

HOLIDAYS--- SURVIVAL or DEFEAT?

By Kay Bevington, Van Wert, OH
Editor *Alive Alone*

The forthcoming holidays are often the most difficult times of the year for bereaved parents, now childless.

I have some suggestions that will hopefully assist you during this season. My husband and I have attempted some of the following since our daughter, Rhonda, died and others are ideas from other bereaved friends.

YOU WILL SURVIVE the HOLIDAYS!

Those first few years of bereavement cause us to think that we'll certainly die without our child/children. You may not be able to ENJOY the holiday but rest assured that there will be a day in your future when you'll be able to once again gain *some* pleasure from them. It will never be the same without your child/children but you will learn to cope and reinvest in others and have a life again.

PLAN AHEAD

It helps to have a plan for some of the events that are fast approaching. Think about and plan for these next few weeks. Decide what **YOU** want to do and let those who are close to you know what **YOU** need. The decisions you make will depend upon your individual circumstances. Adult family/friends should be able to better understand your need for change but some will be reluctant to changes.

CHANGE

Sometimes changing where and when holidays are celebrated helps. Family gatherings do NOT have to be on Thanksgiving, Christmas Day or Hannukah. Whatever religious holiday or family holiday you celebrate these same principles can apply to you. Perhaps your family would agree to have one gathering this year between the two holidays. Just because you've always hosted the gatherings at your house in the past does not mean it has to be the same. Inform your family that you're unable to do this and tell them you will be having it at a restaurant this year or ask another family member to do it for you. Having the holiday gatherings at a different time also permits you to 'escape' to a warmer climate, take a cruise, or just "hibernate" to avoid the excitement of these holidays. You will take your grief with you if you plan a time away from

home but OFTEN the intensity of the pain lessens in a different environment. There are other bereaved parents in your circumstance who would love to accompany you with whatever you decide to do. Join some support groups to meet these people.

HELP OTHERS

Some people decide to work in local food kitchens on these special days. Many who've done this say it helped them focus on what they have and had and to see that life is often more painful and difficult for others. It also makes us feel so much better when we give of ourselves to others.

Some families use the money they would have spent on their deceased child to purchase food, clothing, toys, etc. for an underprivileged child or family.

DECORATING

If you feel your home needs to be decorated for the holidays but you can not muster the courage or energy to do it then ask a friend or family member to assist or do it for you. You may want to consider decorating a tree for the gravesite instead or in addition to what you do at home. Do what is best for you and those currently residing at your home.

ATTENDING SPECIAL EVENTS

What do you do about these special events? Go to them if you think you'd like to but inform your hostess that you may need to 'escape' inconspicuously if you can not handle it. Think about and look for others who are having a difficult time during the holidays and plan to attend or sit with them. It helps to have someone nearby who truly understands. The events are healing for some and painful for others. You will find that your feelings about these change from year to year.

Let your family & friends know how you feel this year. If you wish to attend, warn them in advance that you will probably cry, but assure them that it is important for you to cry and talk about your child. Let them know that they do NOT CAUSE your sadness. Even though tears are shed you MAY feel better later after having
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an opportunity to get away from home. If you just want to sit by the fireside and not attend these festivities then let them know that you appreciate their thoughtfulness and that in another year you will appreciate the opportunity to decide once again.

GREETING CARDS

You may want to consider purchasing printed holiday greetings now, use computer labels to address them, and type a letter talking about your child and your grief. Do them NOW and set them aside until it's time to mail them. IF you'd like others to share pleasant memories with you about your child, ask them to write a sentence or two and send to you with your greeting card. These can be placed in a stocking or a special gift box. These messages can be read privately or aloud at a family gathering. Tears will be shed (which is a catharsis for us) but there will also be pleasant memories and laughter. Some people have used their child's photo or last family photo on their return address labels. I had several phone calls and notes the last time after using Rhonda's photo on our return address labels thanking us for the opportunity to see her photo again after so many years since her death.

ATTENDING WORSHIP SERVICES

Often bereaved parents will say that music and worship services are the most difficult to attend after a child's death. We may be angry at God and we most definitely feel cheated when other families seem to be intact and ours is not. Loneliness and unfairness are our feelings and often cause despair. IF you are able to attend the annual services of your place of worship you may want to sit near the aisle or at the back so you can have an easy escape route and not be 'hemmed into the middle'. Sometimes attending these services are steps toward healing for us but each of us are different and know our own timetable the best.

REMEMBERING YOUR CHILD

You might want to purchase a special candle in memory of your child. Light the candle daily from Thanksgiving through Christmas. Many people take these special candles to the Candle Lighting Services that their local support groups have during the holidays. Some choose to use the candles given to them during this service and make a special table decoration with it for the holiday. Either way we're sharing the love of our child with others by lighting these candles.

Some have taken clothing of their child and had them cut and designed for a doll or bear. These dolls and bears can be given to other family members and friends. Buttons from clothing can be made into pins and given to ladies who are relatives or friends of the deceased. Jewelry can be melted, redesigned and sized for others to wear. See your local jeweler as they often have excellent ideas about how to make new items using the good jewelry that belonged to your child. Be creative and think of ways that you can use the belongings of your child to create something new that will help others to remember him or her. What a wonderful means of commemorating the life of your child and these become valued treasures to other family members and friends.

Whether this is your first year of bereavement or if it has been several years since your child died you will find that you WILL survive the holidays. You can gain some small pleasures if you plan to include the memories of your child in your holidays.