

Holidays after Loss

The holiday season is filled with images of happy families gathered around the fireplace, singing songs, making wonderful memories together. For most families it is hard to measure up to that perfect greeting card image; but for families who have experienced a loss – death of a loved one, major illness or a family breakup – the holidays can be a time of almost overwhelming sadness. What are some of the special challenges of holidays during such difficult times? What can families do to cope (and even thrive) during the holiday time? And, for friends of the family, how can you help? Here is Marti's guidance:

I. Underlying issues

- The gap between expectations and reality
- Especially strong memories associated with holiday rituals "peel away the scab" of the loss
- Family members may feel protective of each other, so they dance around the feelings, uncertain of how to behave
- When you do begin to have fun, feelings of guilt may emerge
- In the case of death, the lost loved is often idealized, leaving survivors to feel left out or less important – this is especially true of surviving siblings when a child dies

II. Ways to cope – and find some joy in the season

- Talk openly about the feelings before the holiday
- Decide together what to repeat from past rituals and what to do differently this year
- Set aside a designated time for remembering together
- Focus on the surviving loved ones
- Seek and accept extra support from friends
- If you're a friend of someone going through a loss, reach out!