Grief during the Holidays in the Aftermath of Hurricane Sandy: Ways for Coping with Loss

"Happy Holidays!" is a greeting we hear often at this time of year. But if you are grieving the destruction of your home or the end of a way of life in the aftermath of mega storm Sandy, or worse still, mourning the loss of a loved one, this holiday season may be anything but happy for you. Marty Tousley, nationally certified grief counselor and author and instructor of the online grief course, “The First Year of Grief: Help for the Journey,” offers up these insights and suggestions for coping with loss this holiday season. Self Healing Expressions (SHE), long-time provider of self-help courses, is the publisher of this grief course and a variety of other online courses for healing and self-discovery.

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Holidays can create feelings of dread and anxiety in those who are bereaved. The clichéd images of family togetherness and the often unrealistic expectations of a season filled with picture-perfect, joyful gatherings can cause tremendous stress for those who are not grieving -- let alone for those in the midst of the painful, isolating experience of loss. In our culture and in our mass media, the pressure to produce warm and wonderful holiday memories for and with our families is enormous. But the reality is that, when you're grieving a loss such as a home you've worked hard for, or worse still, mourning the loss of a loved one, you may not have the resources or energy to do what you ordinarily would do. When you are surrounded by nostalgia and traditions, even the happiest memories can hurt. When you're in the midst of pain, and the rest of the world is in the mood to give thanks and celebrate, you need to find ways to manage your pain and get through the season with a minimum of stress.

How can you celebrate the holidays when you are recovering from the trauma of a historic mega storm or the loss of a loved one so sorely missed? Creating new rituals and new traditions that honor you or that pay tribute to the memory of the deceased is one way to survive and perhaps even embrace the holidays.

Suggestions for Coping with Loss and Grief during the Holidays...

Have a Family Meeting -
List all the things you ordinarily do for the holidays. Decide together what's important to each of you, what you want to do this year, what you can let go of, and what you can do differently. For each task on the list, ask yourself these questions:

• Would the holidays be the holidays without doing this?
• Is this something I really want to do?
• Do I do it freely, or out of habit or tradition?
• Is it a one-person job, or can it be a group effort?
• Who's responsible for getting it done?
• Do I really like doing it?

Do Some Things Differently this Year -
Trying to recreate the past may remind you all the more of your loss or your missing loved one. This year, try celebrating the holidays in a totally different way. Nothing is the same as it used to be anyway. Go to a restaurant. Visit relatives or friends. Travel somewhere you've never gone before. If you decide to put up a tree, for example, put it in a different location and make or buy different decorations for it. If you’ve lost a loved one, you could hang a stocking in the person’s memory, and ask each family member to express their thoughts and feelings by writing a note to, from or about your loved one, then place the notes in that special stocking for everyone to read. Buy a poinsettia for your home as a living memorial to your loved one for the holiday season. Find and read some of the many helpful online grief healing articles, written specifically to help those who are grieving get through the holidays.

Keep it Simple -
You don't have to discard all your old traditions forevermore, but you can choose to observe the holidays on a smaller scale this year.

Self Care: Take Care of Yourself -
Build time in your day to relax or meditate, even if you're having trouble sleeping. Eat nourishing, healthy meals - and if you've lost your appetite, eat smaller portions more frequently throughout the day. Sweet, sugary foods are everywhere, from Halloween until Easter, but too much sugar will deplete what little energy you have.

Get daily exercise, even if it's just a walk around the block. Avoid drinking alcohol, which intensifies depression and disrupts normal sleep.

Try Herbal Remedies -
Lana J. Thomas, author of the Self Healing Expression course, “Creating Your Own Healing Herbal Blends with Confidence”, recommends herbal remedies for depression associated with grief. Thomas comments, “To support you during grief, try healing herbal remedies like Siberian Ginseng to elevate low moods. You could also try St. John’s Wort combined with Ginkgo Biloba. Passionflower, Skullcap, or Kava Kava also help to alleviate depression. Lavender oil on the temples can supply a lift.”

Seek Support from Others -
Grieving is hard work, and it shouldn't be done alone. You need to share your experience with someone who understands and accepts the pain of your loss. If your spouse, relative or friend cannot be the source of that support, you can find it elsewhere. Some people appreciate online grief support where they can connect with others grieving the loss of a loved one and an online grief counselor in the comfort and privacy of their office or home.

Give Something of Yourself to Others -
As alone as you may feel in your grief, one of the most healing things you can do for yourself is to be with other people, especially during the holidays. Caring for and giving to others will nourish and sustain you, and
help you to feel better about yourself. If you can bring yourself to do so, volunteer at a soup kitchen, a storm relief center, or Habitat for Humanity to help another rebuild -- if you are fortunate enough to still have your own home. Do whatever you can, and let it be enough.

Marty Tousley, CNS-BC, FT, DCC is a certified hospice bereavement counselor who has focused her practice on issues of loss, grief and transition for more than 40 years. In addition to a number of grief healing ebooks, her online grief courses include, The First Year of Grief: Help for the Journey and A Different Grief: Coping with Pet Loss. Her grief courses are published by Self Healing Expressions. The self-help site guides and empowers individuals towards healing, health and wellbeing holistically. Find expanded version of this article posted on their blog.
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