

The background is a vibrant red. In the top left corner, there is a piece of red knitted fabric and a yellow straw-like object. Several pinecones of various sizes and colors (brown, grey, white) are scattered around the edges. In the bottom right corner, there is a small, green, artificial Christmas tree with white and red lights.

Dr. Dave
GRIEF EDUCATOR

An eBook on Grief & the Holidays

TIPS FOR SURVIVING THE HOLIDAYS

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Introduction

Hi, I'm Dave Page. I'm a Pastor at Saddleback Church and a Grief Educator. My goal is to help you cope with your grief during the holidays, to bring comfort and relief to those who are grieving. So, if you're grieving, you're in the right place. If you're looking for hope you're in the right place and if you're looking for practical tips on how to survive the holidays you're certainly in the right place! I'm so glad you've joined me.

As we enter the holidays and close out the year, everywhere we turn someone is telling us to be happy. "Happy Thanksgiving!" "Merry Christmas!" "Happy New Year!" But for those who've recently lost a loved one, the holidays can seem more like something to survive than to enjoy.

The holiday season, especially Christmas, is considered "the most wonderful time of the year." But for those who have lost loved ones, it can be the most difficult time of the year. It doesn't matter if your loss was two weeks ago or twenty years ago the holidays are tough for those in grief. We often feel a mix of sadness, sorrow, anger, and pain as we miss the ones we love. Even the best of times are painfully incomplete because we have an awareness that someone is missing.

Our Heavenly Father is referred to as the God of all comfort who comforts us in our pain so that we can comfort others in their pain with the same comfort we received from Him (2 Corinthians 2: 3-4). That's what I'd like to do for you.

I want to give you permission to grieve, especially during the Christmas season. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. Each person's grief is as unique as their fingerprint. But what all of us have in common, no matter how we grieve, is for our grief to be witnessed. I affirm your grief. I will never try to lessen it or reframe it and I won't even try to point out silver linings. I'm a big believer in facing our feelings and feeling the pain because grief brings an enormous amount of pain during the holidays.

My Story

I remember our first Christmas after my daughter passed. Our nightmare began when our five-year old, Jackie, our baby and the life of any party, was diagnosed with a brain stem tumor several years ago. She passed away in my arms six weeks later on March 4th. She took our hearts with her when she left. Spring turned into summer, summer into fall, fall into winter, and then came the dreaded holidays!

Holidays are difficult days for the bereaved. Bereavement literally means to be robbed. The holidays are a time of giving but all I could think about was what had been taken from me.

It is at this time we became acutely aware of the void in our lives. How do we have Christmas without Jackie? To make matters worse, Jackie's birthday is on December 20th. She was our Christmas baby.

At the time I was the pastor of a dynamic church in Auburn, California. Church services went on, Christmas carols were still sung, and people wished everybody a *Merry Christmas*. But my thoughts were on Jackie, fixed more on her departure than on her arrival five years prior. Christmas was different that first year without our daughter. We hung a stocking for her, talked about her, lit a candle in her memory, and shed many tears.

Sometimes showing up for something is the best you can do. We showed up that first Christmas and that was good enough.

But now, many Christmas trees and silent nights later I've learned a few things about this process we call grief and surviving the holidays. I'd like to share with you some tips that might be helpful for you and your family this Christmas season.

10 TIPS FOR SURVIVING THE HOLIDAYS

#1: Develop a Plan

Be intentional and develop a plan in advance of Christmas. It may be as simple as going to the cemetery to sit and talk with your loved one. Observe the Christmas holiday, as you want. Everyone has their own way of dealing with grief so just be yourself. There is no right or wrong way to do this. It's okay not to do what you've done in the past, be flexible. That first Christmas doesn't have to become a tradition for all the following years.

Our plan this year is to fly up to Sacramento, to Auburn, where Jackie is buried and to be there on her birthday, Dec. 20th. We will put fresh flowers on her grave and talk to her there. It will be a special time to remember and honor her on her birthday during the Christmas season.

