

Holiday Seasons are often marked by social gatherings, festive traditions, and religious rituals. Along with celebrations and bright lights, the Holidays can also be a time of profound loneliness for many people. If you are experiencing grief over the loss of a loved one or distance from family and friends, this season may present unique challenges regarding how to mark a Holiday while tending to your own desires. Without a doubt, the isolation and uncertainty of a pandemic during this Holiday Season will be unprecedented for the bereaved.

If you are living with grief during this Holiday Season, you may experience a myriad of emotions including a desire for solitude, a sense of loneliness, and an obligation to respond to the expectations of your community. To help sort things out a bit, it may be helpful to consider the distinction between grief and mourning. Very simply, grief is the constellation of feelings and internal experiences around loss, while mourning is an outward expression of grief. While our feelings and personal experience in response to a loss is grief, we mourn by sharing stories, through creative expression, and gathering with loved ones. As we integrate our loss and begin to heal, it is important to honor time devoted to both grief and mourning.

Because of the restrictions of COVID 19 around travel and gatherings, rather than holiday parties and family gatherings, you may be invited to virtual events or small gatherings in homes or out of doors. The restrictions around the pandemic may leave you with few options, but how you spend your time is still a personal decision. Perhaps you will prefer time in solitude. Certainly, the soft glow of candlelight and quiet beauty of winter invite us into stillness. You may find there is an intimacy, transparency, and a sense of hope within your experience of grief that can only be found in silence.

You may want to spend time with family and good friends sharing stories about your spouse or with cherished traditions. This is a natural way of mourning your loss. Be aware that is a delicate balance within a community that holds as you want to be held. Several people in my grief support groups have shared that in years past, they have attended a holiday event at which no one mentioned their recently deceased loved one. This was confusing and painful for them. The need to talk about your beloved is natural and can only happen in community. Perhaps

a trusted friend or relative can help to find creative ways to share memories within your community.

You may find that what you need changes from moment to moment. Seek ways to mark the season that serve you during this tender time. While it is important not to become too isolated, be gentle with yourself and as far as possible suspend expectations that feel overwhelming. Being alone is a valid choice. You have every right to decline an invitation to a Zoom event, even if attending only requires turning on your computer. Just as important is your right to ask for what you need if you are seeking companionship and community. Even at the last minute. Even if it is as simple as the sound of a familiar voice.

If it is any consolation, know that while you are lonely, you are not alone in your experience of grief. As we move through the season, trust your wisdom about what helps to light your way forward just a little bit towards healing and connecting with loved ones in new ways and with new traditions.

I wish you a safe, peaceful, and restorative holiday season. Here is my contact info if you would like to get in touch with me to talk about this, please feel free to contact me at mpanke1@jhmi.edu or 202-364-7602

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