

Our Shared Journey

Survivor's Guide

Holidays and Special Occasions

Valentine - Birthdays - Anniversaries



A Guide to Surviving all those Special Occasions

By Mary Francis

Our Shared Journey



Surviving Special Occasions

This guide was created because it's hard to get through the special occasions and holidays while grieving the loss of our loved one. This guide will help you to do some planning and it's the perfect map for your journey through all the occasions, with all their emotional up's and down's.

Special occasions can be a time of joy and anticipation but for people who've recently lost a loved one, the weeks between Thanksgiving and New Years can seem like a minefield of anxiety, anger and depression not to mention Valentine day, birthdays and anniversaries.

For a grieving person, anxiety and sadness is normal and part of the healing process. Our mistake is trying to keep everything the same as if our life was still normal. It's not normal, in fact it has been forever changed, so the best approach is to face it head on and be prepared.



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Stop the Insanity



"I can't face the holidays!" is something I begin to hear from bereaved people as the holiday season approaches. During the coming weeks the music and decorations will be a painful reminder of Christmas without your loved one.

Every year the [holiday season](#) seduces us into trying to produce the pure holiday bliss we felt as children. Before you know it your calendar is over booked and you are stressed beyond any hope.



Stop, take a deep breath and make a list of all those things on your calendar. Now, cross off the ones that mean the least to you. Take your updated list and focus on the one or two holiday rituals that matter the most to you and give yourself the time to savor them.

Think about building some new traditions. Remember that it's okay not to do what you traditionally do. Planning something totally different is not an insult to the memory of a loved one and can actually be a positive way to take off some pressure.

Remember what the holiday season means to you. Make that your priority and remember that this season is really about sharing, loving and spending time with family and friends. It's a time to honor the birth of Jesus and to bring some peace into your life.

Try to have some fun and do some silly things, go to movies that make you laugh, play with kids and most of all relax with those you care about.

Use this time of the year to regain perspective, watching children enjoying life to the fullest helps remind us of the simple things that can bring us joy.

Acknowledge Our Loss



Holidays can arouse grief as well as joy. The season will be much more fulfilling if you can find a place for both your grief and the joy of the season.

Life goes on they say, but how can it, how dare it without our loved one?

Are love and grief forever linked? Life is full of wonder and sadness, pleasure and pain, birth and death, darkness and lightness. We laugh at weddings and weep at funerals. In the end there is a time to dance and a time to cry. Unfortunately our culture values fun and has little time for grieving.

Sadly we are better at taking drugs for our pain than facing death and grief. Better at wearing our “mask” than giving an honest answer to the question, “How are you really doing?”

Though it’s easier to talk about almost anything other than the dead, the dead are what mourners most need to talk about – especially during this festive season. Therefore please do not shy away from sharing your memories.”

Don’t try to get through the holidays by behaving as if nothing has happened. Instead acknowledge the loss, the grief and the missing space at the table. If somebody is not at the table who was there last year, it is a wonderful time for everyone to take a moment to talk about their memories and recall what they miss and what they loved about that person. Everyone is already thinking about that person so it’s better to just speak our feelings out loud.

Pretending that everything is fine when everything isn’t just adds to the stress everyone is feeling. The only way to survive the holiday season after the death of a loved one is to make time for memories. Say their names out loud, tell and retell the same old stories, tales of love, laughter, what was most memorable and what we miss the most.

Stories are the fabric that weaves our families together. Storytelling can be done naturally when sitting around the table or relaxing by the fire. Or it can be more formal by each family member writing out a story about the person they had lost and then creating a memory book. Life does go on but let’s take a portion of the past with us, hold onto it so we can pass it on. Sometimes we cry, sometimes we laugh – both are gifts of healing.

Defining Moments



It's been said that over the course of your lifetime, you will experience approximately ten defining moments, some pleasant and some painful. Can you name your ten defining moments?

I know that the death of my husband was definitely one of my defining moments. In a blink of an eye my entire life changed and my future took a different path.



If you want to understand who you are and why you do what you do, you have to go back and find those defining moments that shaped your life as it is today.

If you want help finding these moments ask someone who is close to you for their thoughts. They must be someone you trust to be objective. Ask: "What do you think were my defining moments?" and "What effect do you think it had on my life?"

By understanding yourself better, you will come to also understand why you feel the way you do about the holidays – good or bad.

A monumental defining moment, like the death of a love one, forces us not to take for granted what really has true value.

Remember, the message of Christmas is one of hope. Christmas can be a good opportunity for the family to learn that life still has meaning after the death of a loved one. The memory of the one who has died is often an impetus for the family to get together and celebrate even though the celebrations will be different from what it used to be.