#2: Talk About Your Loved One

Maybe the best way to have your grief witnessed during the holidays is to talk about your loved one. We talk about the weather, food, sports, and work. We talk about everything else ... except the elephant in the room. We all know it's there. It has hurt us all. But we don't talk about it. I encourage you to introduce the elephant in the room. Oh, please, say her name. Please say "Jackie" again. For if we talk about her death, perhaps we can talk about her life. Nothing brings relief like hearing a good story about your loved one.

#3: Memorialize Your Loved One

Find a way to remember your loved one and memorialize them during the holidays. It might mean lighting a candle, writing a letter to your loved one and placing it under the tree, or creating an ornament with your loved one's picture on it and hanging it on the tree. I know someone who created a memory book of their loved one. Create a new tradition in memory of your loved one. You can donate to a favorite charity in their honor. I do this each year to the HEART Africa ministry. You can also go to www.Tributes.com and create a tribute page for your loved one.

#4: Give Yourself Permission to Cry

Oftentimes, the bereaved worry they may cry during the holidays. Of course, you will! It's completely appropriate under the circumstances. Let it out. Crying cleanses the soul. Tears are liquid grief. The shortest verse in the Scriptures simply says, "Jesus wept" (John 11:35). Jesus wept because he was sad that his dear friend Lazarus had died. Hey, if the Son of God needed a good cry, then maybe so do I. And maybe so do you, especially during the holidays. It's part of God's healing process and a normal human response to loss. So have a lot of Kleenex on hand.

It is a great gift to let grieving people know that they don't have to be embarrassed by their tears around you, that they are welcome to cry with you. Maybe even a greater gift is to shed tears of your own over the loss of the person they love. Your tears reflect the value of the person who died and assures them that they are not alone in missing that person.

#5: Give Yourself Permission to Laugh

You may feel laughter is not appropriate in grief, or maybe that it's disrespectful to laugh or feel good while you're grieving. Laughter does not disrespect the memory of your loved one and it doesn't mean you've forgotten them. King Solomon wrote, "Laughter is good medicine for the soul" (Proverbs 17:22). Laughter is not only healthy; it helps reinvigorate you for the hard work of grief that lies ahead.

Kay Warren said, "The parallel train tracks of joy and sorrow are always running side by side throughout our lives. I used to think of life as a series of hills and valleys; sometimes we're up, then we're down. But I've come to realize that life is much more like a set of parallel train tracks, with joy and sorrow running inseparably throughout our life. Laughter is good for your soul even in the midst of your pain.

#6: Be Careful of "Shoulds"

Please don't let anybody "should" on you! Never let others take your grief away from you, minimize your loss, or tell you how you should or shouldn't grieve. Avoid the "Tyranny of the Shoulds" as in "I should send out Christmas cards, bake cookies, or go shopping." Do what is most helpful for you and your family.

#7: Be Kind to Yourself

You have been wounded and are not at full strength. Your soul has been injured so please take care of yourself physically. Eat healthy foods even if you don't feel like it and get some exercise. Walk ten minutes down the street and then walk back. Avoid alcohol and get some rest. Do something you like to do each day, something that makes you smile. Treat yourself with kindness like you would treat your best friend.

Remember, self-care is not selfish. If you know my story, I was diagnosed two years ago with leukemia. My philosophy is I'm living with leukemia, not dying from it. My life literally depends on my self-care. Your health and well-being also depend on your self-care.

#8: Include the Children

Children feel confused, powerless, angry, and anxious during the holidays because of a death in the family. Kids grieve differently than adults. Our children need their grief witnessed during the holidays just like we do. Be honest with them. Explain that it is okay for them to cry and for adults to cry, and that although they are feeling sad right now, they won't always feel like this. See what part of the holiday tradition is most important to them. Try to involve them in memorial rituals. For example, ask them to draw or write down their favorite holiday memories of the departed loved one.

#9: Ask for Help

Realize you can't get through this alone. Gravitate to where you will get support. Allow people to help you. Now is the time to call all those friends and family members who said, "If you need anything – call me." By allowing them to help, you are giving them a gift as well.

Have you heard about our new *Hope for Grief Community*? We recently launched a Grief Community at Saddleback Church that I invite you to check out. It meets on a regular basis and offers support groups and grief events in between our larger gatherings. You can't get through grief alone. Healing comes in community. We'd love to have you become part of this caring community.

