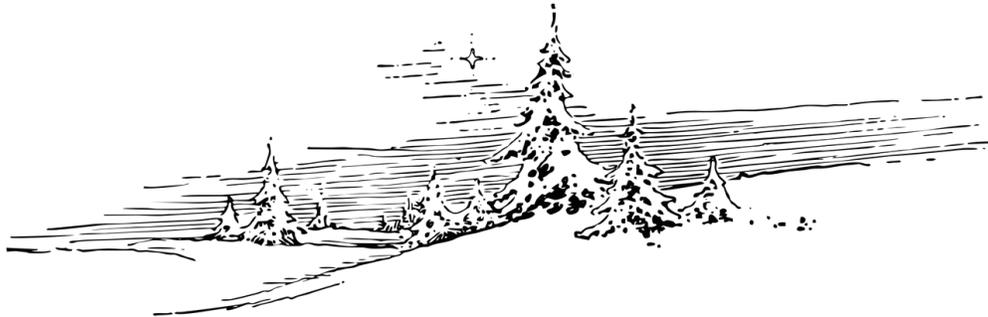




Grief and the Holidays (during a Pandemic...)

By Allison Gary, MA, LPC



When we have experienced a loss, the holidays can be filled with an unusual sensation. **Nothing looks or feels the same without our person.** When we feel angry, irritated or remorseful, the supposed “best time of the year” and “season of cheer” can make us feel more isolated and alone. We ask ourselves, “How can we celebrate without our person?” “Why doesn’t anyone else see how awful this time of year truly is?” “When will I feel normal again?”

You want to talk about your loss, but no one seems to get it, and you don’t want to be a “downer” for others, especially this time of year. It can feel as if no one knows how to respond as you hear clichés like: “They’re in a better place,” “Everything happens for a reason,” or “Just remember the happy times”. Well intended sentiments can feel dismissive and as if your pain, loss of normalcy, motivation and identity go unacknowledged.

The COVID-19 pandemic has added a new layer of grief. It can feel even more isolating. Our sense of community and support is now solely on a computer screen. Memorials and rituals have been adapted. We hesitate to receive hugs that we may desperately want but must avoid right now. **Traditions don’t look or feel the same and we may be spending the holidays alone.** When grieving a loss, this can feel like too much.

Grief, as unnatural as it can feel, is the natural response to loss. Grief is experienced emotionally, physically, mentally, and spiritually. Some people crave for the holidays to be the same as always, hopeful that the familiar will bring comfort. Others want nothing to do with the holidays and will treat them as just another day. And many will be somewhere in between. **Any response is okay, even if our reactions differ from how others are coping – your feelings and experiences are valid.**

Here are some considerations for coping with grief during the holidays this year:

1. Be Aware of Your Feelings

Grief is felt through many emotions, all of which can be particularly sensitive during holidays. Self-awareness can help us navigate the present moment. Name what you're feeling and honor that feeling. It's okay to feel sad or mad and it is okay to feel happy. Even in the moments we feel isolated and alone, "Grief is our companion." Grief will always remember. Allow emotions to ebb and flow.

2. Identify Communication Strategies

Think about how you wish to communicate this year, and who you wish to communicate with. Do you want to talk on the phone or just text? Do you want to do any video chats? Who would you like to communicate with? You get to decide.

3. It is Okay to Say "No"

Be cautious not to overwhelm yourself with social or familial obligations, it can be easy to do during this time of year. If you're not feeling up for going to that "Zoom holiday party," give yourself permission to say no. In doing so, you are taking care of yourself. If you do go to that socially distanced holiday shindig, give yourself credit for the accomplishment of attending, even if you join for a short time. Give yourself permission to "click off"/leave the Zoom Room when you need to.

4. Be Gentle with Yourself

You don't have to love this holiday season. The holidays throw us off our routines, and grief can be compounded. Try to find grace and patience with yourself and maintain basic personal needs. Overall, meet yourself where you are at (whether it's running a 5k or binging Netflix). "Sometimes it's OK if the only thing you did today was breathe" (Yumi Sakugawa).

5. Ask for Support

If you're struggling, don't be afraid to reach out to family, friends or professionals for support. It can be helpful to think ahead about who your support people are so that you can have them on "speed-dial" if needed. Just because we have to be apart this year, due to COVID, doesn't mean that we can't still reach out when we need.

6. Give Yourself Permission to Change a Tradition

Normal has been turned upside-down and so have holiday traditions both individually and collectively. Sometimes how we have done things in the past doesn't feel right anymore because everything has changed. It may be that an old tradition is too hard to do now, and maybe a new tradition can begin. Give yourself permission to roll with changes during the holiday season, and to be intentional about what changes you implement.

7. Honor Your Loved One

It is important to allow yourself time and space to remember your loved one. What is something you can add to your holiday traditions that honors them, your connection with them,

and their continued impact in your life and in the world? It doesn't have to be anything big or grandiose, but something meaningful to you personally.

8. Take Care of Your Basic Needs

Making sure that basic fundamentals are tended to such as eating, limiting alcohol, drinking enough water, exercising and trying to get some sleep is important. Routine and establishing consistency is helpful during stressful times and it can help to give a sense of control when we feel out of control.

9. Limit Your Information

It can be helpful when we are intentional about limiting our exposure to information. Media can be overwhelming at times. Consider limiting social media, news coverage or information that doesn't feel good. You can always catch up later, it's okay to unplug.

During this isolating time in our individual and collective lives, know you are not alone. We encourage you to reach out and take the time and space you deserve during these unprecedented times. HeartLight Center has monthly support groups happening virtually throughout the holiday season. To register to attend, click here: www.heartlightcenter.org/index.php/online-registration/

About the Author: Allison Gary is the Program Coordinator and a Group Facilitator for Heartlight Center, Inc and a Licensed Professional Counselor, specializing in Grief and Loss. To learn more about Allison, visit www.acgcounselingservicesll.com.