

## Living Through Loss Counselling Society of BC

### Grief and the Holidays – Strategies for Coping

The holidays are fast approaching. It is easy to get caught up in the hustle and bustle of holiday festivities, planning family activities and visits with friends. Norman Rockwell and Hallmark images tell us what the season should look like and how we should feel. T.V propaganda bombards viewers with seasonal metaphors, song lyrics provide idyllic descriptions, and advertisements encourage consumerism. It is everywhere! These are the standards against which many of us measure our lives – especially at “the happiest time of the year”.

Most of us navigate the holiday season with dichotomous feelings of anticipation and anxiety – and we muddle through. There are, however, some people in the community who feel disconnected and do not anticipate the holidays. For some of these people, this may be the first Christmas they spend without their loved ones. Whether young or old, we dread feeling “different” and we do not like drawing attention to ourselves; hence, often, we suffer in silence and pain.

In 2011 approximately 15,000 people died in Metro Vancouver, on average seven people grieve each one of those losses. That means 105,000 people are grieving in Vancouver at any given point in time. When people are grieving there is a lot of absenteeism, accidents related to grief, dissidence in families, anger and acting out behavior, and more hospital and doctor visits. The average age of hospice clients range from 45 to 55. Many of these people have young families. Adults who are grieving find it very difficult to look after children who are also grieving. We have so few models of how to grieve, that peoples coping skills at this time are not particularly useful. Some of the things that we ask people to do when they are not coping well is to pay attention to their body, so they are strong enough to deal with the painful work of grief. The first intervention for a person in grief is usually physical, we want to get the body strong enough by doing the things listed below.

Although not a panacea for grief or the grieving process, the following tips can be of help as you navigate through the holidays:

- *Drink water and lots of it!* Water helps to flush toxins from the body. Grief creates excess amounts of stress hormones, like cortisol, which is associated with disease, sleep disturbances, and other physical maladies such as depression, anxiety, panic attacks and stomach disorders.
- *Stay away from alcohol.* This can be difficult during the holiday season. Alcohol is a depressant, spikes blood sugar, dehydrates, and is not helpful during the grieving process. It may numb the pain for a short time, however the grief process does not move forward it holds you in the same place you were before the alcohol and you feel worse the next day.

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- *Rest.* Rest helps boost the immune system and counteracts the effects of stress on the body. Office parties, family events, and children’s holiday functions can all be exhausting. Taking time to rest is particularly important when normal sleep patterns are interrupted.
- *Eat healthfully.* Grief often significantly increases or decreases appetite. Holiday foods, while tempting, are usually high in sugar and fat – so enjoy these “treats” in moderation. It is important to eat a healthful, balanced diet with an abundance of fresh fruit and vegetables.
- *Take supplements.* Talk to your doctor about adding a Vitamin B Complex and Vitamin D to your diet. Vitamin B complex help manage stress. Vitamin D helps balance mood and counteracts the effects of low exposure to sunlight, which can cause Seasonal Affective Disorder in some people during the winter.
- *Exercise.* Physical activity releases serotonin in the brain, which, in turn, helps balance mood, increases energy, boost the immune system, and normalize sleep. Winter weather can put a damper on going outside for exercise. Consider physical activities that can be done indoors like yoga, swimming or aerobics.
- *Self care.* Take time to do the things that make you feel good. The holidays are displayed everywhere and taking the time for self care can help with stress of the season. This can include getting a massage, seeing a movie, or eating at your favorite restaurant.
- *Talk.* Spend time with family and friends who will let you speak as much or as little as you need. Processing the loss of a loved one is exactly that – a process. Talking about what is happening for you will help you heal.
- *Take time.* Grief does not have a timeline - it takes as long as it takes. Spend time with people who support you and who do not expect you to ‘be over it’.
- *Feel what you feel.* The death of a loved one is painful. Many people feel ‘guilty’ if they laugh or have fun after someone has died. Do not judge yourself for enjoying some holiday activities.
- *Ask for help.* Reaching out and asking for help is not a weakness. Everyone needs support. You are not a burden. If you do not want to rely on friends and family, there are community resources that specialize in bereavement support:
  - The *Living Through Loss Counseling Society of BC* is a charity that provides affordable counseling. For more information visit [www.ltlc.bc.ca](http://www.ltlc.bc.ca) or call 604-873-5013.
  - *BC Bereavement Helpline* is a free, confidential service that provides referrals to grief support resources in the province. For more information visit [www.bcbereavementhelpline.com](http://www.bcbereavementhelpline.com) or call 604-738-9950, Toll Free 1-877-779-2223.

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