

# TIPS FOR GETTING THROUGH THE HOLIDAYS



The pressures around the holidays can be even more challenging after the death of a family member. Here are some tips for navigating this time of year and a [Holiday Plan Worksheet](#) to help you work through these decisions as a family.

**1. Plan ahead.**

Wondering what the season is going to be like can sometimes be more intense than the actual holidays. Having a plan can lessen worries and concerns, especially for children. Once you've talked through what everyone's hopes are and decided what you and your family have the capacity to do, share your decisions with friends and family.

**2. Don't let other people determine what you "should" or "shouldn't" do.**

You don't have to do what others think you should do or what you've always done. Give yourself and your children permission to keep, change, or start new traditions.

**3. Accept limitations.**

You may not be able to or want to do all the things you've always done. Talk with your children about the aspects of the holidays that are the most meaningful and prioritize those. Consider scaling back or changing the parts that feel too daunting or aren't as meaningful for you.

**4. Celebrate different feelings and preferences.**

Just like grief, everyone's hopes and wishes for the holiday season can be different. Involve your children

in discussions about what they would like to do and acknowledge how they might be similar and different.

While you might not be able to honor everyone's preferences, talking about them can help you better understand where everyone is coming from.



**5. Be informed before attending events.**

Find out who will be there, how long it's expected to last, and whether you need to do anything to prepare for it. As a family, brainstorm ways you and your children want to respond to questions or offers of help from others.

**6. Ask for help, even when it's hard to do.**

If it feels right, allow people to help in concrete ways such as cleaning, cooking, baking, shopping, childcare, and running errands. Sometimes we worry about burdening others, but often they are eager to help.

**7. Take care of your physical body.**

The holidays can be physically and emotionally draining, especially if you're grieving. Try to schedule time for rest, downtime for your children, and nutritious food/hydration for all of you.

## 8. Find ways to remember and honor the person who died.

Here are some ideas to consider:

- Light a memorial candle. Invite children and other friends/family to share memories.
- Write a card or letter to the person who died.
- Write memories on strips of paper and use them to create a paper chain.
- Hang a special decoration in memory of the person.
- Buy a gift the person would have liked and donate it to a cause important to them.
- Giftwrap a box and make an opening in the top for family and friends to share written memories. At a special time, the box can be unwrapped and as a family you can share those memories.
- Set a special memorial place at the table during a holiday meal.
- Create a memorabilia table or corner where you can place photos, stuffed animals, toys, cards, foods, and other mementos.
- Cook one of the person's favorite meals. Food can be a great starting point for sharing memories.



The National Grief Center  
for Children & Families

### **Dougy Center Bookstore/Resources**

Dougy Center's practical, easy-to-use materials are based on what they have learned from more than 65,000 Dougy Center participants. To order online, visit [dougy.org](http://dougy.org) or [dougybookstore.org](http://dougybookstore.org), or call 503.775.5683.

### **About Dougy Center**

Founded in 1982, Dougy Center provides grief support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families can share their experiences before and after a death. Dougy Center provides support and training locally, nationally, and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist children in grief.

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# HOLIDAY PLAN WORKSHEET

**1. The family meeting.** We suggest working through this worksheet together with your children. Pick a place to meet (in your home or someplace else) that feels safe and comfortable and set aside enough time for everyone to be able to talk. Take breaks when necessary. If one long meeting seems like too much, break it up into shorter ones, or bring up a question/topic to discuss one at the time. Let children and teens know that their thoughts and feelings are important and everyone will have a chance to speak. Because grief is so individual and unique, family members might have different feelings around certain holiday events and traditions. If a disagreement comes up, you can ask clarifying questions to help each person express their thoughts and feelings around wanting or not wanting to do something. A useful communication skill is to repeat back your understanding of what someone said, to check on if you heard them correctly. By doing this, it will be easier to clear up misunderstandings and find solutions that work for everyone.

**2. Questions to consider during the family meeting.** What did this holiday mean to the person who died? What do each of us need for support (hugs, privacy, time with friends) and who can we ask for help? How will we handle it if one person wants to do something and another person doesn't?

**3. Holiday family plan checklist.** After creating your lists for each item, go back through and identify who will be responsible for tasks you wish to keep/create, and who can help.

**Food:** What foods do we typically cook? What were the favorite foods of the person who died? Who can help this year? Do we want to cook at home or go out? What will we bring to parties?

- List what you normally do and star the items you want to keep.
- List new traditions you want to start.

**Decorations:** Do we want to decorate this year? What were the favorite decorations of the person who died? Do we want to create decorations to honor the person who died?

- List what you normally do and star the items you want to keep.
- List new traditions you want to start.

**Events, parties, and family gatherings:** Do we want to attend our usual parties this year? Will we host a gathering? Do we want to include the memory of the person who died? How? How will we handle conversations about the person who died? What about conversations with people who do not yet know about the death?

- List what you normally do and star the items you want to keep.
- List new traditions you want to start.

**Traditions:** Traditions to think about: sending cards/newsletters, attending faith or community services, taking a trip or vacation, visiting the cemetery or memorial spot for the person who died. What traditions are connected to the person who died? Which new traditions would we like to create? How will we carve out time for ourselves and our reactions? Who can we go to for support and care?

- List what you normally do and star the items you want to keep.
- List new traditions you want to start.

**Post-holidays:** What have you traditionally done for New Year's Eve and Day? What do you normally do during January and February? What did the person who died enjoy doing? January and February can be daunting months even during the best of circumstances, so it can be helpful to have something to look forward to that isn't connected to the holiday season.

- List what you normally do and star the items you want to keep.
- List new traditions you want to start.

**Reflection:** Just as you set aside time to have a family meeting to create a plan for the holiday season, it's equally important to meet and talk about how things went for each of you. Let family members know ahead of time that there will be a chance to discuss what worked, what didn't, what you want to do differently next year, and to check in about how people are doing after the holidays. It can be important to let others know what they did that was especially helpful or caring.