

## Getting Through the First Thanksgiving

Traditionally, Thanksgiving is the biggest family holiday of the year. More people travel home for the Thanksgiving holiday than any other time. Phone lines will be tied up, and millions of cards will be sent. Old feelings of hurt are often pushed aside so that there can be a feeling of warmth and peace as families share a time of thankful remembrances gathered around a table.

When a child dies, whether the death occurred early in a pregnancy or as an adult, the entire tone of the first Thanksgiving holiday without this precious child changes. Instead of being a time of joyful gathering together, there is a time of very real reminders that someone is now missing. The circle no longer feels complete. The table has an almost hollow feeling of emptiness. There are sad echoes throughout the home instead of only the sounds of happy laughter that once was descriptive of this fun time together as a family.

Facing the first Thanksgiving without your child can be the most difficult grief work you will ever do. Your heart has already been broken, and now you will have constant, painful reminders that someone from your family is missing—you no longer feel complete. This empty spot once occupied by your child causes a sense of pain similar to a throbbing headache. Nothing seems to relieve the pain, and you are left feeling like you just don't know what to do.

Talk about your child! Don't try to pretend that all is well, and that this is like any other Thanksgiving you've celebrated in the past. By pretending, you only push aside emotions that must be dealt with at some time. Include your child's name in the Thanksgiving blessing offered at dinner. This will break the ice and let others know that you want your child included in this most important family day.

Bring a picture of your child to the family gathering, and share that with others when family-sharing time takes place. Maybe all you have is an ultrasound picture. If your heart feels moved to share that picture with others, then do so! Help make your child part of the family tradition.

Some parents have found it healing to set a place at the table in memory of their child. Many parents place a candle at the table, and once a blessing for the food has been offered, the candle is lit and there is comfort in knowing that their child has been included in the tradition of the day.

Read a poem or a brief letter written in memory of your child. Parents find that there is often great comfort found in having a brief reading about their child. It is somewhat symbolic of helping to make the family circle feel complete. It is most important to validate your child.

Don't apologize for tears. Your tears are an outward shedding of some of the pain held within the depths of your heart. You do not ever need to apologize for missing your child.

By including your child in some way on Thanksgiving Day, you will feel a small bit of healing in this most difficult journey we call grief. By acknowledging your child, you will also validate your child and the grief that you still feel over the loss of your precious child.

There is great healing in saying “I love and miss my child!” This one step marks the beginning of finding your joy in living once again.

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