

## DIFFERENT PLACES AT THE HOLIDAYS

We are all at different places in our grief, especially when it comes to the holidays. Some of us are very newly bereaved and we can't even think of a holiday celebration this year. For others of us this will be our second or third or later holiday season and we know that it is possible to, at least, survive the holidays.

If it is your first year I suggest you do only what you feel must be done for yourself, your spouse, and your surviving children. Inform others around you (your own parents and siblings and in-laws) that Christmas this year will be too painful; that you don't have the interest or the energy to celebrate as you have in the past. Whether they accept this as reasonable or even okay is their problem. Ask for their understanding, but if you don't get it, don't worry about it. In the first months what we do or not do is a matter of survival. We cannot contend ourselves with another's understanding or approval.

Leave traditions for other years. Why should you expect yourself to carry them out when they are not only painful, but have little meaning now that your child is no longer a part of them.

Recognize that this year will be painful and surrender to that fact. Don't use up energy you don't have to pretend it is the same. Admit and accept that you don't even WANT the holiday to happen this year. Of course, few of us can completely ignore the holidays, but we can do a lot to relieve ourselves of the unnecessary pressure. Do what makes it easier for you this particular year.

I might suggest that you turn yourself to the real meaning of Christmas this year—the birth of a child meant to die. Maybe the spiritual aspect of the holiday might give the comfort that material celebrations cannot. Of course, the thought that your child will be at the Christ Child's birthday party this year will cause tears, but that's okay. God knows you are crying because you loved and that's what He is all about.

For those of us who are at the second or third or later holidays, this year may be even harder. One reason is that after a year or more is past we will not have the support we need, and yes, even the permission of

those around us, to hurt at the holidays. Others only give us a year to grieve and surely if you have gone through the first holiday without your child, they feel you should not have trouble after that.

The second holiday season may be the most difficult because we were numb and hurt so badly at the first holiday that we barely realized that the holidays were there. Maybe in the second year the shock of the death is less and the reality that our child IS dead, and will NEVER be a part of our holidays again, is even more vivid. This is a deeper and more lasting pain than we experienced in the first year. We may experience this pain for many years.

Again, I encourage you to do what is best for yourself, your spouse and your surviving children, and allow those around you to think what they will. They have not experienced what we have and do not have the right to inflict their expectations on us, nor do we have the obligation to conform to their expectations.

A word about approval might be appropriate here. We are a society that lives by approval. Others must approve of our actions, our behavior, and sometimes, even our thoughts. If we don't meet the approval of society we are cast out. Even we turn that lack of approval inside and say to ourselves: "If I don't conform I must be different or wrong. If we are concerned with meeting another's approval we surrender our individuality—our real selves. If we are to grow from the experience of losing our child; if we are to successfully resolve our grief; we must stop looking to others for approval of what we do. We must have confidence that how WE handle our grief is good and right. Since WE are experiencing OUR grief, WE are suffering OUR pain, WE are working towards OUR recovery, we must do it OUR way. Just as no one can live our lives, no one can live our grief and no one can tell us how to grieve.

See yourself as knowing what is best for you. Don't let others take that right from you by succumbing to their disapproval.

Handle the holidays, whether it is your first or your twenty-first, the way that is best for you. You will be the one who will grow from it.