

st michael's hospice

# Bereavement at Christmas

Coping with bereavement can be difficult at any time of the year but for many Christmas can be a particularly challenging time. We hope this leaflet can be of support through the festive period.



## Coping with the Christmas season when you are bereaved.

Hearing carols and seeing others happy can feel overwhelming if you are bereaved. Television, radio, the internet and social media, can at times hold sentiment, reminding us of sadness and the loss of someone close.

It could be you may receive invitations to social gatherings which might trigger thoughts of coping, or not coping, as you brave the event alone. It could also be you no longer receive the invitations you once did and can feel hurtful to no longer be included.

Between memories of Christmases past and the expectations to act like you are ok, it isn't any wonder Christmas after someone has died is very often an experience you would rather forget.

Whether you are grieving a spouse, partner, parent, grandparent, sibling, child, or friend, it's normal to worry about how you will handle that first Christmas season (or even the second, third, or more). You may even think you'd rather sleep through the whole of December and wake to the dawning of a new year.

Those feelings and fears represent a normal, healthy range of emotions about painful loss and society's expectations and limited ability to talk openly and honestly about grief.

## How can I get through Christmas when there is such a gap in my life?

**Some useful things to remember.** There is no rule saying you must behave in a certain way at this time of year to make others more comfortable. However, if you can find it within yourself to acknowledge the Christmas season (even just a little) it may help you to step into a new year ahead.

**Christmas is just a day.** It's easy to lose sight of the fact Christmas is one day and often the buildup and pressure is from commercial motives. Keeping this in perspective can be important not to let it dominate your life.

**You are not alone.** It can seem as though everyone is celebrating and excited about Christmas. This isn't true. You will find many people have individual reasons for dreading Christmas. There are also many people (not just those from other faith groups) who choose not to celebrate it.

**You will get through it.** It has been proven that our thoughts and how we react to them can have a positive or negative effect on our psychological and physical health. It is challenging, but with that in mind, try to focus on what lies ahead and not what could have been, or dwell on the past. The season can give way to a hopeful new year and spring time.

**Feeling emotional is natural.** Be prepared to feel upset or cry if you do decide to get out the Christmas decorations. This is natural and normal, especially if it is your first season bereaved. Perhaps think of somewhere different to put them, or make a special display of favourite photos together, with some favourite decorations.

**Receiving cards and season's greetings.** Be prepared for cards, including the names of people who have died, from people who may not have heard your news. Consider how you will respond and if necessary, ask a friend or relative to deal with any replies for you.

**Is it a time to be jolly?** Those who are grieving often feel bad for not feeling good at Christmas, or if they do manage to have a good time, they feel guilty for laughing or feeling joy when they think they should still be in mourning. It's a bit of a vicious cycle but it may be unhelpful to think nothing has changed. It would be false to pretend there isn't a hole in your family or life. If you have children, they may even want the loss to be recognised.

**Some useful things to think about doing.**

**Take things slowly and at your own pace.** You don't need to be cheerful if you're not ready for it. You may get invitations from well-meaning people to spend time with them because they don't like the idea of

you being alone. It's important to remember you are allowed to be happy; you are allowed to be sad; you are allowed to be whatever you need.

It's okay to be selfish with your own needs and it's important to be gentle with yourself. It's okay to turn down certain invitations to give yourself space, but it's also okay to let people know you need extra support too. Only accept if it's what you want and perhaps think to yourself how nice it may be to feel even a little joy, or smile even just once.

**Make a special memory.** This could be something you create yourself, such as writing a poem or letter, or it could simply be a drink to toast their memory. You could even light a candle each day for a few minutes of recognition and remembrance.

**Volunteer at Christmas.** Many groups and charities put on special lunches for the homeless and those who would otherwise be alone at Christmas. They are always in need of volunteers. It is a great way to get out and meet new people.

**Something new.** You may want to buy a new decoration this year to hang on the tree for the person who died. Perhaps you can have it engraved with a special message, or their name. You could consider planting a tree, shrub, or flower as a memorial. Perhaps make a Christmas wreath which you could place somewhere special or meaningful.

**Shop online.** You don't need to put yourself through the ordeal of facing happy, excited people or choirs on the high street. If you need help just ask, people really do want to help, or do your shopping online.

**Traditions.** Christmas is a very traditional time of year for many and it could be you, and the person who died, had favourite traditions you enjoyed. You may wish to maintain those traditions which hold many special memories for you, or it could be you are open to experiencing new things. Do whatever feels right for you.

**It's okay to not send cards.** If it's your first Christmas bereaved, you may want to contact everyone a while before to explain you won't be sending Christmas cards. But you can still ask for them to send cards as you would like to hear from them.

**Being creative can help.** Making gifts of cakes, sweets and pickles can be helpful. Knit, sew, paint pictures, or whatever your talents lead you to. You might discover a new pastime which brings you joy.

**What you enjoy.** Spend time doing what you like, read a book, watch films, have a soak in a bubble bath, do whatever it is that helps you relax.

**Re arranging furniture.** Some people find it a great comfort to keep a room the same, or keep furniture positioned in the same way, to keep someone close.

However, you could decide you would prefer to replace furniture, or change a room around, perhaps helping to reduce reminders of the person who died. Do what feels right for you.

**Eating well.** Try to avoid sugar highs and lows. Sugar can make things taste nice but the bad news is it naturally induces emotional lows. Try not to over eat, or under sleep. Try to eat a well-balanced diet and some mood enhancing foods such as oats (which are calming) turkey, chicken and dark chocolate. They help produce the feel good chemical, serotonin.

**Limit your intake of caffeine and alcohol.** Stimulants can create high and low moods. Camomile tea is good for calming when you feel anxious.

**Accepting any offers of help.** Sometimes we resist offers of help and can feel like we are not managing if we do. Acknowledging or accepting offers of support can be important and helps us to know we are not alone and others care. This may need to be balanced with self-care and the preference to be by ourselves sometimes. There is no obligation either way.

**Find a friend.** Try to find good friends to spend time with, where you can really be safe and you can all cry, laugh or whatever you need to do.

**Consult those closest to you.** If you have children, talking to them in advance about what they want to

do and balancing your needs with theirs can be helpful. Remember people express grief in different ways. They may be excited about Christmas when you are not or vice versa. This doesn't mean they are not feeling their loss, but are coping with it differently.

**One final thing.** If you feel a sense of guilt at the thought of enjoying even a small part of the season, maybe giving yourself permission on their behalf by asking "What would they want me to do this Christmas?" will be of support. Christmas can be a highly emotional time of year with poignant memories and constant reminders of happy couples, families, and friends. Talk to your Bereavement Counsellor if you are seeing one, friends and family, or contact a helpline.

For more information about the Hospice's Bereavement Support Services, call **01424 456361**, email **[bereavement@stmichaelshospice.com](mailto:bereavement@stmichaelshospice.com)**, or find out more about our services on our website **[stmichaelshospice.com](http://stmichaelshospice.com)**



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Date of preparation: October 2023

Registered charity number 288462