

The gift of grief

For those who have lost a loved one, the holidays can be filled with pain – and potential for healing, says **Dr Tama Lane**

The prerequisites of the holiday season include ample doses of cheer, a generous helping of fun, and stuff-focused frenzy. Imprinted in our psyche, the expectations are abundant.

Holidays mark the passage of time. They are milestones that frame each year and bring meaning to significant moments we have shared with others. We are bombarded with portraits of love, happiness, togetherness, and family unity. But in many cases, this bustle of unfiltered joy contrasts markedly with the B side of the holiday season – the emptiness and despair of grief.

In the unspoken contract, there is no such thing as love and relationships without the anticipation of loss, grief, and that specter of despair. Even before we have experienced it, many have a glimpse and understand the process through metaphors. Grief is like a moving river. Tears are the silent language of grief. In reality, however, grief is a hot, emotional mess. We are often ambushed and blindsided by intense reminders that leave us breathless. Grief lurks in well-hidden places, and often jumps out unexpectedly to scare the bejeezus out of us, triggering a tidal wave of feelings.

None the less, grief is a conduit to feel. To navigate through its stages is a heroic journey, unique for each individual. For a brief period, feeling “comfortably” numb protects us from pain. But grief rarely walks in a linear or sequential fashion. It can step diagonally, sideways or, like a tantrum child, stop and refuse to move at



all. No worries though, because grief is clever and unrelenting. It either gently taps you on the shoulder or jolts you back into reality with a booming roar.

Thanksgiving, Christmas, Chanukah, New Years are the biggest and usually most challenging of all. Since grief does not take off for the holidays, how can one cope or celebrate togetherness when the world loses its celebratory vibe?

There is holiday magic within the mess of grief. Rather than avoiding those

Above: Grief can hit you unexpectedly; but to deny it is also to deny your feelings.

feelings, lean into them. Grief is not what you are attempting to avoid; rather, it's the pain. When we shut ourselves off from our core emotions, we distance ourselves from the experiences that move us forward in our lives and work. When we numb the dark, we also numb the light.

Emotional exposure defines what it means to be vulnerable. In the darkness of despair, we sometimes turn away from our team of allies to conceal our suffering. If we reveal the magnitude of our loss to those close to us, we fear the pain will somehow be transferred. But pretending we don't hurt is not living our truth – it invalidates our reality. A supportive presence that keeps showing up and loving us, not judging our vulnerabilities, can be our greatest source of healing.

Unexpected endings leave us with a sense of incompleteness, of having an unfulfilled relationship. Thoughts, experiences, and feelings we never fully shared with the deceased fill us with what ifs, if onlys, and all the other questions and scenarios that keep us awake at night.

Although there is no finish line or specific grief expiration date, coping by writing letters to the person who has died, journaling, creating a memory box, or talking directly to the lost loved one can help resolve unexpressed feelings or that sense of unfinished business, which can be so prominent following a sudden death.

The mirror of grief reflects back our loss – don't look away. In learning to live with loss, we “gift” ourselves the ability to feel good again, smile again, reexamine and rediscover ourselves, and begin anew.



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