

# Grief, Loss and the Holidays



**Theresa Lynn, PhD, RN**  
**Executive Director**  
**Wings of Hope Hospice**



# Chapter 1

## WHY DO THE HOLIDAYS MAKE LOSS SEEM SO HARD?

---

I believe our deepest human yearnings are to feel whole and connected to others. Who among us does not want to be known and understood? Who does not enjoy making others laugh because they “get” your humor?

Holidays are a time when the world slows down. We get off our treadmill and acknowledge what is important. Time is typically centered on relaxing and enjoying ourselves. We gather with family and dear friends. We nurture and celebrate our relationships. We are not distracted by the everydayness of life and the more mundane aspects of work and other routines. Consequently, all our losses are felt more acutely during this time. Slowing down means there is more space for pain to make its presence felt. If the pain is related to the loss of a relationship, society’s emphasis on relationships during the holidays can be like pouring salt in a wound. It is not unusual to feel as if we are “going crazy,” especially if the loss we have experienced is significant, like the death of someone we love. However, because we feel some degree of grief with any kind of loss, any of these may also turn our world upside down: loss of a pet, a job, or a

physical ability; any kind of broken relationship; loss of possessions or a sense of safety and security; loss of innocence; miscarriage or abortion; loss of a future we thought we were going to have; loss of hope; missing an important event; loss of freedom; loss of sobriety. There are many others. What we lose does not even have to be positive. We can feel “crazy” after losing anything that has become familiar to us, like alcohol or cigarettes. Even the loss of an unhealthy relationship is still a loss and can still be a painful experience.

Loss causes many changes in our lives, and one of the most underrated is a change in our roles. If my child is dead, am I still a mother? Am I half a person without my life’s partner? If I have lost my job, am I still a valuable member of society? Our self-esteem may plummet, and we may wonder what possible worth we could now have.

If we are mourning the death of someone we love, the circumstances surrounding the death have an important effect on our grief experience. If the death was due to an illness, we may have watched the one we love suffer a string of losses. Terminal



illness typically steals bodily functions as well as the ability to move, swallow, and communicate. Watching this kind of decay can create a unique form of horror that may not even be realized until after the death. While it usually does not last, it is not uncommon to have difficulty at first recalling what our loved one looked like when they were healthy. If the death was sudden, unexpected, and traumatic or violent, we are wrenched into a new reality that includes the loss of innocence we may not have even realized we were living with. How can we ever feel normal again? How can anything, including the holiday season, ever feel special again? If we believe we were somehow responsible for the death, every morning can feel like a fresh hell. While we may not be truly suicidal, we may wish for an end to our pain because we cannot imagine we will ever feel differently than how we feel right now.

As we struggle to find meaning connected to our loss, we may find our faith battered. Why is it that something so unfair has happened to us? How can our God let something this painful occur? If we are feeling this way during a holiday that is set up around our faith, bitterness and anger may build. Exultations of the jubilant faithful may scrape like sandpaper.

Holidays are often a time of great beauty. Many of us decorate our homes and cook special foods. Everything glitters with the richness of light and love. If we are in the depths of anguish and despair, we may find it hard, if not impossible, to experience beauty. We feel ugly, and the world seems to be a dark, hopeless place void of any joy. It seems that everyone around us can enjoy beauty, and this magnifies how alone we feel.



Our experience with grief is unique to us. No one else can feel exactly what we feel. Also, as individuals, every loss we have will be a different experience from all our other losses. There is no possible way another person can completely understand how we feel.

When a loved one leaves our life or we experience the loss of abilities, dreams or possessions, one of the things we must eventually learn is how to live around this loss. Reality as we knew it is forever changed, and somehow we must get through our everyday routines despite the absence of this person or this thing. It is a separate, yet similar, process connected to a holiday. We must somehow adjust, all over again, to this hole in our lives during what may previously have always been a very special time. Getting through a holiday is a microcosm of simply getting through life after a loss. For those of us who enjoy holiday gift giving, the absence of a special person can cause unique

heartache. Gift giving is an extension of ourselves. We wrap our love around this thing in which we know our loved one will delight. With gleeful anticipation, we plan, we purchase, we wrap, and we wait. We know that no one but us could possibly understand the importance of this gift. It is a perfect representation of the uniqueness of our relationship. We watch for the wide eyes and the big grin we know we will see when the box is opened. When that special person is no longer with us, the heavy listlessness we feel pervades nearly every waking moment.

