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Rules for Getting Through the Holidays While Grieving

1. Take care of yourself.

We are conditioned to feel this is selfish, but when grieving, this is absolutely essential. Grief is physically and emotionally exhausting. Most people find holidays to be exhausting, so the combination of grief & holidays can be too overwhelming.

2. Set boundaries about what you are willing to do and not do.

Pressure comes from family, well-intentioned friends, and traditions. This year, if you don't feel like doing something, don't. Let others know you are setting boundaries for your emotional and physical well-being (Exception: Children still need holiday celebrations).

3. Be your own Captain of Kindness

Recognize the positive steps you have taken to survive this crisis. Be kind to yourself and give yourself credit for getting up each day and putting one foot in front of the other. Some days this is all you can do . . . and that's okay.

4. Let go of expectations and pressures.

Some are unrealistic. Some are just unfair in a time of grief. Some are self-imposed; some come from others. "You should be doing . . ."

5. Give yourself permission to change your mind at the last minute.

You may decide to attend a function, only to find at the last minute that it feels like too much. If so, simply bow out. A simple explanation of, "I just don't have the energy to do that today," should be sufficient. Then let it go. Don't beat yourself up.

6. Scale back or eliminate holiday decorations.

Again, this takes a lot of energy and decorations can cause floods of memories that make you sad. You can return to decorating for the holidays in the years to come. This year, it will mean you don't have the chore of taking them down.

7. Anticipate grief triggers and avoid if possible.

Expectations of holiday cheer and fa-la-la are everywhere. Christmas music, ads that cajole you into the holiday spirit, and the general push for holiday cheer can heighten your feelings of sadness. Awareness will help prevent your being caught off-guard.

8. Look for meaningful ways to honor the memory of your loved one during the holidays.

You may want to establish a tradition that keeps the memory of the deceased as part of your holidays. Special angels, a tree bearing decorations that represent things loved by the deceased, or lighting a special candle can all bring comfort and memories of happier times.

9. Explain your needs, limitations, and boundaries to family members.

Remember it is not a negotiation or argument. Simply explain, ask for their understanding, and stand firm. They may be accustomed to your being the one who is always strong and takes care of everything. If so, this will be an adjustment, but you have the right and the need set limits.

10. Remember that a holiday is just a date on the calendar that will pass.

You can get together with others at a later time when you feel stronger.