

## Finding Relief Through the Holidays

Losing a child changes everything about how a family thinks, sees, tastes, touches, and feels life. Experiences become strangely new and at times so different that it is sometimes frightening. Traditions and times of family fun that once seemed so routine, now feel oddly painful and lonely. Families often find themselves seeking ways to get through the holidays, instead of planning for holiday celebrations with past anticipation and joy.

Probably the first coping mechanism, and the most useful, is to accept the fact that losing a child does change things. Families often change best friends, seeking the support of those who can identify with individual as well as collective needs of the family. Sometimes families change churches. Often, worshipping at the same church is an emotional pain that is too hard to bear. Sometimes family members even change jobs, finding it easier to make the work more bearable with a new beginning. It is, therefore, reasonable and necessary to change some of how the family traditionally celebrated the holidays. Losing a child brings about many changes!

Don't place undue expectations on yourselves as a family. When your child died, a very real part of your identity as a family ended, too. Acknowledge that you are now in the very difficult position of holding fast to memories of someone you loved so very much in order to keep that precious child alive within your family. Not everyone will understand, and that often leaves hurt feelings, distances between friends, and even broken relationships within the extended family. Adjusting to the loss of a child is so very difficult for everyone.

Because you miss your child so much, yet you want to still have your holiday season be a time of celebration and joy, you are faced with a most difficult dilemma. Especially hard is facing the first holiday without your child. There will be a unique emptiness felt by each family member.

By including your child in the holiday, you will find that, even though it is painful, you will also feel some healing with your family take place. Many families have found it very healing to buy a gift for the child who has died. Place a holiday stocking on the mantle, and include small gifts in it such as a family journal, a picture frame, or a memorial candle. It is healing to include your child in the holiday in a special way.

Use the child's name when talking. Give family members permission to cry. Nobody expects you to be a super hero, so don't try to be one. It's healing to say, "I miss my baby so much, and I really wish she was with us!" Hold each other up as a family. When we try to deny our sorrow, often the pain only is intensified. Accept grief as a reality, and help each other through the pain.

Do things different, and don't be afraid to break old holiday traditions. Make this your year to begin a new holiday tradition. Maybe buy one really outlandish gift that can be wrapped and rewrapped year after year. Continue to include that particular gift in the annual family gift exchange. Think of something different that is unique to you as a family. It will help break the heavy grief, and aid you in finding some momentary relief from your pain of loss.

Remind yourselves as a family that there will be a time when things will feel okay again. There is light at the end of the tunnel. You will be able to choose remembering the joy your loved one brought into the family rather than only remembering the grief of the day your child died. When a family celebrates love, the pain becomes less intense, and you will begin to feel relief.