Emotionally Charged



These special times are emotionally charged and take extra energy. Being thankful is a positive way to attract more situations and experiences to feel even more thankful for.

But....what if... you don't feel particularly thankful right now? What if, like so many other others, you're having a difficult time and are feeling sad?

Along comes Thanksgiving with all of its added pressures and family obligations and you're faced with all those "grateful" people asking you to count your blessings.

"Bah, humbug!" you think, "If you lost your loved one like I did you wouldn't be so smiley."



So, how do you handle the holidays in a healthy way? The fastest and most effective way to change how you're feeling is to force yourself to be social. Thanksgiving is a good time to do a good deed and it's amazing how much better you will feel when your focus is on someone else.

Give yourself a chance to enjoy the holidays. Single parents are so anxious about their children at Christmas, they tend to forget their own needs. It's not easy to fit in all the family things by yourself, so you need to learn not to worry if some things don't get done.

Relax, love and accept what you can do - that's the best gift you can give your children, family and friends.

Being on your own teaches you a lot about what's important and what isn't. And, at Christmas, it really is the spirit and love that counts.

Tips and Advice to Help You



Try not to see the holidays as a demand on you to feel jolly, merry and joyful. Instead stop and reflect that these special holidays are here to remind us that in the midst of our pain there is hope.

- Be open to exploring the full expanse of your creativity and look for new ways to [celebrate](#) with your family and friends.
- Start a gratitude journal. It will change your life because it requires you to find something to be thankful for each day. Today, do something kind for someone else and don't tell anyone that you did it. Notice how much better it makes you feel.
- A lot of traditions are no longer possible when a loved one dies. Keep what traditions you can and be willing to start some new ones. Example – Lighting a memory candle at Christmas.
- Keep the lines of communication open with all the family members. Celebrating important events is difficult, but sharing past memories will help you to heal.
- Get support from others that have suffered a loss and who will understand how you feel as the holidays approach.
- Don't get overwhelmed on the holidays. Do what you can and eliminate the pressure of doing what two people used to do.
- Buy a gift in memory of your loved one and give it to the charity of your choice.
- Include children in discussions of how Christmas is going to be celebrated. Ask them what they want and what they don't want to do. Get them to choose or make a new decoration for the tree.
- Each member of the family will grieve the death for different reasons and in different ways. Talk about your loss and don't hide from it.

Family Meals Show You Care



Sometimes, when times are tough, a home cooked meal (giving or receiving) can be just the thing you need to lift your spirits. The last thing people think about in times of grief is cooking. It's a true blessing to receive a home cooked meal during a difficult time.

If you are having some holiday potluck dinners, decide early who's bringing what so guests can plan their shopping in advance. Clean out the fridge and freezer ahead so there will be space for what they bring.

Feeding someone is an expression of love. You may not be able to take away their pain but you can do something simple to show how much you care. Also, by helping others in need you are taking the attention away from your pain and focusing on the needs of another.

Every Thanksgiving and Christmas we share meals and memories grow. We smell and taste those favorite dishes and our memories come flowing back. Everyone should share their heritage by passing on their family recipes – memories that come back with every delicious taste.



Share gifts from your kitchen without losing your good dishes: use a sturdy piece of cardboard covered with aluminum foil, decorate brown paper bags, fill decorative tins, use glass canning jars tied with brightly colored ribbon, fill heavy duty paper plates with treats and cover with plastic wrap and use coffee filters to separate layers of cookies.

Make copies of your tried and true Christmas recipes and keep them in a separate holiday file. Jot down helpful reminders on your recipes for next year. For instance, this is Uncle Jim's favorite.

Forgiveness



The holidays were designed to remind us that love for each other is the most valuable of all gifts.



However, I know many people who have suffered at the hands of others and unfortunately they have descended into a frozen state of [unforgiveness](#).

They use drugs to numb their pain, lash out in anger or retreat into silent despair. I understand their pain but I also know that despite unimaginable suffering, others have found their way back to happiness and we can too.

Buddhist monks developed a quality known as “loving kindness”. We may think that this means thinking of others but the opposite is true. Start by caring for yourself by silently repeating meditative phrases that start with “May I ...” Examples: “May I be happy – May I enjoy life – May I be healthy”

This may seem strange and fake but if you continue this simple practice you will begin to feel peace within yourself.

This unconditional love will gradually mend those hurts that you thought would never heal. To lose the capacity to love and forgive is the only real thing that can destroy our ability to be happy.

Real forgiveness must honor and protect those that have hurt us. A truly forgiving person is someone who experiences all the sadness and anger and yet still acts with fairness and compassion.