Food, the centerpiece of many holiday gatherings, is another way we show our love. Whether we cook or order from a menu, the food we share is a nurturing, life-sustaining celebration of our relationships. But in the wake of a great loss, even if we can taste the food we eat, we may have neither the appetite nor the energy to come to the table.



Families who had difficulty getting along before a loss may find that grief magnifies the problems. A permanent end to a rocky, strained, or abusive relationship may bring relief and, consequently, guilt. If the abuse has been a secret, we may not readily share our relief with others. Add to this other stresses like holiday gatherings or financial hardship and we may as well be squirting gasoline on a bonfire.

Just as we cannot totally prepare ourselves to smoothly handle any kind of loss, we cannot be completely prepared for how tender and fragile we

may feel during the holidays because of a loss we have experienced. However, just knowing it may happen and not being surprised by it can help.

We must be gentle with ourselves and gentle with each other. We must believe that we have worth simply because we are, not because of what we do or who we are with or what we have. We may have lost a piece of ourselves, but chances are we have been given something as well. If we can find out what that is, we can honor it. It is our own priceless holiday gift to ourselves.



# Chapter 2

## WHAT CAN I DO TO GET THROUGH THE HOLIDAYS?



First, do nothing. Simply feel what you feel. It is a simple notion but not necessarily an easy one. It may be the very last thing we want to do because what we feel may be very painful. If we are surrounded by people who want to distract us because our pain makes them uncomfortable, it can also be a very lonely time. Those around us may not like this “new” person who is grieving, and they may want the “old” us back as soon as possible. But we are forever changed. It is not possible for us to be the person we were because we cannot undo this loss we have experienced. And so we need to feel. Our feelings are not wrong; they just are. Think of them more as a barometer or reflection of the changes happening deep within. Actually feeling, and even exploring that feeling, is the best way to get to the point where we do not feel overwhelmed by our emotions.

Second, express what you feel. This is called mourning, and it is absolutely critical. If we bottle up and try to ignore our feelings, they will come out in other, perhaps unhealthy or even dangerous, ways. Our pain is real, and it deserves a voice. There are many ways to express grief: talking, crying, writing, praying, singing, living with intentional awareness, or expressing appreciation for what we have. Expressing grief can be done privately - in a journal or in a silent prayer. It can occur in a more public fashion - support group meetings, remembrance services, or visiting

memorials. Some of our world's most famous music and works of art were created during a time of incredible loss during that artist's life. We give ourselves a gift when we create space in our lives to allow our feelings to surface, whatever those feelings may be. If we stay busy or numb our feelings with drugs and alcohol, it only delays the inevitable.

It is very important to take care of our physical selves during this time. Our immune system can be affected by grief, and we are more vulnerable to illness and accidents. As much as we are able, we need to eat balanced meals and drink plenty of fluids, especially water. We need rest and may find ourselves sleeping more than usual. We should try to stay away from alcohol and other substances that can numb our pain. Our bodies will tell us what we need if we pay attention.

Sometimes grief counseling is suggested for someone who seems to be having a difficult time coping with a significant loss. Keep in mind that grief is not a problem to be fixed, nor is it a disease to be cured. Grief is not the same as depression and cannot be permanently alleviated with medication. We may or may not need a grief counselor. What we can mostly likely benefit from is having a companion during

our grief experience. That companion is a witness to our pain. They listen with their whole being. Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, U.S. Army (Ret.), puts this concept into an easy-to-remember formula: "Pain Shared = Pain Divided. Joy Shared = Joy Multiplied." The experience of grief can run the full range of emotion. When we express and share it, however we do that, we benefit from its gifts and experience growth.

