

# FINDING HOPE

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*Grief During the Holidays*

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Jason Troyer, PhD

**GriefPlan.com**

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## Feeling Lost & Stuck in Your Grief?



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**Finding Hope**  
*Grief During the Holidays*



By Jason Troyer, PhD

Finding Hope Grief During the Holidays  
Jason Troyer

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This book is not designed to replace information from a mental health professional or a physician. The reader should consult an appropriate professional in matters relating to his or her physical and emotional health.

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## To the reader,

If you have recently experienced the death of a loved one, you may view the upcoming holidays with a sense of dread. I wrote this booklet to provide you with comfort, hope, and information as you prepare for the holiday season. I have included information on finding balance, honoring and remembering your loved one, and strategies for surviving the season. I have even more information listed on my website: [www.GriefPlan.com](http://www.GriefPlan.com).

I hope this booklet will be helpful to you as you continue to remember your loved one and that you are able to experience the joy of the holiday season.

Sincerely,

*JASON TROYER, PHD*

[www.GriefPlan.com](http://www.GriefPlan.com)



## Guiding Principles

There are many different opinions on grief and loss. Below I've summarized my professional perspective on some of the major principles in this field.

- Christmas and other holidays can be especially painful for the bereaved, but they also offer many opportunities for healing and support.
- There are many healthy ways to express grief (including feelings, actions, and thoughts) and all forms should be acknowledged and respected.
- There is no set time period for grieving the death of a loved one, but the consequences of loss are often felt longer than most people expect.
- Most responses to a loved one's death are painful, yet normal.
- Normal reactions immediately following the death of a loved one include sadness, shock, yearning, crying, disbelief, distract- edness, confusion, vivid dreams, guilt, anger, irritability, relief, difficulty sleeping, restlessness, loneliness, absent-mindedness, and many others.
- Many friends and family members don't know how to be helpful or provide comfort to those who have lost a loved one.
- A continuing connection to your loved one is often healthy and normal; there is no need to "cut ties" or try to forget them.
- Planning and participating in meaningful events or rituals can be very helpful.
- Most people can adjust to the loss of a loved one with the assis- tance of friends and family, but some may benefit from profes- sional assistance.

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## Achieving Balance During the Holidays

Surviving the holidays after the death of a loved one is about finding balance. Below I've listed two areas where you will need to find your own sense of balance regarding your loss and the holidays. In each instance you'll need to find a balance that works for you.



### **Finding Balance:**

#### *Grieving the Deceased and Focusing on the Living*

Finding balance between grieving your loved one and staying involved with the living can help you feel more whole and genuine during the holiday season. Concentrating entirely on the deceased can intensify your grief while harming your relationships with those who are still alive. Plan time when you will be focused on other people and enjoyable tasks; it is healthy and normal to occasionally distract yourself from your loss. If possible, spend time with loved ones even if you don't expect it to be helpful. Sometimes you may be pleasantly surprised.

Conversely, avoiding your grief during the holidays to “put on a happy face” may feel like faking your way through the season. Even worse, it can seem as though you are dishonoring your loved one. Because your grief may feel out of place in the midst of parties, elaborate dinners, and joyful celebrations, it can be helpful to plan some special time for remembering and honoring your loved one. Recognizing your loss while staying connected to the important people around you is not an easy balance to achieve, but it is healthier than focusing exclusively on the deceased or the living.



## **Finding Balance:**

### *Maintaining Traditions and Starting New Ones*

The holiday season, including Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukkah, and other winter festivities, are filled with traditions. When a loved one dies, these traditions may feel completely different. In some cases, it may be comforting to continue a tradition — even if it must be modified. For example, if you always hosted a large Thanksgiving dinner at your home with your spouse, it may be important to you to continue that tradition. In other cases, it may be useful to change long-standing traditions. Perhaps this year it is time for Thanksgiving to be at someone else’s house. There is no magic formula for whether or not you should keep a specific custom. It can be helpful to choose specific rituals to maintain and also recognize that some will have to be modified.

# Strategies for Surviving the Holidays

## *Preparing for Difficult Holiday Events*

Most bereaved people find themselves dreading certain holiday events. For example, you may have attended the same performance of the Nutcracker with your sibling for the last 14 years. After your sibling dies, you want to go but are concerned about how you will react. While nothing can completely remove the pain in these situations, you can make them easier by planning ahead. Here are some specific ways you can plan ahead for these challenging situations.

