

Creating New Traditions at the Holidays

Schedule a gathering in which family members have an opportunity to discuss an upcoming holiday season, anniversary, birthday, or other special time. Ask family members to help prepare and plan for these days together. Here are some recommendations for an agenda for the gathering:

Begin with an open forum to discuss fears and anxieties about the upcoming holidays/special times. Openly acknowledge the absence of your loved one(s) and how that absence will make things different this year. Talk about the family's support system and whom you might call on for help and comfort during the holidays. As a family, discuss plans and traditions for this year. Consider the old traditions, and decide whether you prefer to continue them or create new traditions (or a combination of both). Here are some examples:

- **Holiday Meals.** When? Where? Who will cook? Can responsibilities for preparation/clean-up be shared? Who will attend? Should we set a place for the deceased? If we don't set a place for the loved one that died, do we want to honor this person in another way, e.g. a photograph or a lit candle? Do we want to continue our tradition of (toast, prayer, turkey carving, etc.) and if yes, who will be responsible for doing it?
- **Decorations.** Do we want them or not? Should we use the old ones/usual kind or try new ones? Should we put out a decoration in memory of the deceased? Should we hang them in the usual place or somewhere new? Shall we use the deceased favorite decorations or should we not put them up this year?
- **Gifts.** Will we exchange gifts or not? Who will do the shopping/wrap the gifts? (Could a friend make some selections for you?) Will we open the gifts at the usual time/place or create a new tradition for our gift exchange? Would we like to give a special gift (e.g. to charity/needy family) in memory of our deceased loved one? Does anyone have any special gift requests (e.g. something that belonged to the deceased)?
- **Traditions.** What do we want to do about holiday parties, baking cookies, caroling, reading holiday stories, watching holiday movies, adopting a family in need, etc.? Shall we start new traditions, stick with the old, or create a combination of old and new? Should we schedule a Family Grieving Time on certain days to express and release emotions so that we can more freely experience our holiday time?

After that discussion, reassess how each person is feeling about the upcoming holiday/special time now that plans have been addressed. If a family member continues to have difficulty coping, consider accessing extra support for that person, such as bereavement counseling, a support group, spiritual counseling, medical intervention, or increased contact with his/her support network of friends and family. Also remember that choosing to celebrate on different dates or choosing not to celebrate at all are options that may or may not work for everyone. If one family member wants to abstain, how will this affect other family members who do wish to celebrate? Is it possible to make a plan that respects several different needs?

Most of all, remember to be gentle with yourself and have self-compassion for all that you are managing during these difficult times.

