

Coping at Christmas

The first, and indeed any, Christmas after a close family member has died, can be a very difficult time. Everyone seems to be celebrating, preparations for Christmas seem to go on forever and are everywhere – in shops, on TV, in magazines and on the internet.

Many people feel they just want to 'cancel' Christmas which is usually a time to be with family but will not be the same as someone will be missing. There are lots of decisions the first Christmas without the loved one: Do we decorate the tree, send cards, give presents, attend a place of worship, join in the festive meal, go to a family party? And for many people the run up to Christmas can be more difficult than the actual day.

Some ideas which may be helpful as Christmas approaches...

- Don't allow other people to dictate to you how you should get through this difficult time of year. Don't feel you have to go to a party or festivities with friends/extended family if you don't wish to or don't feel you will cope.
- Sometimes we don't know what we will feel like doing until the last minute. Don't feel you have to have a plan. Tell people you will decide on the day and you will come if you feel up to it, but may well not be able to.
- Let close friends/family know that you are struggling and need to be able to talk about the person that has died at this important family time.
- Tell people that you need to have the person that has died acknowledged by others at Christmas - to see their name in a Christmas card or to remember them with a toast during the Christmas meal might mean a lot, but many people would be scared of doing this unless you tell them.
- Within the family try to talk to each other about how you are feeling, or what you all might want to do. Thinking and talking together can help us to prepare ourselves for Christmas, and sometimes when these plans do go right, the day can bring surprising comfort to us.

- If you have young children in the family, be aware that they might wish for Christmas to carry on as before and although this can be painful, the normality of Christmas celebrations might also be a comfort.
- For people who have no children and have lost their partner, Christmas can be especially painful - it can be difficult being with other families at Christmas and yet the alternative - being alone - can be equally hard to bear.
- Some people don't send cards the first Christmas after losing someone, others may wish to include their loved one's name and are touched if they receive cards with a sentiment about the person who has died.
- Don't put too much pressure on yourself. If there are relations who expect to visit or for you to visit them, just let them know you can't do it this year. Consider introducing a time limit - "I'll come over for a quick drink but will only stay an hour."
- Develop a Christmas ritual e.g. attend a candle lighting service with other bereaved people; spend time at a special memorial place on your own or with others.
- Spend time with people who understand your experience and avoid those who don't.
- On the day itself, make time for you to escape if things are too much; a walk outside can really help ease tensions.
- If you can't cope with the idea of Christmas doing something completely different may be an option, but be mindful that sometimes being away from supportive friends or family can be more difficult and the jollity of strangers may be painful.
- Volunteer for a charity helping the homeless or elderly over Christmas. This can be a distraction and you feel you are doing something helpful too.
- Try to take some gentle exercise every day; this helps boost much needed endorphins.
- New Year celebrations can also be difficult; it can feel like we are moving 'further away' from our loved one and wishes of a 'Happy New Year' can intensify yearning and grief. Acknowledging these feelings to yourself and others close to you, and perhaps having a plan for New Year's Eve, whether being alone or with close, understanding friends who will allow you to be yourself at this poignant time of year.