Social Events



It's a domino effect – having an **active social life** means lots of people care about your well-being, which in turn makes you more likely to take care of yourself and that helps you grieve in a healthy way.



Instead of thinking you're the only one having a tough time mingling, look to the right and left of you and find someone who may be hiding by the food looking a little shy and uncomfortable. By introducing yourself and helping them get over their shyness, it takes the pressure off you and makes you feel less self-conscious.

Arrive early so you can start conversations with fewer people and relax yourself into the party. We all like people who are similar to us. So at a party, mirror the other person's body language. Example: if someone is a slow talker, take your time and match their pace.

People are drawn to a 'power' posture; put your shoulders back, open up your stance and smile. Power is about making the other person feel welcomed by holding eye contact. Simply holding their gaze makes them feel respected and that feeling is then reflected back to you.

Really listen and refer back to what they said with the phrase 'you were saying....' It makes them feel that what they say matters to you.

Fear of small talk; what if you don't have anything to talk about? Make a small goal of talking to just one person within two minutes of arriving at the get together. Visualize yourself having a good time, chatting with people and smiling.

The truth is, just being interested in what others have to say and really listening to them, is the key to making your evening more enjoyable.

Social Events



You may wish to avoid the whole season by going away or sleeping through it! You may be anticipating the worst. The anticipation of Christmas is often worse than the day itself. The day will come and go, and you will get through it, but it is easier if you plan ahead.

You may feel under a great deal of pressure to "get into the spirit". You may also feel guilty if you go out and have a good time! In addition, you may experience again some of what you knew closer to the time of their death: anger, loneliness, sadness, depression.

The first time I went out to a movie without Donnie it was with a group of friends. It didn't feel right and I couldn't wait to get back home. I had thought, "It will do me good to get out", but I was not ready.

As you think ahead to any activity or celebration, plan the timing so you are in control of when you want to leave and plan ahead on how you will handle memories that will pull at your heart.

It is a balancing act to get out and yet on the other hand you need time to just rest and grieve. The main thing is that you do get out and that you plan ahead. Sometimes, it's best to take an understanding friend with you, especially if it's a social with mostly couples.

Try to have reasonable expectations because the fact is it will never be the same again. So it is okay to plan and be realistic about what you can handle, both physically and emotionally. Slowly, you will be able to find joy in these outings and you will find your path.

Whenever you find yourself exasperated, step back, take a deep breath and try to see the comedy in whatever is frustrating you at the moment.

We often overestimate the degree that others understand us. Rather than making assumptions, we need to seek clarification – even to ask straight out "What do you mean?" They might not realize how their tone sounds or how their gestures are seen. Be willing to take the first step to understanding and try to recognize that they may also be feeling anxiety.

Compassion Connects Us All



Remember how you felt when someone complimented you or did something nice for you?

It probably made you believe that goodness is still possible. When there is compassion, feelings akin to happiness suddenly seem possible.

The opposite also works, in that by extending ourselves or doing a gracious deed we become the beneficiary of our own kindness.

During the holidays, as you perform acts of kindness, know that your efforts will change someone and that's powerful.

Simple Acts of Kindness

- Say “please” and “thank you”.
- Offer your seat to the elderly, disabled or pregnant.
- Say “good morning” to the person beside you.
- Put your shopping cart back in place.
- Say “I’m sorry” when you are wrong.
- Ask someone “How are you doing?” and really listen to them.
- In traffic let the other car merge ahead of you.
- Forgive someone and never bring it up again.

Each of us can show compassion throughout the day. These small acts of kindness may go unnoticed by the world, but in doing them, we generate tenderness, thoughtfulness and love. They help heal our grief and that is its own reward.

Compassion can break through the habit of indifference or judgement that keeps us separated from others. Take the time for others and something happens to our world, it becomes larger and we don’t feel so alone.

Holiday Helpers



I've got a list for you – a collection of hints to make this an easier and more joyful season.

Get Organized – Keep track of your gift purchases, list names to buy for and receipts in one envelope. Designate one area in your home to store gifts as you purchase them.

Share the Fun – Invite friends over for a tree trimming party and treat them to coffee and dessert. Make gift wrapping an event of fun and have a contest for the most original idea.

Get in the Spirit – Fill your home with holiday scents: potpourri, pine and scented candles or oils. Wear the colours of the season, red and green. Tie Christmas bells to doorknobs, key chain or shoelaces. If you can, go to a school Christmas program and reread some of the great Christmas stories. Spend some time watching Christmas movies, especially the comedies.

Good Deeds – Make a charitable donation in someone's memory. Buy one or two extra canned goods and donate to a food bank. Participate in an Angel Tree program at your local mall. Take a batch of homemade cookies to a Nursing Home. Volunteer to decorate a tree for someone who might not be able to do it themselves or offer to help so they don't have to do it alone.