- Attend the event with a trusted friend or family member. Be open with them about how difficult this may be for you.
- Be gentle with yourself and recognize that you may not stay for the entire event. It is not a sign of weakness if you decide you need to leave. Sometimes it is easier to attend if you have preemptively given yourself permission to leave if necessary.
- Allow yourself to be a spectator. Perhaps you and your spouse were always involved in your church's Christmas Eve service. After your spouse's death, it is understandable that you may want to attend, but not plan the service. Be kind to yourself.
- Finally, it is perfectly reasonable to skip some events. Take a year off and give yourself some time to heal.

## *Dealing with Unexpected Grief*

At some point during the holiday season you will experience



painful reminders of your loved one that come out of the blue. Small triggers such as smells, songs, or foods may bring up these memories. For example, you may recognize that your loved one isn't there to eat your special Christmas treats or realize that you don't need to buy them presents this year. You might find yourself crying while eating a candy cane because your family member loved them or feeling sad when you hear their favorite Christmas song. These “grief bursts” are a normal part of grief. It is impossible to

anticipate these pangs of grief and sometimes they are especially painful because they are so unexpected.

It is helpful to know that these unexpected moments are a normal part of the grief process — even if they continue for many years. Because it is impossible to plan for them, the best strategy for dealing with them is to allow yourself to recognize and feel the loss. Focusing on happy memories or sharing your feelings of loss can also be helpful.

## *Making Positive Changes*

Avoid situations and people that you know will be “untherapeutically painful.” These are situations where you are likely to be miserable and have little chance of receiving any benefit. Perhaps you always went to your brother-in-law’s house for Thanksgiving dinner even though the event was consistently filled with angry bickering and bad food. For the last 18 years you went because it was important to your spouse. Now your spouse has died and you’ve been invited back. But you expect that this will be a miserable afternoon with virtually no chance of feeling happiness or experiencing support. These are the type of events you should avoid.

Dealing with the loss of a loved one can be the inspiration needed to discontinue unhelpful patterns and create new and meaningful rituals. You should definitely keep or modify any helpful traditions, but think carefully about any activities that are no longer enjoyable for you. Loss can provide an opportunity to say “no” to meaningless habits and begin new, helpful ones.





### *The Healing Power of Children and Animals*

Spending time with children can be especially comforting for those who are grieving. Perhaps it is children's innocence or pure joy as they enjoy the season's treats, festivities, and presents. Whatever it is, many grieving individuals find comfort in watching children experience the joy of the holiday season. Pets can also be helpful companions during times of grief. Pets provide constant unconditional love, acceptance, and "contact comfort" which can be especially valuable during the holidays.

## *Taking Comfort in Your Faith*

Many people find great comfort in their faith traditions and religious rituals during times of grief. Your religious and spiritual beliefs can provide answers to some of the difficult questions that come with loss. Rituals, such as prayer and religious services, can provide comforting ways to express your grief and honor your loved one. Take time during the holiday season to participate in any religious rituals that provide you comfort.





## Myths of Grief Related to the Holidays

**Myth:** Talking about or thinking about the deceased means that you are “stuck” in your grief or that you haven’t achieved closure.

**Reality:** Talking, thinking, and even crying in regard to your loved one is normal — even if it has been several years since your loved one’s death. The holiday season often brings up very specific and powerful memories, and it is normal to feel sad and cry. If you’re concerned your grief is atypical, see the section on Should I Seek Professional Assistance.

**Myth:** Christmas and other holidays are happy occasions. Therefore, I should try to “put on a happy face” for the sake of others.

**Reality:** Be open to the joy of the season, but don’t try to fake happiness. Your family and friends will understand why this is a difficult time.

**Myth:** I can’t be happy during the holidays. Others will assume that I am not honoring the memory of my loved one properly if it looks like I’m enjoying myself during seasonal festivities.

**Reality:** Experiencing joy does not diminish the memory of your loved one. Laughing, socializing, feasting, and singing are an integral part of the season; you can simultaneously honor your loved one and enjoy the holiday festivities.

# Honoring & Remembering Your Loved One During the Holidays

The holiday season provides many opportunities for special ways to pay tribute to your loved one. The best ways to honor a loved one are those that are meaningful to you and your family, so feel free to adjust the suggestions below to fit your own needs. Think about what was important to your loved one. What organizations and activities were they committed to? What holiday traditions did they treasure? Below are some ideas to help you begin thinking creatively about ways to honor and remember your loved one.

