

# 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 Christmas when you're 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 memories reminding us of sadness, and the loss of someone close.

You may receive invitations to social gatherings which might trigger thoughts of coping, or not coping, as you experience this time of year alone. It could be you no longer receive the invitations you once did and it can feel hurtful to not be included.

Between memories of Christmases past and expectations to act like you're okay, it isn't any wonder Christmas after someone has died is 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 (or even the second, third, or more). You may even think you'd rather sleep through the whole of December and wake in the new year.

**These feelings and fears represent a normal, healthy range of emotions about painful loss, 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. However, if you can find it within yourself to acknowledge Christmas (even just a little) it may help you to step into a new year ahead.
- It's easy to lose sight of the fact that Christmas is one day. Often the buildup and pressure comes from commercial motives. It can be helpful to keep this in mind.
- It can seem like everyone is excited about Christmas. This isn't true. You will find many people have individual reasons to not celebrate Christmas. You are not alone.
- 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 springtime.
- It is natural and normal to feel upset or cry if you do decide to get out the Christmas decorations. Perhaps think of a different place to put them, or make a special display of favourite photos and decorations.

- You may receive 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.

**People 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.**

**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 people to spend time with them because they don't like the idea of you being alone.

It's okay to turn down invitations to give yourself space, but it's also okay to let people know you need extra support too.

- Make a special memory. This could be something you create yourself; 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 in remembrance.
- You could consider volunteering. Many groups and charities support the homeless and people who would otherwise be alone at Christmas.
- You may want to buy a new decoration this year to hang on the tree. Perhaps you can have it engraved. You could consider planting a tree, shrub, or flower as a memorial. Perhaps make a Christmas wreath to place somewhere special.
- You don't need to put yourself through seeing smiling faces and hearing choirs while shopping on the high street. If you need help just ask, people really do want to help, or you could do your shopping online.

- Christmas is a traditional time of year for many. It could be you, and the person who died, had favourite traditions you enjoyed. You may wish to continue those traditions, or it could be you are open to 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 to explain you won't be sending Christmas cards this year. But you can still ask them to send cards to you if you would like to hear from them.
- Being creative by making gifts can help. You could bake cakes, make pickles, knit, sew, paint pictures, whatever your talents lead you to. You might discover a something new which brings you joy.
- Spend time doing what you enjoy. Read a book, watch films, have a soak in a bubble bath, do whatever helps you relax.
- Some people find it a great comfort to keep a room or furniture the same, to keep someone close. However, you might prefer to replace furniture, or change a room around. Do what feels right for you.
- Try to eat a well-balanced diet and some mood enhancing foods. Try not to overeat or under sleep and limit stimulants like sugar, caffeine, and alcohol. These can cause high and low moods.
- 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. It's also okay to prefer to be by ourselves sometimes. There is no obligation either way.

- 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.
- 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.

- If you feel a sense of guilt at the thought of enjoying even a small part of the season, maybe giving yourself permission to ask "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 Bereavement Support Services, call **01424 456361**, email **[bereavement@stmichaelshopice.com](mailto:bereavement@stmichaelshopice.com)**, or visit **[stmichaelshospice.com/bereavement-services](http://stmichaelshospice.com/bereavement-services)**



01424 445177

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