Stress Busters – Take a warm bath with a scented candle and shower gel. Make a soothing cup of cocoa or peppermint tea. Turn off all the lights except the Christmas tree and count your blessings. Take time to admire the festive holiday decorations in the neighborhood and listen to seasonal music.

Make sure you are done early so you can enjoy Christmas Day. Don't get stuck doing last minute errands. Check the batteries in your camera and plug in your phone so it's fully charged for Christmas Day.

Double check your gift list. Have you purchased and wrapped everything?

Family Get-Togethers



With the holiday season, comes the family get-togethers with different generations and values.

Depending on which generation hosts the family get-togethers, it can be stressful dealing with different personalities, lifestyles and ages. This is especially true if they are staying over for several days.

When it comes to sleeping arrangements take time to consider who needs quiet time for afternoon naps and who goes to bed early but also rises early in the morning.

It's a challenge to keep mealtimes on schedule because they often revolve around children and their nap times. Meals also come with different appetites and tastes can range from vegetarians to shakes only and everything in between.

If the grandparents are hosting, then everyone is a guest and it's not the job of the grandparents to please everyone. They may offer some choices but there should be some boundaries. "If a grandchild has special meal needs then their parents should take care of them.

Parents should also be encouraged to bring children toys and books so there isn't any expectation that the grandparents are to entertain them all the time. On the other hand, plan ahead for some activities that are age appropriate – card games for the old timers, board games and scavenger hunts for the teens, making a snowman or tobogganing for all ages.

Dig out your home movies and picture albums. This is a perfect time to share your memories with the next generation coming up.

Be realistic for what can happen when you put a lot of different personalities together. If you have a family member who creates drama every year, don't expect that it won't happen again this year just because there has been a loss in the family. Don't be surprised by it, instead think about ways to keep their behavior in perspective so it doesn't ruin everyone's time.

One main rule should be that you never give up your own room because sometimes you may need a welcome sanctuary from your company. We know you love them, but it's okay to keep some private space.

Countdown to Christmas



There is a definite conflict between the **expectation of a joyous season** and grief. What we need to do is start seeking out those small moments of joy wherever we can find them. **Laughter** is hard to come by but it is the best antidote to grief as it lessens the flow of stress, lowers blood pressure and relaxes muscles.

There is a lot to be done and grief is taking your energy. It helps to make lists and do some planning. Below are some tips to help you get started.

Make a master list of everything you have to do before the holidays. Cross them off the list when done and add new ones as you think of them.

Decide where you are going to spend the holidays and make your travel arrangements: plane tickets, hotel and car rentals.

If staying home, plan who will be your guests for extended visits (if any).

Write out your gift-giving list and leave space for any changes. Buy early any gifts that need to be shipped. If you're ordering gifts from catalogs, do it by the middle of November for best selection.

Plan a budget for this year's entertaining and gift-giving.

Start planning the parties you're hosting and send invitations or call ahead before people get booked up.

Print out a November/December calendar and write down all the important events, concerts etc. that you want to go to.

Write out and mail your Christmas cards by the end of November. Please don't send the same photocopied letter (all about you and what kind of year you had) to each family member. If you are going to take time to do the cards, then take the time to personalize each one.

By the start of December you should start decorating the inside of the house. Hang up the holiday wreath on the front door and do any outside lights on a weekend when you can get some extra help.

Holiday Tips



- 1. Bring your loved one into the Christmas celebration.** Light a special candle in your home in memory of your loved one.
- 2. Eliminate the pressures as much as possible.** Only do what you want to and what you are able to.
- 3. Evaluate family traditions.** Discuss with other family members what traditions you want to keep and what you want to change.
- 4. If baking and other food preparations are a chore,** then save your energy for other things and buy the food instead of preparing it.
- 5. Since this is an emotionally draining time,** get lots of rest.
- 6. Buy a gift in memory of your loved one** and give to a needy person.
- 7. Invite someone who is alone** to share part of Christmas Day with you.
- 8. There is never a good time to suppress emotions.** Don't start now!
- 9. Rather than placing all the emphasis on Christmas Day,** try to observe the season.
- 10. Give yourself a treat during the hectic season** – a manicure, massage, haircut, movie or afternoon tea with a friend.

If you are facing Christmas alone for the first time, I encourage you to reach out to someone you trust and share your feelings with them.

When It's Just You & the Kids



Going it alone can be tough at this time of the year. It's crazy to pretend that everything is the same when it's not. Here are some tips to help your [children and grandchildren](#) survive the season without their loved one.

