



Compassion for Life

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HOPE for the Bereaved Child and Teen During the Holidays

WHAT HELPS WHEN IT HURTS

Holidays can be very difficult for a grieving family. Images of family togetherness and often unrealistic expectations of the holiday season are everywhere; in the malls, on television and on the fronts of greeting cards. So how does a family celebrate the holidays when a loved one is so sorely missed?

Following are a few tips to help families supporting a bereaved child/teen over the holidays:

- **Talk with your child about the holiday season.** Anticipating the holiday, especially if it's the first holiday without a family member, can be worse than the actual holiday. Talk with your child about their feelings and expectations for the holiday season. Discuss the activities your child would like to participate in or attend.
- **Even if your child does not talk about the loss often with you, do not expect for your child to be "over it."** Children grieve on their own timeline and differently from adults. Significant milestones, such as the first holiday after the loss, may cause the child's feelings about the loss to re-surface, even if the child has not talked about the loss for a long time.
- **Make holiday plans that help your child feel nurtured, emotionally safe, and comfortable.** Review your plans for the holidays with your child. Spend the holidays where you and your child feel supported, nurtured, and comfortable.

Creating new therapeutic rituals and new family traditions is a good start and can be very healing. Here are some suggestions that might help the family get started.

- Buy a strand of (battery powered) miniature lights, string them on a miniature tree, decorate it, and place at the grave. Family and friends can bring miniature ornaments to trim the tree.
- Meet at the grave site, light a candle, and sing a favorite holiday carol.



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- Plant a living thing to commemorate your loved one. Make the planting a ritual with invited family and friends. Serve punch and cookies after the planting.
- If your loved one loved animals, make a donation to the Humane Society in his or her name or take the children to the Humane Society with a gift of dog or cat food. Write a gift card: Happy Holidays! (sign with your loved one's name). Have the children use the money they would have spent on gifts to purchase the cat or dog food.
- Purchase or make a Memorial Candle. Light it each evening and place it by a picture of your loved one. Also, light it beside the dinner table on Christmas Day.
- Take time to have family members share their favorite stories about your loved one on Thanksgiving, Christmas Day, Hanukkah or other holidays.
- Set a place for your loved one at the holiday dinner table. Place a candle or flower on the plate in his or her honor.
- For the Thanksgiving Holiday blessing, write your own. A good start would be: Lord, we miss and remember _____, but we are thankful for _____.
- Set aside some time before opening gifts to discuss the non-material gifts that your loved one gave the family: Family values, morals and/or beliefs.
- Instead of signing his or her name on your holiday cards, add a symbol of your loved one: a butterfly, an angel, a bird, the sun, a star, a heart, a flower, balloons or a rainbow. Purchase a special stamp and pad with this logo on it and use it often.
- For the New Year: Make a resolution to your loved one that you will work on your healing in the new year.

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(Portion of this article is adapted from [Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors, TAPS](#))