#10: Remember You're Not Alone

King David wrote, "Yeah though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me" (Psalm 23:4).

Jesus said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5).

God is With Us

One of the names for Jesus associated with the holidays is "Emmanuel" which means "God with us" (Isaiah 7:14). John said, "The Word (Jesus) became flesh and dwelt among us. He still dwells among us. Jesus is with you in your grief, especially during the holidays.

My favorite verse regarding God's closeness with us in our pain is from Psalm 34:18: "The LORD is close to the broken hearted and saves (delivers) those who are crushed in spirit" (Psalm 34:18). Jesus knows what it's like to feel sorrow and pain and he has the ability to help deliver and heal us in our pain.

In "O Holy Night," we sing, "A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices." We feel the weariness of life and death in this world and wonder how anyone can rejoice. We are in desperate need of the hope of Christ to break through our loneliness and despair. While the holidays can be a sad time for those who grieve I want to share the comfort and joy that is found in the coming of God himself to rescue us in our despair.

The life of Jesus that began in a wooden cradle culminated with his death on a wooden cross. But it was not a senseless, meaningless death. Rather, it was a death-conquering death, followed by a new resurrected life. "The Son became flesh and blood. For only as a human being could he die, and only by dying could he break the power of the devil, who had the power of death" Hebrews 2:14).

Death's power brings much sorrow in this life this power is only temporary and will not last forever. What Christ set in motion when he defeated death at his first coming will come to its full fruition when he comes again.

This is our great hope at Christmas, that "yonder breaks a new and glorious morn." The Christ who came as a baby and died as our substitute will one day return to consummate his kingdom. And when he comes, "he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore" (Revelation 21:4).

All of us that have lost loved ones will grieve during the holidays, but we can have hope in the midst of our sorrow. The Scriptures tell us to grieve but not like those who have no hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13). We need hope like we need air to breathe. Jesus is our living hope (1 Peter 1:3).

Jesus overcame death and rose again to give us new life. As a result, we now have the hope of an afterlife, life in heaven where we will be reunited with our loved ones. I will see my precious daughter again and you will see your dear loved ones again as well. King David, after he lost his son at birth, said, "He won't return to me, but I will go to him" (2 Samuel 12:23). That's the hope each of us share – that we will go to our loved ones someday. I will see Jackie again, I can't wait.

And that's all I have to say about that.

Q&A

Q#1: Should holiday traditions that were established by the deceased be maintained?

Only if you want to and only if you feel they are helpful. Don't let others pressure you into doing rituals that you loved one established unless you find them meaningful and want to carry on the tradition. Maybe you don't do it that first Christmas after their passing. Maybe you begin it again on the second Christmas. Maybe you never do it again and begin a new tradition on your own.

Q#2: How can the children of a deceased parent best support the surviving parent during the holidays?

Let them tell you what they need instead of you planning out their schedule and thinking you know what is best for them and what they need because you don't. We all grieve differently. When you lose a spouse of 50 years you feel lost. I realize you are grieving too but remember we all grieve differently. Give them some space. Let them share with you how they are feeling and what they would like to do and don't do. Sometimes we think it's best to just keep them busy but not necessarily.

Q#3: How do I live the rest of my life without my son at Christmas time? Why is he not here for Christmas and why was he taken from me for all the Christmases to come?

This is from a loving mom who lost her dear son in a tragic death. It was a catastrophic loss and with that comes complicated grief. It hasn't been that long since the loss, so the wound is fresh.

My first thought is: be patient with yourself and be kind to yourself. Surround yourself with people who care and love you. You can't get through this alone. Find a grief community you can join that will support you. Healing comes from our relationship with God and others. I don't know why he was taken from you anymore than I know why my daughter was taken from me. None of us like change, especially change we have no control over. My heart goes out to you. I'm so sorry for your loss.

Grief is a normal human emotion, but it should be transitory. With that said, there is no timeline for grief. The first couple of years are especially painful. But when it becomes chronic and debilitating people experiencing it may need mental health treatment.