Ideally, families are a built-in support system. When a death occurs in the family, everyone is mourning the loss of the same person. Family members may understand like no one else how affected we are and how difficult for us the loss of this person or relationship is. However, the relationships between the person who died and all the remaining family members were different from each other, and everyone's experience of grief is different from everyone else's. A display of emotion or lack of it can cause misunderstandings and hurt feelings, even in the most well adjusted of families.

Sometimes we want our pain to remain private. Having a place to be where no one knows what



wings@wingsofhopehospice.com



269-686-8659 or 800-796-2676



we are going through can be a haven. What about those times we do not want to be alone in our grief? Can we say to another person, “I’m hurting. I’m having a really hard time”? There are some people to whom we cannot say such things. This is not a reflection on the validity of our pain; there is nothing wrong with us because another cannot listen to us express our feelings. Their discomfort is about them. They are too full of their own pain to listen to that of another. And so we need to look for support where there are people who can give it. Find a support group. Find a trusted individual who will be a companion and simply bless us with their quiet presence during this difficult time.

If we are mourning the death of someone we love during the holidays, there are many special ways we can acknowledge our loss.

Here are a few:

- Change some holiday traditions; keep some of the old ones and create new ones.
- Develop a special ritual that remembers the loss/person who is gone. Light a candle daily and spend a few minutes in quiet reflection.
- Hang an ornament that represents that which was lost.
- Set your missing loved one a place at the table.
- Say a special prayer in memory of the relationship you are missing.
- Give a gift your loved one would have liked to someone in a nursing home.
- Create something that has special meaning to you.



Perhaps the most valuable holiday gift we can give ourselves is that of preparation. Who do we want to see or spend time with during the holidays? Who do we not want to see? What do we want to be sure to do or not do during this time? Even if there are traditions we keep every year, perhaps we should not keep some of them this year if they feel too painful or simply too energy consuming. We can always resume next year.

The best gift we can give others during this time is to take good care of ourselves.



[wings@wingsofhopehospice.com](mailto:wings@wingsofhopehospice.com)



269-686-8659 or 800-796-2676

# Chapter 3

## HOW CAN I HELP SOMEONE WHO IS GRIEVING DURING THE HOLIDAYS?

It can be difficult to see someone we care about in pain. It can be uncomfortable for us and may cause us to spring into action because we want to *do* something to ease that person's suffering. It is important to be aware of the difference between our experience of someone else's pain and their experience of it. It is one thing to want to help someone else. It is quite another to initiate action because we want to relieve our own discomfort. The latter may not be what is most helpful or even desired by the grieving individual.

A grieving person wants and needs space, both literal and figurative, in which they can grieve and mourn their loss. Create for them a 'healing environment' in which they will not be distracted by noise, activity and the occasional petty aspects of day-to-day life.

Maintain a calm and peaceful presence. Be available as an understanding and listening companion should they choose to talk. Or simply sit with

them in silence. If we fill the space with words, we may exhaust a person who is already stretched beyond their capacity.

Try not to judge or tell them they should not feel a certain way. Be careful of pointing out things for which they should be grateful; this can shut a person down from feeling the true breadth and depth of their experience, and this is what needs to happen.

Try not to have expectations of how long a person's grief will last. They are forever changed by their loss and will never completely 'get over' it. They will have good days and bad days. Even years later, the memory of a loved one may be triggered by a song or a smell, and there may be a period of reliving some of that more intense grief.

It is also not helpful to compare losses. Pain cannot be measured, and nothing is gained by saying one loss is greater or less than another.



Avoiding talking about the person who died may alienate the person who is grieving and create feelings of great loneliness for them.

When in doubt, ask the individual what he or she needs at that time. We must recognize we do not have all the answers and remember that we cannot 'fix' this for them.