- 1. Include children in** any discussion about the holidays. It is a time of great insecurity for them and they need the security and support of the family. Let them know in advance that Christmas is still going to be celebrated and consult them before making major changes.
- 2. Get the children's ideas** about an appropriate gift or donation in memory of a loved one. Make them part of the process. They may also like the idea of a special candle that would burn in memory of the one who has died. Let them buy it!
- 3. Give the children a break from the family.** If they want to spend part of their Christmas holidays with their friends, let them.
- 4. Encourage children to talk** about the one who has died. This can be a painful experience, but it can prove helpful in allowing them to express their feelings.
- 5. Organize a simple treasure hunt** with clues that eventually lead to a small gift hidden in the house. Make clues fun and simple, according to each child's age and ability.
- 6. Go for a drive** and admire the Christmas decorations.
- 7. Don't try to keep everything the same:** It isn't and as sad as that fact is, it still has to be acknowledged.
- 8. Remember the spiritual side of Christmas.** Most churches offer a variety of social events for families during the holidays.

Holiday Traditions



Whether it's trimming the tree or touring your neighborhood's Christmas lights, holiday traditions strengthen our family ties.

Holiday traditions improve kid's self-esteem, sense of identity and even their optimism. But it's not just kids who benefit, those who share at least one holiday tradition are more satisfied with the holidays and laugh more.

When I grew up it was always a highlight to open that one special present on Christmas Eve. When I had children we continued this tradition and now my grandchildren delight in shaking each present for that special one that they can open up early.

For some, they open all the presents at midnight on Christmas Eve and then sleep in on Christmas morning. While for others it's about doing an activity together instead of giving gifts. Being active, like going on walks with our family and friends, helps to make us all feel connected.

I know lots of families where the main traditions are all surrounded around the food. Whether it's baking ginger man cookies or creating that perfect gingerbread house.

A great tradition is going out to the theater to watch a Christmas special and take in the music and festive feelings of the crowd. What traditions do you have? Do you plan to pass them on or are you ready to create some new ones?

You may not be able to get everyone together for the actual holiday and if you try to be in two places at the same time it just creates too much drama and stress. Tell those that can't make it that you can still celebrate with them, just not on the actual holiday. It is being together that counts, not being together just on a specific date.

Holiday Treats



Christmas candies and desserts bring out the child in all of us, stirring emotions and evoking fond memories.



Ginger bread cookies. The mere scent of gingerbread buoys our mood. The cute smiling cookie bring a lift to your day.

A yule log. It's a beautiful dessert that is decorated with love.

Candy canes. Peppermint comes by its name honestly as it actually 'peps' you! The candy can boost alertness and it slows you down as you quietly take the time to eat it.

Sugar cookies. The classic sugar cookie is made with loving and nurturing care. Whipping up a batch is stress free because they are easy and fun to make.

Fruit cakes. It's a traditional holiday dessert, a fruity beauty that isn't perishable so its great to have on hand for unexpected visitors.

Eggnog. The traditional holiday beverage. Just smelling the cinnamon sharpens your thinking so you can fly past frustrations with a smile.

Make your favorite holiday treat and share it with those you love. There is something special about sharing our time, treats and love with others.

People who engage in these and many more traditional treats enjoy and value the spirit of the holidays more.

Christmas Tree



Every year, when December comes, the tree decorations are gently unpacked, and past ornaments given to us by friends and family are put out for display.

Through the years more ornaments have been added to the tree. Each ornament can be traced to someone who loves us or to a special Christmas - such as 1st Christmas or 1st Grandchild.

Sometimes amidst of the Christmas hustle, we look at the ornaments and our eyes fill with tears. They remind us of all the love we have, but also of the love we have lost. Instead of doing the tree all by yourself, have a tree trimming party and share your memories about each ornament.



It's just a few days from Christmas and I'm enjoying my Christmas tree. I wasn't planning on putting up a tree – after all it's just me and it seemed like a lot of work. But my daughter thought I should have one and came over to help me decorate it. Funny thing is that I enjoy sitting and watching the lights every night as the Christmas music plays far more than I thought I would.

I guess that sometimes it takes someone else to know what is best for us. Even though I am living alone, I am not alone. I have lots of great friends and family and that is the difference. That's why I don't want to think "lonely" but need instead to think "blessed" and enjoy the season. I hope you also decorated your home and enjoy the blessing of your family.

Christmas



Christmas Cards

When words are written down and not just spoken, they last forever. Christmas cards are a personal connection. They say “I care about you and here’s why....”



People like it when you notice the little things. The simpler the compliment, the better. Taking the time to share your thoughts means a lot to those in your life. Also, make sure to ask them how they are doing.