Complicated grief disorder keeps sufferers trapped in their pain and sense of loss after the death of someone they love. With professional assistance, even the worst feelings of grief can be resolved, and its most disabling symptoms lessened.

Q#4: How does one balance the joy of the Christmas season with the pain related to grief from death of a loved one or even the breakup of a serious relationship?

Regardless of the pain, God's joy can be present even during the Christmas season. Remember Jesus was described as a "Man of sorrows" and yet he had great joy as well.

The first Christmas does not ignore our pain. When we open the pages of Scripture, we find that all was not merry and bright. The new glimpses of joy that do emerge fall against the backdrop of pain, misery, and disorder. Herod was slaughtering babies throughout the land. Those first rays of brightness shone in a land of deep darkness. And yet the angel said to the shepherds and to all of us today, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:10).

Q#5: Will my life ever be good again?

After writing his classic book on grief, *A Grace Disguised*, Jerry Sittser found that one question kept surfacing in the hundreds of letters and emails he received in response to his book – “Will my life ever be good again?”

People want to know if life has any joy in store for them in the future after suffering a devastating loss. I wandered the exact same thing immediately after losing Jackie because the loss was so excruciating and overwhelming. I honestly didn’t know what to do or how to process it. I didn’t know how to grieve. I needed someone to help me frame my loss.

Out of desperation, I called Jerry Sittser at Whitworth College, and asked if he would come speak at the church I pastored. It was totally for selfish reasons – to help me recover from my grief. Jerry came and helped me with my loss. He became a model to me of someone who had suffered great loss (he lost his wife, mom, and daughter when a drunk driver hit their minivan) and yet had joy in his life.

Jerry loved God, his family (what remained), other people and life. He had a smile on his face and a bounce in his step. I wanted to be like Jerry.

I figured if he could do it, then so could I. I thought that if God could transform Jerry, then maybe he could transform me too. I think we all need models, people to look up to, which have gone where we want to go.

Helen Steiner Rice said: “Comfort comes from knowing that people have made the same journey. And solace comes from understanding how others have learned to sing again.”

We never get over the loss of a loved one. Rather they become a part of us. They remain in our hearts forever.

I have found that life can be good again, really good! Life will never be the same again. Things are different now - but good. I have a new joy. By experiencing such deep sorrow, I can now experience an even deeper joy. I have a smile back on my face and a newfound passion to help others who grieve to experience joy in their lives as well.

Transition ...

HAND OVER HEART– Let’s have a few seconds of silence to honor of our loved during this holiday season. Let’s center ourselves.

CANDLE LIGHTING

The flame of the candle symbolizes our remembrance. As we light our own candle in memory of our loved one, let us do so with gratitude that they lived and that we shared their life for a season. Now, when you light the candle, I want you to say their name out loud. Keep you candle lit as we share a responsive reading together.

POEM: WE REMEMBER THEM

Gates of Prayer, a Jewish Prayerbook

In the rising of the sun and its going down,
WE REMEMBER THEM.

In the opening of the buds and in the rebirth of spring,
WE REMEMBER THEM.

At the blueness of the skies and in the warmth of summer,
WE REMEMBER THEM.

At the rustling of the leaves and in the beauty of autumn,
WE REMEMBER THEM.

At the beginning of the year and when it ends
WE REMEMBER THEM.

When we are lost and sick at heart,
WE REMEMBER THEM.

When we have joys we yearn to share,
WE REMEMBER THEM.

As long as we live, they too shall live,
For they are now a part of us.
WE REMEMBER THEM.

NOW, LOOK INTO THE FLAME OF YOUR CANDLE ... CLOSE YOUR EYES ... WITH EYES CLOSED, BLOW OUT YOUR CANDLE ... YOU WILL SEE THE FLAME STILL GLOWS BEHIND YOUR CLOSED EYES. AND SO IT IS WITH OUR MEMORIES.

PRAYER OF BLESSING

And now, may the Lord bless you and keep you,
May the Lord make His face shine upon you,
And be gracious to you,
May the Lord lift up His countenance upon you,
And give you peace.
In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Thank you so much for joining me. I hope this teaching has been a blessing to you.

Grieve well to live well.

God bless,

Dave Page

THE END

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