Q: Even though it should be a happy time, I often feel sad during the holiday season. What can I do to combat this?
A: The grief experienced after the death of a loved one is difficult at any time of year, and especially during the holidays when family gatherings and traditions are omnipresent. For many people, this is when we miss our loved ones even more than usual. Our memories of good times and togetherness – and watching others celebrate as we feel overwhelmed, lonely, or sad – can be very painful. It is also during the holiday season when the bereaved often need to adapt holiday traditions and rituals or find new ones.

The first step in coping with grief during the holidays is recognizing the season may feel different than it once did, and that can be difficult. The next step is to ensure that you are prepared with specific plans and back-up plans and have the support you need in place. Remember, there is no right or wrong way to handle the holidays in grief, and you have every right to decide what works best for you and to do that.

The following are some additional tips for getting through the holiday season:

Set realistic expectations for yourself. Consider the season’s celebrations and determine whether you can handle or want to continue with those responsibilities and events. It is OK to take others up on their offers to cook, shop, decorate, plan, etc.

Surround yourself with people who love and support you. Discuss your plans with family and friends.

According to an American Psychological Association Stress in America survey, adults are more likely to find family responsibilities stressful than they have in the past. For many of us, the holiday season can bring an increased sense of family responsibility and, along with it, additional feelings of stress. Advertisements about the joys of the season can seem lost on us as we scurry around trying to do even more than usual. It’s easy to feel overwhelmed.

Unfortunately, we may turn to unhealthy stress management behaviors such as overindulging in eating or drinking to keep going. These actions don’t help and often make us feel worse. There are better, healthier and longer-lasting techniques we can use to make holiday stress – and other stressful times – more manageable.

APA suggests these tips to help effectively manage holiday stress:

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Counselor Column, From Front

and inform them of any changes in the holiday routine. You can also enlist family and friends to share memories of loved ones through telling stories or looking at photo albums, which can provide a sense of comfort.

Try to avoid “canceling” the holiday despite the temptation. Allow yourself some alone time to remember and grieve, but balance it with planned activities with others. It is OK to say “no” and avoid some circumstances that you do not feel ready for, but do not isolate yourself.

Allow yourself to grieve – feel joy, sadness, anger. Every individual has their own unique experience of grief. There is no one way, right or wrong, to grieve. It is OK to feel angry and sad, and it is also acceptable to experience joy and laughter.

Take care of yourself. Try to avoid the commotion of the holiday season, as well as the consumption of drugs and/or alcohol to self-medicate. Eating healthy, well-balanced meals, exercising, and getting plenty of sleep are optimal remedies for handling the stress of grief.

Create a new tradition or ritual that accommodates your current situation. Some find comfort in traditions of the past, but others find them too painful to continue. Discuss and evaluate which traditions you would like to include or exclude for this year’s holiday season. Some examples of new rituals and traditions include: creating a memory box to fill with photos or children’s drawings; lighting a candle in honor of the absent loved one; having a moment of silence during a holiday toast to honor your loved one; donating to your loved one’s favorite charity; writing a poem about your loved one and sharing it with other family members; playing your loved one’s favorite music or game; or planning a meal with your loved one’s favorite foods.

If your grief throughout the holiday season becomes too much to bear, do not hesitate to reach out and talk to a mental health professional to help get you through. The Village EAP is here to connect you with resources. Simply call 1-800-627-8220.

The most important thing to remember is there is no right or wrong way to celebrate the holiday season after the death of a loved one, and that the best way to cope is to plan ahead, get support from others, and take it easy.

Stress, From Front

• Strengthen social connections – We know that strong, supportive relationships help us manage all kinds of challenges. So, we can view the holidays as a time to reconnect with the positive people in our lives. Accepting help and support from those who care about us can help alleviate stress. Also, volunteering at a local charity on our own or with family can be another way to make connections; helping others often makes us feel better, too.

• Initiate conversations about the season – It can be helpful to have conversations with our kids about the variety of different holiday traditions our families, friends, and others may celebrate. Parents can use this time as an opportunity to discuss how some families may not participate in the same holiday traditions as others. Not everyone needs to be the same. It is important to teach open-mindedness about others and their celebrations.

• Set expectations – It is helpful to set realistic expectations for gifts and holiday activities. Depending on a child’s age, we can use this opportunity to teach kids about the value of money and responsible spending. We need to remember to pare down our own expectations, too. Instead of trying to take on everything, we need to identify the most important holiday tasks and take small concrete steps to accomplish them.

• Keep things in perspective – On the whole, the holiday season is short. It helps to maintain a broader context and a longer-term perspective. We can ask ourselves, what’s the worst thing that could happen this holiday? Our greatest fears may not happen, and if they do, we can tap our strengths and the help of others to manage them. There will be time after the holiday season to follow up or do more of things we’ve overlooked or did not have the time to do during the holidays.

• Take care of yourself – It is important that we pay attention to our own needs and feelings during the holiday season. We can find fun, enjoyable, and relaxing activities for ourselves and our families. By keeping our minds and bodies healthy, we are primed to deal with stressful situations when they arise. Consider cutting back television viewing for kids and getting the family out together for fresh air and a winter walk. Physical activity can help us feel better and sleep well, while reducing sedentary time and possible exposure to stress-inducing advertisements.

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