This is a good time to celebrate your talents and do some crafts with the children. We all have different talents and designing the cards can be a big part of your Christmas.

Watching a Christmas Movie

Laughing at a favorite comedy amps up production of antibodies. That will lower the stress hormones that weaken your defenses.

Scents Can Make Your Holidays Happier

Are you frazzled with all that has to be done? Stop and take a deep breath – the festive flavors and aromas of the season are proven to bring on feelings of calm, happiness and excitement!

The woody scent of your tree, wreath and boughs of holly relieves stress by evoking feelings of nostalgia. Buy a real tree or spray an artificial tree with a pine aroma or use pine oil with a plug in diffuser.

Sandalwood oil has a sweet, slightly woody aroma and sniffing this oil can calm your anxiety. The smells of your Christmas tree will promote feelings of calm and relaxation and its fresh evergreen scent will boost your mood and energy.

Fighting Stress



Relaxing by listening to Christmas jazz or other mellow music for 30 minutes triggers the release of powerful proteins.

Crooning along to “Deck the Halls”, “Jingle Bells” and other holiday songs lifts your mood. Studies show that singing can also boost mental sharpness, [increase happiness](#) and reduce anxiety.

It’s more than just beautiful and traditional; the latest studies show your favorite Christmas music can cut your stress and relieve your pain. Whether it made you sing, hum or just smile, chances are good it will give you a much needed boost in the midst of the hectic holiday season.

Believe it or not, Christmas carols can relieve the worse of pains. Singing regulates breathing patterns, allowing your lungs to take in more energizing oxygen and boost your immunity.



Cuddling with a Pet - In a study, folks who stroked a pet for 15 minutes got a surge of feel good, contentment.

Being around your pet for just a few minutes soothes anxiety upping the feel good brain chemicals. Cuddling a pet cuts your odds of blood pressure spikes and lowers levels of cholesterol.

Dog owners walk twice as much – up to 300 more minutes a week – than non-dog owners. Walking is a weight bearing exercise that builds bones, but even more important is that it lowers our holiday stress and anxiety.

Christmas Shopping



Is just the thought of Christmas shopping enough to make you want to stay in bed? Here are some easy tips to help you:

Stick to just one present per person. People who receive one big or thoughtful present are more impressed by the gift when it's given by itself than when it's paired with less expensive or personal gifts. As a result, one great present makes you appear more generous.

Get them to go online and put what they want on their “wish list”. See web retailers such as Walmart.com, ToysRUs.com and Macys.com. Ask them for links to their online wish lists and then you can easily pick out a gift within your budget.

Do last minute shopping and get the best discounts. Typically savings can be as high as 50% off their original prices.



Christmas is a time to reach out and help the less fortunate. Get great last-minute holiday cards from UNICEF where seventy-five percent of sales go towards good works.

You don't need to spend a lot of money to really impress people with your holiday gifts. All it takes is letting them know why you selected that present for them, writing the reason on the card – “when I saw this, it made me think of you and” Just knowing the thought that went into picking a present makes others appreciate it even more.

This one foolproof shopping trick is done throughout the year - jot down things your loved ones have mentioned they like or need so you can get them something that they will appreciate. Save on shipping by sending gift certificates, magazine subscriptions or club memberships. Maintain a year round gift shelf where you keep items you discovered on sale.

Christmas Overspending



Marketing is setup to make us feel like scrooge if we don't shower our loved ones with gifts. Some of us have bought into the idea that love is contained in the dollar value of our gifts.

Please know that it's all marketing and that the holiday spirit doesn't come from what can be bought. Instead we need to focus on the giving of spiritual and emotional abundance.



Instead of focusing on what money can buy this holiday, give a gift that will never be discarded, such as money into a college fund or doing a gift for others or donating your time.

You must **budget** for the holidays or else everything from gifts to social events will end up on your credit cards. Set price limits for gifts among family members and stick to it – with no apologies. Also, don't shop with your credit card, instead leave it behind and take cash only.

Sometimes being thrifty entails doing without, what was once known as “making do”. Being thrifty means making dinner out of leftovers. Being thrifty means never having to say, “If I hadn't wasted that, then maybe I'd have this now.”

Our brains light up when we do a kindness for someone else. And it's the small things, from crafting a homemade stocking to making fruitcake from scratch that gives the most pleasure with the least amount of money being spent. These gifts are true gifts of the heart because they are made and given with love.

Holiday Meditation



Studies show that the holidays are the most stressful time of the year. But for those that have lost a loved one, you can times that stress by 100 and that is what you are dealing with.

By refreshing your mind and spirit you can combat your anxiety and be more relaxed. Simply find a quiet place and try meditation.



