of him at all.

Sometimes I want to be with people who knew him and let the sadness roll over and through me until there's nothing left. Other times I am blissfully happy with the life I have.

You don't have to be sad all the time. When you feel festive, you are allowed to celebrate guilt-free. Since grief is a permanent state and a process—not merely a feeling—it does not diminish other emotions and is not diminished by them. Grief can hold hands with joy and peace and healing.

Gentle listeners are great for when you want to talk, but don't force it. You are not a turkey, and no one is going to stick an instant-read thermometer in your backside to judge whether you're grieving enough. You are allowed to forget about your grief. You are allowed to feel your grief without talking about it. The depth of your loss and love are not in question. Be where you are.

Plan to Mourn



My brother died on my party-loving husband's birthday. The question I wrestle with every April also has to be wrestled right now: how can I mourn what I've lost and celebrate what I still have?

Maybe you're plagued by other questions:

How do I handle the jealousy and heartache that comes every time I open a Christmas card or log on to social media?

What will I do if one more person asks how I'm doing? How can I express my grief without risking too much?

How do I take part in traditions that center joy and peace when all I feel is sorrow and chaos?

Answers to questions like these don't come wrapped up and tied with a bow. They can't be solved and crossed off a list, never to be thought of again. But we can learn to manage and care for them. I think one of the ways we do that best is by planning to mourn.

Set aside time to focus on your grief. If that idea makes you feel panicked, set a timer. It doesn't have to be long. Use that time to be alone. Go through old photos, eat at your person's favorite restaurant, sob, write them a letter, visit their grave, reach out to other family or friends who miss them, and anything else that feels honoring and helps you feel your loss.

Don't try to corral or drum up your emotions. Let them come as they are. When the time is up, move into the rest of the day.

Intentionally making space to mourn makes later celebration feel more authentic. It can also keep us from being overcome with grief when we're supposed to be singing Happy Birthday or Merry Christmas.

You can expect your grief to blindside you at some point during this season. Instead of fighting it off, pre-plan some time to invite it in.

Check Your Expectations



Grief has well-known characteristics. When you walk into the all-you-can-eat grief buffet you expect to find sadness, confusion, and anger, and you do. What you're not looking for is the steaming vat of awkwardness. Grieving can be strange and unpredictable, for the one grieving and for the people close to them.

Our own grief doesn't always show up in the ways we expect. You may have thought the work Christmas party would be no big deal this year, but then you couldn't bring yourself to go. Or maybe you had the time of your life and then stayed up all night consumed by guilt.

Maybe no one at church remembers that you're grieving this season, and you feel hurt and forgotten. Maybe EVERYONE remembers and you feel like a caged animal being observed for science.

When my brother died, one friend texted me every few days for weeks on end. Another didn't bring it up at all for months. They both love me deeply, they just respond to tragedy in different ways.

Don't freak out if you don't feel what you expect to feel, and try not to take it personally if others don't respond the way you expect them to respond. Remember, even we don't know what to do with our grief.

It's real weird. We're gonna be awkward about it. We're gonna step on each other's toes. People who love us will say insensitive things with good intentions. For yourself, and for others, dole out some grace.



Be Honest, Be Kind

Death feels so foreign, so impossible, because we're not made for it. It muddles our brains and weakens our spirits. Like losing an arm, it throws every part of life off balance. The dissonance of being alive in the world without someone you love is enough to make your ears actually ring.

There's no shame in not knowing how to process loss. It is more than we were meant to bear. We were meant for flourishing, forever-life in unbroken connection with God and each other. In a way we come out of the womb grieving, our souls craving what we've not yet known.

Because Jesus cared to dawn our flesh, to live and move inside our brokenness, to create life anew from the depths of the grave, we can look forward to the day when what is will become what is meant to be.

But for now, we ache. Be honest.

This is a season when opposite things exist together—loss and gifts, grief and celebration, loneliness and hope. We must grow our capacity to hold both together. Only we can do this work. And it's so hard.

It's not hard because you're weak, or unenlightened, or broken, or behind. It is hard because it is against design. Be kind.

IN A WAY WE COME OUT OF THE WOMB GRIEVING,
OUR SOULS CRAVING WHAT WE'VE NOT YET KNOWN.





A FINAL WORD.

If you are grieving in the traditional sense, if your loss is relational, physical, spiritual, all or none of the above, 2020 has stripped us down and left us raw. We are carrying the ache of loss and the exhaustion of prolonged uncertainty. We are feeling the instability of life in ways we never have before. We are anxious, confused, snippy, homesick, and stir crazy. We are grieving.

As I write these words, it's not lost on me that neither grief nor celebration look anything like "normal" this year.

Don't minimize the weight of it all. Don't compare away the weariness. Acknowledge the pain. Honor the grief, and breath in grace.

A CLOSING PRAYER:

YOU ARE THE GOD WHO KNOWS.
I AM BROKENHEARTED, BONE-WEARY AND SO TERRIBLY HOMESICK.
KEEP ME CLOSE.
TEND MY WOUNDS.
KEEP ME FROM FIGHTING AGAINST OR SURRENDERING TO MY GRIEF.
INSTEAD, TEACH ME TO HONOR IT.
SHOW ME HOW TO HOLD PAIN WITH BLESSING, MOURNING WITH JOY.
THANK YOU FOR KNOWING WHEN NO ONE ELSE CAN.

STEPHANIE H
COCHRANE

HI THERE. I'M STEPH, BIG FAN OF SMALL-TOWN VIBES AND BIG CITY RESTAURANTS. I SPEND MOST DAYS DOING A LITTLE WRITING, A LITTLE COOKING, AND A LOT OF BUTT-WIPING.

I BELIEVE JESUS IS THE BEST PERSON AND KNOWS THE BEST WAY, THAT DEEP FAITH CAN HOLD HANDS WITH REAL DOUBT, AND THAT WE CAN LEARN TO EMBRACE PARADOX WITHOUT PANIC.

I'D LOVE TO CONNECT ON
INSTAGRAM @STEPHANIEHCOCHRANE
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