

Why Are the Holidays So Hard?

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The holiday season can be filled with emotions that can be more profound and surprising than other times of the year, especially for individuals who are grieving. Subsequently, it is common for us to ask the question: *Why are the holidays so hard?*

While there is not a scientific answer to this question, there are four key things that can happen during the holiday season that can make it tough.

1. Feeling Inauthentic: Holidays can feel increasingly difficult because they may feel inauthentic. The experience we are being told we should be having is not in line with the experiences we are having. Emotionally, we are expected to be “merry and bright” because the winter holidays are “the best time of the year”. Our attention is being pulled to black Friday and cyber Monday deals, shopping center parking lots are full, and intersections are donned with lights and waving snowmen. Everywhere feels like it’s bursting with holiday cheer! Our environment is telling us to smile and care about trivial things, when our hearts and souls may not be aligned with the outside environment. The pressure to feel merry and bright can magnify the feeling of sadness and longing. Being in a crowd of people and not feeling understood can intensify the feelings of loneliness.

- *Practice grounding yourself in the present moment.*
- *Carry a stone*, or small symbol to remind yourself to be present. When you are in places where things feel uneasy, hold your stone as a reminder you are not alone.
- *Breathe.* As simple as it is, bringing consciousness to something we do every moment can calm our nervous system. Breathe, count your breath in for 10 and out for 10. There is scientific backing that this simple act is beneficial to us mentally and emotionally.
- *Tell yourself: “I am here now, I am ok”.* Remind yourself that what has come before or is yet to come is a memory or a thought, but the truth is we are here now and we are ok, just as we are. Self-acceptance and self-reassurance can help move through the discomfort of inauthenticity.

2. More to Do: During the holiday season, even if you don’t celebrate holidays, there is increased pressure to do things, such as: shopping for gifts, attending or hosting parties or gatherings, sending cards, taking time off, attending recitals or programs, to name a few. Our “to do” list can feel endless this time of year, and it can be hard to know where to put our energies. It is common for people to ask if they should go to a party or gathering as they are finding their way in the first few years after loss. There is not a yes or no answer to when the time is right to say yes or to decline, it is about finding balance that makes sense for you.

- *Find balance.* Think about everything that is on your “to do” list currently. Now think about what may feel good to attend or do, and what you may want to say no to or decline – despite the pressure to say yes. Think about what has helped guide you on your path, in the past, that you can draw upon now to make the decisions that are right for you. It is ok to accept an invitation and then decline, even the day of, if you do not feel up for it. Let people know you appreciate flexibility as you may need to decide last minute.



Please let go of what does not feel good on your to do list. It is an act of saying yes to you and what you need in the moment. Be open to planning but also be just as open to cancelling plans. Push yourself to engage, socially, but also encourage yourself to be still and reflective when you need to be.

3. It is a Time of Reflection: Naturally, this time of year invites us to be more reflective as we turn inward. We are spending more time inside and are naturally more isolated. During cold and winter months our sleep increases, even our physical bodies are more guarded in the cold than in the warmer seasons. During this time, it can feel isolating and lonely, especially if we are missing someone and reminders of them can be everywhere.

- ***Slow down and allow yourself to feel.*** During a time of reflection, it is important we allow time to slow down and allow our true feelings to be felt. It is not only ok to pause, but it is essential that we create space to feel our feelings, as painful as they may be. Find a safe space to feel and reflect. Some things that have helped others include: journaling, writing letters to the person we are missing, prayer or meditation, attending a grief support group, creating a list of songs to listen to that create the space to feel our feelings, and having safe support people on “speed dial” who will help hold space for what you are feeling. What can you try that will allow yourself to feel?

4. It is a Time Filled with Traditions: The holidays can feel overwhelming because they are also a time of year filled with traditions – some experiences that have been part of our lives this time of year for a long time. Having a tradition change is another loss we grieve for. Traditions can serve as reminders of those who are no longer with us, which may bring comfort and it may also bring sadness, fear, or anticipation for what it will be like without our loved one present. For years we have likely had the same routine and traditions during the holidays and when someone is no longer, physically, a part of those traditions we reflect on years past and it can be emotional to have to come up with a new tradition or to find a way to include them in our old tradition in a different way now.

- ***Find ways to memorialize or recognize your loved one(s).*** Be open to creating new traditions, that may be different, but do not have to forget those who are no longer here, physically. New traditions can include putting up a picture or lighting a candle in memory of those not here. Some choose to change things completely, maybe going out of town or on a pilgrimage to honor your loved one. Some make efforts to keep things “the same”. Either way, finding ways to include and acknowledge your person, and your grief, can bring a sense of comfort to the holiday experience.

May you have a restful holiday season, take time to reflect and empower yourself to say yes and no, and take good and gentle care of you throughout this time of year.



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