



# HOLIDAY JOURNAL THERAPY: GRIEF EXERCISE

by Mari I. McCarthy 2010

For many people, the holiday season is time for family, celebration and tradition. We all have our rituals and activities we look forward to, but if you have recently lost a loved one, it can be hard to balance your grief with the pressure to get into the seasonal spirit. It can be especially difficult when you associate the holidays with the person you've lost.

It's important for you to be understanding and kind to yourself while you are grieving; accept that it's OK for you to have conflicting feelings and ups and downs. Use journal therapy exercises to begin work through your emotions as the holidays approach.

1. Start by gathering an envelope of mementos from past holidays you shared with the person who passed away. Find photos, letters or other physical reminders of your time together and spend time appreciating your happy memories. If you like, you can tape or glue the envelope to a page or inside cover of your journal so you can look at them often.

2. On a blank page in your journal, begin the therapeutic journaling process by making a list of holiday events and traditions in which your deceased loved one took part. Make note of the details; be specific and write down even the small things. For example:

- *At Thanksgiving, Dad would roast an enormous turkey for the whole family and carve it himself at the table. He loved Frank Sinatra and would put on old records and sing along as he cooked. Even the grandkids now know the words to "Fly Me to the Moon."*
- *Dad loved the smell of Christmas trees and had to have a big fresh-cut tree for the living room and a wreath for the front door.*
- *We went caroling in Mom and Dad's neighborhood every year and had hot chocolate and cookies afterward. Dad's favorite song was "Jingle Bell Rock."*
- *We had baked ham and a huge feast every Christmas after going to church as a family. We had a gift exchange and would watch old movies like "It's a Wonderful Life."*

It will probably be emotional and difficult to think of memories with the person you lost, but you can write a little bit every day until it becomes gradually easier. Give yourself license to cry and vent as much as you need. Journal therapy is not an overnight process, but give it time and stick with it.

3. When you have finished your list, reflect on which holiday traditions you want to continue this year and which you want to let go or reinvent. For example, maybe you want to keep doing the caroling party because it reminds you of how much your father loved singing, but you aren't feeling up to a big Christmas dinner and would prefer to go

out for a meal or volunteer at a soup kitchen instead. It's totally understandable if you want to scale back your normal activities and keep your holidays simple.

4. Conclude this therapeutic journaling exercise by writing down your thoughts and expectations for this year's holiday season. Keep them manageable and specific. For example:

- *I will give to charity and volunteer on Dad's behalf this year and ask my siblings if they want to join me.*
- *I expect that I will have a hard time on Christmas Day. I don't know if I'll be up to decorating a tree, having a big dinner or doing a big gift exchange.*
- *I plan to spend a lot of time with Mom because I know she is lonely and sad, too. I'm going to offer to host Thanksgiving this year so she doesn't have to worry about it.*
- *I'm going to listen to a lot of Christmas carols. They remind me of Dad and make me feel closer to him.*

As the holiday season progresses, your goals and expectations may change, or you may simply have more you want to say. Keep working on your journal therapy and writing regularly, and keep being kind to yourself.

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