

How to Have a Grief-Related Holiday Planning Discussion with Family Members

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Having a conversation about how holidays and traditions will change after a family member's death can be emotionally challenging. Here are some gentle approaches to consider:

Start Early and Involve Everyone

Open conversations about the holidays well in advance to give family members time to process and share their thoughts. Frame it as a collaborative discussion by saying, "I'd love for us all to talk about what the holidays might look like this year and how we can support each other."

Acknowledge Diverse Grieving Styles

Recognize that each person grieves differently and may have unique preferences for navigating the holidays. You can say, "I know we all have our own way of handling this, and it's okay if we approach the holidays differently. I'd just like us to communicate openly, even if it gets messy at times."

Be Mindful of Children and Teens

Children and teens may not have the words to express their feelings or might feel excluded from decisions. Consider involving them by saying, "What are some ways you'd like to remember [name] during the holidays?" or "How do you feel about continuing or changing some of our traditions?" Or, ask them to draw a picture of how they are feeling, or act it out with toys. You are invited to check out the newest issue of the HeartLight Highlight [here](#) for more information about developmentally appropriate grief support for children and teens.

Suggest a Family Meeting

Instead of individual conversations (though helpful in some situations), suggest gathering as a family to discuss plans collectively. Start with something neutral: "Let's come together to talk about how we want to approach the holidays this year, especially with [name] not being here." This can provide a safe space for everyone to share and brainstorm together. Not all living together to have an in-person meeting? No problem! Host a Zoom or Google Meet meeting for the family.

Set Realistic Expectations

Some family members may want to uphold every tradition, while others may want to change everything. Address this upfront by saying, "It's okay if we don't all agree on how to do things this year. Let's try to find a middle ground that feels meaningful for everyone. Or maybe we spread some activities over multiple days."

Validate All Feelings

Create an environment where it's safe for family members to express sadness, frustration, or even joy. Remind them, "It's okay to feel however you feel this year—whether that's sad, nostalgic, or even happy. All emotions are valid, and we're here to support one another." You can also validate feelings by teaching others about the vast amount of feelings we can have by using the free online tool, [The Feelings Wheel](#).

Discuss Practicalities and Scaling Back

In addition to emotional aspects, include conversations about logistics. For instance, "Would it feel helpful to scale back on the usual festivities this year, or should we simplify some traditions? I want to make sure it feels manageable for everyone."

Celebrate Togetherness

Frame the discussion as an opportunity to strengthen family bonds. For example, "The holidays might feel hard, but I think coming together as a family can help us find comfort and create new memories, even in the midst of loss."

Acknowledge Readiness

Start by acknowledging that it may not feel like the right time for them to have this conversation. Saying something like, "I understand if you're not ready to talk about this right now, but I wanted to check in because the holidays are approaching and it's been on my mind."

Offer Empathy and Patience

Let them know you're there for when they're ready, and it's okay to take their time. Something like, "We don't need to decide anything today. I just want to make sure we support each other through the changes."

Discuss Your Personal Feelings as a Guide

Share your own emotions or concerns as a way to open up the conversation. You could say, "I've been thinking about how different things might feel without [name] during the holidays, and I'm unsure of what to expect. How do you feel about it?" This allows them to engage if they're comfortable, without feeling pressured.

Focus on Celebration and Honoring Loved One

Sometimes shifting the focus to how to honor the deceased can help. For instance, "When you're ready, I'd love to talk about how we might honor [name]'s memory during the holidays." This can feel like a more positive and manageable approach. You could even offer personalized suggestions for how to honor them.

Provide Space for Flexibility

Let them know that it's okay if traditions change or if things look different. You can say, "We don't have to do things the way we always did. We can make new traditions or take it one step at a time."

Offer Alternative Forms of Connection

If the direct conversation feels too heavy, suggest alternatives like writing down thoughts, creating a memory box, or planning a small gathering to reflect on your loved one. Or, you can connect about the holidays through a suggestion box that everyone reads together, but anonymously.



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