

Grief and the Holidays

The holiday season is generally regarded as the time of year to celebrate, have festive gatherings with family and friends and to look ahead with excitement to the approaching New Year. The same is not necessarily true for people who are struggling with the death of a loved one. It often becomes a time full of painful reminders that magnify the sense of loss. Holiday songs on the radio, television commercials depicting the joys of shopping and gift-giving, neighborhood homes decked with lights and wreaths.....there is no escape from the sights and sounds of the season. It is difficult to grieve anytime but especially during those times when your thoughts turn so tenderly to the one who was such an important part of the past, the one whose absence is felt so painfully in the present. This is true of holidays as it is of other special days: birthdays and anniversaries, Mother's Day and Father's Day, Valentine's Day and vacation days—any days you and your loved one made dear.

One of the helpful resources suggested by Morgantown Hospice is a book written by James E. Miller titled *How Will I Get Through The Holidays?* One of the most practical pieces of advice offered in the book is to plan ahead. "Realizing that this year's holidays, and maybe several years' holidays, will not unfold the way you'd wish, you can make plans to do the best you can with the circumstances you face. You can prepare yourself to deal with what you think will be the more difficult situations. You can give thought to how you will cope with those parts of your celebration that are especially emotion-laden, or how you will handle those tasks or roles that were the special responsibility of your loved one. You can ask others to help you, both in thinking about what you'll do and in carrying out your ideas."

Don't be afraid to make changes in your traditions this year. Include the people with whom you would usually share this time and brainstorm how to incorporate different routines into your celebration. Make sure the young people in your family are included in this process as they will have their own feelings and needs that must be given value and consideration. Together, find a way to honor your loved one because it is important to remember. It does not have to be an elaborate ceremony. Something as simple as lighting a candle, looking at a photo album or proposing a toast at dinner can give everyone time to reflect and, perhaps, recall a story they would like to share. It is okay to laugh. It is okay to cry. It is okay to say the person's name. It is okay to have some private time when emotions are

too overwhelming or you are overcome by sudden feelings of fatigue. Grief is tiring as you now have to think about many things in your life that were once so automatic. Jim Miller wrote, "You will need to be flexible in how you approach your holiday celebrations, but you won't have to know exactly how to do that. You can learn as you go, and you can have others beside you who are learning to be flexible with you. You will need to accept the rise and fall of your feelings and to understand that your emotions will have a life of their own. But you need not worry about these fluctuations. Almost all bereaved people experience them. They are nature's way of helping you adjust gradually and safely to the loss you have suffered."

For more information about grief support, you may contact Morgantown Hospice Bereavement Coordinator, Patricia Tederick, at 304-285-2777 or toll free at 1-866-317-2777. Jim Miller's book is available through Willowgreen Publishing at 219-490-2222.