SIMPLE STEPS *to* MAKE MEDITATION
PART OF YOUR HOLIDAY ROUTINE

Begin any meditation by closing your eyes, taking slow, deep breaths and becoming aware of your body. Slowly take notice how everything feels – your clothes, the chair you’re sitting on, etc. Start by taking ten minutes to shut out the rest of the world and quiet your mind.

Feel calmer in crowds by stepping away and visualize yourself flying high above everyone. Give mental blessing to everyone you see rushing around below you, wishing them happiness and health until you feel yourself calming down. Take a few deep breaths and feel yourself come back down to the crowd. This vision detaches you from the crowd, opens your heart to compassion and helps you attract positive energy.

Enjoy this get together by first sitting back and imagining that you are surrounded by lots of angels. Have a heart to heart talk with your angels. Pour out your feelings of worry, frustration and stress. Finish by breathing deeply for a minute. This works because voicing your anxieties helps you let them go.

With to-do lists a mile long it’s no surprise that most of us feel cut off from our loved ones. Meditate, Breathe Consciously, Listen, Pay Attention, Treasure Every Moment.

Share the Spirit



Have you done something kind for someone or been on the receiving end of a thoughtful gesture? When you share something, even a small gesture, it always puts a smile on your own face.

Put a nativity set in your home. You can buy inexpensive and unbreakable sets that are just right for young families with children. Start the Wise Men on their journey to the nativity set beginning in a child's bedroom and move them a little closer to the manger every day until they arrive on Christmas Eve.



If you haven't been in the habit of going to church, somehow it's easier to start during the holidays. Go to all the Christmas specials or worship at a church you don't normally attend to give yourself a spiritual lift.

Honor each other's faith and the heritage each of us brings to our families. Remember the reason for the season is to honor the birth of Jesus and not get caught up on the marketing all around us.

Find a candle that has beauty or meaning for you. When you've set aside some time - before a meal, during prayer or reading – place the candle before you, say a simple prayer, blessing or thank you and light the candle. For just this moment, let the world fall away.

For some, it's traditional to give a blessing before the meal begins. It's a perfect time to close our eyes and let the mind rest in the heart.

Talking to a Higher Power about your grief helps you work through your pain more quickly. Just express what you're feeling in a prayer as if you were talking to a dear friend. It doesn't even have to be spoken out loud.

Volunteering



- Support your community or church gift-donation programs.
- Give only new gifts. Keep it simple and without batteries.
- Call the shelter in advance and find out what is needed.
- Create a team, from work or family members and make stockings for children in need.
- Take gifts to the women's wing of a local jail or prison (call first) so that mothers will have something to give their visiting children.

To be recognized, respected and to feel as if we matter – yes, that is what everyone wants. And it's possible to give this gift even in the most casual manner. Don't reserve recognition, respect and attentiveness for just the people who are important to you.

Any time you meet someone, you have a choice. You can see them as an inconvenience or as someone that is also working to be free of pain.

Volunteering is a great way to meet new people. By helping others you help yourself and you will change in ways that you could never imagine.

People that give of themselves for community support triple their chances of having a life of joy rather than despair. Part of the reason is the new friendships they make.

Confucius "I sought for happiness and happiness eluded me;
I turned to service and happiness found me

What is Your Gift to the World?



Forget about what's possible and what's impossible. Let your mind drift as you think about all the **possibilities**.



Here are a few worldly gifts to get you thinking:

- The gift of understanding and not being too quick to judge others.
- The gift of laughter so we can enjoy each other's company.
- The gift of a smile because it makes us all look beautiful.
- The gift of forgiveness because we all make mistakes.
- The gift of peace, unconditional love and acceptance of others.
- The gift of optimism so we can never lose hope.
- The gift of purpose so we have something to get out of bed for.

What gift would you give the world? What can you do personally to make this gift possible for someone you know or for a stranger?

Here are a few things to think about – not easy but worth going for:

- I will not disagree out loud unless it is absolutely necessary.
- I will look at people when they are talking.
- I won't interrupt or change topics.
- I will decrease "I, Me, My" and increase my use of "You, Your".
- I will value people by knowing their likes, values and needs.
- I will be generous with sincere praise to at least 3 people daily.
- I will work at thanking people – for the big and little things.

What Are You Doing This New Year's Eve?



Ring in the year with some of your best friends. New Year's Eve is the holiday where you spend time with the friends you care about the most and it's also the holiday that's most painful when you are by yourself.

Light every candle in the house, arrange your favorite flowers in vases and play a CD that's made for dancing.

