

Getting through the Holidays *from The Dougy Center*

Our Mission

The Dougy Center provides support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families grieving a death can share their experiences.

We provide support and training locally, nationally and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist children in grief. We are supported solely through private support from individuals, foundations and companies. The Dougy Center does not charge a fee for its services.

Dougy Center Resources

The Dougy Center has been helping children, teens, young adults and their parents cope with death since 1982. Our practical, easy-to-use materials are based on what we have learned from more than 30,000 Dougy Center participants over the past three decades.

Contact The Dougy Center

For more information about The Dougy Center - give us a call or visit us online.

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The Dougy Center

The National Center for Grieving Children & Families

The pressures around the holidays can be even more challenging after the death of a family member. Here are some tips to consider that may help as you navigate the challenges, as well as a Holiday Plan Worksheet to help you work through these decisions together as a family.

1. Plan ahead.

Anxiety and anticipation leading up to the season can be more intense than the actual holidays. Planning ahead can help lower anxiety, especially for children. Once you've decided what you can and can't 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. Give yourselves the right to do what you want to do!

3. Accept limitations.

You may not be able to do all the things you've always done. Which aspects of the holidays are especially challenging for your family? Consider scaling back or changing things you may have done in the past, and consider what has been or might be especially enjoyable or meaningful to your family.

4. Celebrate different feelings and preferences.

Involve your children in discussions about what they would like to do. You and your family may decide to keep everything the same or change everything – or you may fall somewhere in-between.

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.

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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 more often than not, they are eager to help.

7. Find time for rest.

The holidays can be physically and emotionally draining, especially if you're grieving. Encourage rest and quiet play at times, and plan for healthy eating and hydration for the entire family.

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, such as a wreath or stocking. If a stocking is used, family members can place cards or pieces of paper with memories inside.
- Buy a gift the person would have liked and donate it to a charity.
- 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 the memories shared.
- 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 any other kinds of mementos.
- Share one of the person's favorite foods or meals. Food can be a great spark for sharing memories.



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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 everyone know that their thoughts and opinions will be acknowledged and that each person 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 good 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?

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- 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? (Explore this without worrying what others will think!) 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? You may want to plan a trip or some other special event for after the holidays end. 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.

