

# Our Shared Journey

*Survivor's Guide*

*Holidays and Special Occasions*

*Valentine - Birthdays - Anniversaries*



A Guide to Surviving all those Special Occasions

By Mary Francis

# 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.