Loss is part of the human experience. Grief is a normal reaction to loss. Someone who is grieving does not need to be 'fixed.' We cannot know the meaning behind their loss; nor can we fully understand the purpose of their suffering. Do not take that away from someone. Just witness their pain with them. Simply be a grief companion.



# Chapter 4

## DOES GRIEF GIVE GIFTS DURING THE HOLIDAY SEASON?

Sometimes I wonder if all the technological advances our society has made have not actually arrested us emotionally and spiritually. How many of us, in the wake of a great loss, keep going, keep moving, distracting ourselves with activity and sound? Do we fill every waking moment with something in order to avoid feeling?

What if it were not possible to have light 24 hours a day? Would we slow down with darkness? Would we close our eyes and listen? Could we trust that not being able to see is okay, that it is temporary and the light will return? Could we rely on our other senses to reveal to us that of which we need to be aware? What did our ancestors do after dark before the discovery of electricity? I imagine a small band of people of all ages sitting around a fire. They tell stories. The old teach the young. The young

entertain the old. They forge the bonds that enable them to know and trust each other. In times of great loss and sadness, they perform rituals, make music and sit together in wordless silence, staring into the fire, perhaps wondering about their own ancestors. The coming of the night provided a natural and regular time and space that celebrated their relationships and connectedness to each other and the world in which they lived. In times of trouble, it supported them.

Grief is often a time of great darkness. The holiday season is typically a time when we slow down and live with more reflective awareness and see and appreciate the people around us. Is it possible that their combination could be a gift? We do not enjoy feeling pain, especially the deep throbbing ache of the absence of someone we love. However, grief is something we cannot outrun. Regardless

of the distractions we arrange, be they activity, passive entertainment or substance abuse, when we look over our shoulders, grief is still there. It makes its presence known, whether we like it or not, whether we are ready for it or not.

What if, like our ancestors, we recognized our cycles of living in darkness? Perhaps we cannot see a future of hope and brightness, but we can still hear and feel and touch. What if we sat very still and listened? What if we trusted that something greater is at work, and we do not need to control everything? Can we imagine simply feeling?

Sometimes our families and friends who cannot understand our grief are, out of ignorance, not supportive of the journey on which we find ourselves. This can make gathering with them at holiday time especially difficult. There are, however, others who can give us what we need. They are strangers only because we have not yet met them. Their own journeys are more similar to ours than the people with whom we regularly share our lives. Their friendship and support can be gifts to us.



[wings@wingsofhopehospice.com](mailto:wings@wingsofhopehospice.com)



