

Helping Children and Teens Cope with the Holidays

For kids and teens who are grieving the death of a loved one, the holiday season can bring up a variety of responses and feelings, including:

- Sadness, depression, anxiety, fear, anger, guilt, and/or apathy. These feelings are often expressed alongside the usual excitement of this time of year, and can be a confusing contradiction for the child.
- Somatic responses — such as frequent headaches, stomachaches, and/or sleep disturbance — may be the only way a child knows how to respond to the variety and intensity of his or her emotions.
- Kids and teens often have a desire to keep family traditions the same as they were when the deceased was alive. This is a way to keep the person “alive” and to avoid the overwhelming feelings that may come up when the loss is acknowledged.

How You Can Help

- Invite the child to share memories of the deceased — photographs, mementos. Help the child to create a safe “container” for expressing his or her feelings and experiences, such as a special journal or a memory box.
- Build frequent breaks and calming activities into your regular routine. Help grieving children and teens to structure their day, especially when there is a change in routine.
- Encourage the child to stay balanced physically. Maintaining a healthy diet and regular sleep routine will help with regulating emotions. Increased exercise may help with somatic complaints.
- Help the child discover the meaning behind family traditions. Engage children and teens in creating new traditions when appropriate. Encourage the child to create special ways of honoring their deceased loved one.
- Assist grieving kids in developing a plan for dealing with the holidays, including the anticipation that it will be too painful to experience without their loved one. This may include identifying ways to take a break from family gatherings, creating a list of friends the child can call, or reaching out to others who are having a difficult time through volunteer activities.
- Validate that often a child feels worse *after* the holidays, once the flurry of activities is over and there is the letdown of not having the deceased there, despite the child or teen’s efforts to keep everything the same.

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