## WAYS TO HONOR AND REMEMBER YOUR LOVED ONE

### *1) Review pictures and videos of previous holidays*

Looking at pictures and videos of holidays spent with your loved one can provide comfort. Creating or reviewing a photo album, scrapbook, or videos can be a wonderful way to remember your loved one. Some enjoy doing this alone while others want to share stories with friends and family.



*2) Volunteer for or contribute to an organization whose mission you support*

The holiday season provides many opportunities to volunteer and contribute to worthy causes. It can be especially helpful for those who want to do something active as part of their grief. Buying presents for disadvantaged children, contributing to food pantries, volunteering or donating money to an organization that was important to your loved one can all be meaningful ways to honor their legacy.



*3) Keep a special reminder with you*

You may feel especially lonely during the holiday season. It can help to carry something that reminds you of your loved one. For example, you might carry a picture, a significant piece of jewelry (e.g., wedding ring, a special watch, etc.), or a present you received from your loved one as a way to continue to feel close to them. Let me assure you that this is a healthy and normal response to a loss.

#### *4) Maintaining old rituals and creating new ones*

The holiday season is full of big and little rituals: elaborate



dinners, worship services, special songs and food, significant symbols, and time with loved ones to name a few. It is important to maintain the long-standing rituals that continue to be helpful while also creating new, meaningful ones. This may be as simple as listening to your loved one's favorite Christmas song alone or as complex as holding a fundraiser for a relevant cause. Rituals and meaningful events can be powerful ways to feel connected to your loved one.

Other examples of rituals during the holidays can

include attending a service of remembrance, lighting a candle, visiting your loved one's gravesite or other important location, or hanging a special ornament. Just as your relationship with your loved one was built upon many interactions, so too can your connection be maintained with significant moments of remembrance.

## Should I Get Professional Help?

First, you should always seek professional assistance if you think it would be helpful to you. Even if it has been months or years since your loss, you can still take advantage of a support group or counseling. You certainly don't have to be "crazy" or mentally ill to benefit from these forms of support. Mental health professionals can provide an unbiased perspective and can help you develop strategies for becoming "unstuck" in your grief. Grief counseling is not a magic potion or a cure for your grief; you won't walk out of your sessions feeling as though your grief has disappeared. But professional assistance can help you better understand your grief and can provide a safe environment for talking about your concerns.



## *Signs You May Need Professional Help*

- You feel that you are “stuck” in your grief in some way
- Your grief has not lessened (or has gotten worse) after several months or a year
- Your feelings of guilt and/or anger have not diminished
- You can’t say your loved one’s name or you won’t allow others to talk about them
- You experience grief, depression, and/or anxiety that impairs your ability to take care of yourself, be effective in your work, or maintain your relationships with others
- You experience thoughts of self-harm or suicide (Always seek help in these situations)
- Your use of alcohol, medications, or illegal substances impairs your ability to be a fully-functioning person

*\*All of these signs (with the exceptions of thoughts of self-harm or substance abuse) refer to your situation several months after the loss — not immediately after your loved one’s death.*

## A Final Word of Hope

While no words can take away your grief, I hope this booklet has provided you with information and comfort. The holiday season provides opportunities to receive support from others and honor your loved one. I hope that you are able to experience healing and joy this holiday season.

My hope is that you have begun to find balance between remembering your loved one and participating in life and that eventually your happy memories endure longer than the sad ones.

With sincerest condolences,

*JASON TROYER, PHD*

[www.GriefPlan.com](http://www.GriefPlan.com)



## About the Author



Dr. Jason Troyer is the creator of [GriefPlan.com](https://www.griefplan.com). In his professional experience as a therapist, grief researcher, and professor, he discovered that grieving people wanted a plan to help them on their grief journey. His GriefPlan Programs include videos, information, activities, writing prompts, and other tools to guide people to heal, remember, and rebuild after loss. Dr. Troyer also offers 1-on-1 GriefPlan Coaching for those who want additional help. He provides engaging presentations and workshops on a variety of grief-related topics. Dr. Troyer earned his doctorate in Counseling Psychology and masters in Counseling. You can contact Dr. Troyer at [GriefPlan.com](https://www.griefplan.com).

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