269-686-8659 or 800-796-2676

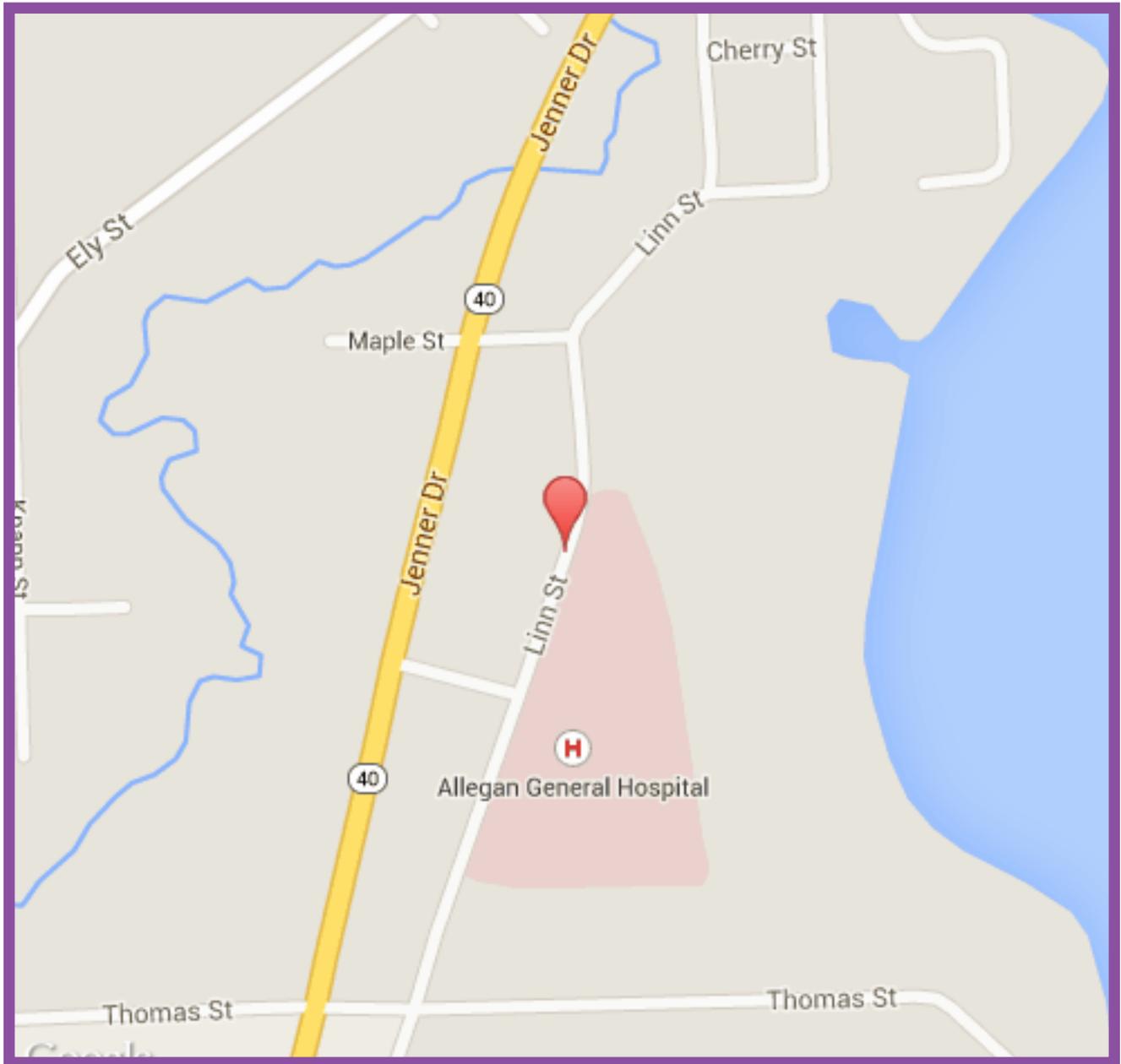


Support comes from within as well. Healing is built into us. It is how we are made. After great physical trauma, the body goes into shock. It becomes very still so that all the energy necessary for healing can be marshaled and directed toward the injury. It is the same with emotional and spiritual trauma. When we allow ourselves to be very still and feel what is happening inside us, we create the conditions where natural healing can occur.

A while back, I cared for two white rats for my friend Laura. They both contracted cancer, a couple months apart from each other. When it was time to euthanize first Stuart, then Snowball, I was amazed at the depth of my pain at having to let them go. How was it that the deaths of these little rodents hit me harder than the death of my

grandmother when I was thirteen years old? Did I love my grandmother less than these animals? I realize now that one of the gifts my grandmother's death gave to me was a softer heart. And it gets softer and bigger with every loss. The death of other family members, pets, job changes, a divorce, my home... I am learning just how much love a broken heart can hold.

The holidays are a special time. The experience of grief in the wake of a loss is special too, in its own painful way. Let us trust that when they coincide, there are gifts for us in the darkness. Let us stare into the fire and know we are connected to all those who have gone before us. Let us believe that compassion and love are strengthened, not destroyed, by the flames. Let us trust that we can slow down and rest in the timeless care of the universe.



## Wings of Hope Hospice

Address: 530 Linn Street

Allegan, Michigan 49010

Phone Number: 269-686-8659

or 800-796-2676

[www.wingsofhopehospice.com](http://www.wingsofhopehospice.com)



[wings@wingsofhopehospice.com](mailto:wings@wingsofhopehospice.com)



269-686-8659 or 800-796-2676