Now is the moment to appreciate what you still have. You've survived the year so fill your heart with hope and toast in a New Year in which your future has endless possibilities.



Real Age doctors tell us that friends are good for our health. Dr. Oz calls them Vitamin "F" (for Friends) and counts them as priceless. Research shows that people in strong social circles have less depression and terminal strokes. Taking Vitamin "F" will help us be younger in attitude, adding years to our lives.

If you choose to bring in the New Year by yourself than do it in style. Try a glass of champagne or wine with double buttered popcorn and a favorite movie. I suggest a motivational movie like: Sea Biscuit, Rocky, Apollo 13, Jerry Maguire, Chariots of Fire or go for a good comedy.

On the other hand, spending it with a few close friends or family members can be a good, positive way to start out the New Year. The choice is yours – stay in or go out are both good as long as you make the effort to start your year out in a positive, happy frame of mind.

Valentine's Day



There is no special occasion as hurtful as **Valentine's Day** for highlighting that you no longer have your loved one and that you are now single.

They say grief brings people closer together. It's not true – grief is isolating. It takes hold of your heart and doesn't let go.

We need others, in ways that can't really be explained. I think our broken hearts need to feel supported and cared for. Yes, there is something healing about being cared for and loved by others - knowing that if we no longer existed, we would be missed.

This poem is from the book "Chicken Soup for the Grieving Soul". I want to pass it on to everyone that has had to say good-bye to a loved one.

I Wish You Enough

I wish you enough sun to keep your attitude bright,

I wish you enough rain to appreciate the sun more,

I wish you enough happiness to keep your spirit alive,

I wish you enough pain so that the smallest joys in life appear bigger,

I wish you enough gain to satisfy your wanting,

I wish you enough loss to appreciate all that you possess.

I wish you enough "hellos" to get you through the final "good-bye".

Did you ever say good-bye to someone knowing it would be forever? Recognizing that their time is short and so taking the time to tell them how much they meant to you. I love this poem because I think if they were here for Valentine's Day our loved ones would say "I Wish You Enough".

Birthdays and Anniversaries



As excruciating as the [holidays](#) are without our loved ones, some find that the two most difficult days are birthdays and the date of their death.

This is a good time to do something symbolic as a way of acknowledging their accomplishments, acts of courage and even their personalities.

In the beginning it seems like there is a videotape playing in our heads of the days before and after their death. We are powerless to stop it but as time passes we learn to consciously think of other things. Although it is hard to believe, the years will help soften the anniversary of their death.

In the beginning it is hard to think or talk about our memories. Later we want to talk, but sometimes others don't understand that it's healing and they change the subject because they fear that we will cry or be unhappy.

Sometimes we hold back for our children, but they are often waiting until they feel that the adults are ready to talk, before sharing their own concerns and memories.

Children can usually handle the truth better than denial, even though the denial of pain is intended to protect them. Respect your children by including them in the family sadness, not by shutting them out.

Never let your grief rob you of your memories.

I believe an object in our life can hold a special memory. One of the most prized objects in my life and the one that holds the most memories is a small rusty tin box. I only need to look at that old beat up tin box and memories of my Mother and her card games come flowing to my mind. This old tin box held her pennies and she would bring it out whenever the neighbors came over for a card game. It reminds me of Mom and how much she valued and enjoyed the company of family and friends.

Birthdays and wedding anniversaries shouldn't be avoided as if they didn't exist. Instead celebrate their birthday by being thankful for the life they shared with you. Your wedding anniversary is a time to reflect on the happy years you did have together.

After a Few Years — What Then?



When dealing with the death of a loved one you focus exclusively on the loss. You cannot even imagine that other events may occur in the wake of or even because of that loss. When you think of the [future](#), there is an emptiness and nothing matters.

In the end, if you are down on yourself you may pull away from other people, becoming isolated and lonely. A breakdown of self-esteem is a central characteristic of loneliness and depression.



We have only a limited time on this earth and we need to face the reality that our life goes on after the death of our loved one. When we do, that constant awareness of the limit of our time to live and love should give us the courage to care about others without losing our own health; physically and mentally.

The first few years can be pure hell and yet they can contain the beginnings of new joys. These joys start out slowly and require nourishment to grow. When you're in the midst of your loss, you may not notice these gleams of light.

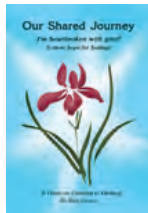
You may not be paying attention to these newborn sources of happiness, but they are there and some day you will be ready to receive them.



Our Shared Journey

I hope this guide will remind you what the holidays and special occasions are really about, being with your friends and family, recreating traditions, maybe starting some new ones, but most of all - love.

For even more advice and support please check out my other guides:



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