

# Grief, Anniversaries & Significant Events



***Birthdays, holidays, Christmas, Valentine's Day, anniversaries, the day they died, the day we met ...***

For the bereaved, the list of significant events that can trigger grief responses can be endless. Other losses experienced after the death of a loved one, whether they be additional bereavements, loss of possessions, relationships, employment, etc., can also be particularly strong grief triggers.

While our responses will change over time, the sorrow and pain as these anniversaries and events come and go can be draining and emotionally exhausting. The lead up to such events can often feel worse than the day itself.

In the lead up to anniversaries and other significant events, the first question you need to ask yourself is: *What do I need at this time?* This is not a selfish question. Significant occasions can be really hard, so make sure that you tune into your own needs, as well as those around you.

This information sheet is designed to provide ideas and strategies to assist you to support yourself, or someone who is grieving, during these times.

## Planning

It is important to do some planning in the lead up to significant occasions. Planning can give you a greater sense of control, which can help to ease some of the anxiety and concern you may be feeling.

Occasions such as birthdays and Christmas often come with established traditions and rituals. Some people prefer to stick with traditions they have always had, but don't be afraid to alter your traditions if you need to. Your 'normal' has inevitably changed, and you may prefer to create new traditions accordingly. If you decide to cancel your usual activities altogether, that's okay too, but make sure you plan something else to do, as too much free time may leave you feeling isolated and lonely.

## Share your plan with family and friends

Once you have planned how you would like the day/occasion to go, make sure you let your friends and family know that this is what you intend to do. Be honest with them and let them know that it is a difficult time for you. Often they feel unsure how to act around you, so let them know that it's okay for them to talk to you about your loved one, and that if you get upset, then that's okay too.

If you are planning to attend an event or gathering, it might be useful to let the organiser know that whilst you intend to go, this may change on the day, or you may need to leave early depending on how you are feeling. This will 'let you off the hook', in that you can feel comfortable leaving if it all gets too much.

## Take good care of yourself

It is important to take good care of yourself physically and emotionally in the lead up to, and during, significant occasions. Eat well and listen to your body, e.g. if you are tired, make sure you get some rest. Likewise, make sure you take care of yourself emotionally. Try not to suppress your emotions, e.g. if you need to have a good cry, then do so, as you will likely feel better afterwards. On the other hand, don't be afraid to enjoy yourself if this occurs. Happiness and sadness can co-exist, and being happy is not disrespectful to the memory of your loved one. You may also choose to avoid people at this time, particularly those who are unable to understand your experience of loss.

## Self-care tips and strategies

Below are a variety of ideas that may help you to better navigate significant events.

### Beforehand

- Look at your diary and make a note of events and milestones that may be difficult for you. Start to think about what you can do during these times to look after yourself.
- Consider arranging to be with someone who understands during these times.
- Decide how you want to spend the day, and let friends and family know so they can better support you.
- Think about how to answer certain greetings in advance. For example, when someone wishes you a 'happy holidays', you may respond with 'thank you', 'I'll do my best', or 'best wishes to you too'.
- Keep a journal in the lead up to, and after, the significant occasion. Make note of things that were particularly difficult so that you can better navigate them next time.

### On the day

- Free yourself from the expectations of yourself and others, and give yourself permission to not be okay.
- You might like to come up with some small rituals to honour and acknowledge your loss, e.g. writing a letter to your loved one, visiting a landmark, or arranging to meet up with friends and family.
- Express your feelings through a creative outlet, e.g. painting, art and craft, writing, dancing.
- Talk to other people about your memories of your loved one and ask them about theirs.
- Do something you wouldn't normally do in memory of them, e.g. make a donation in their name, plant a memorial tree, sign up for a class in something you've always wanted to do, or volunteer to help a charity.
- Do something that makes you feel good. It may be as simple as reading your favourite magazine, going for a walk, listening to music, getting a massage or enjoying a good cup of coffee.

## Seeking further help

Although grief can be very painful, most people (85–90%) find that with the support of their family and friends and their own resources, they gradually find ways to learn to live with their loss and do not need to seek professional help.

Sometimes however, the circumstances of the death may have been particularly distressing, such as a traumatic or sudden death, or there may be circumstances in your life which make your grief particularly acute or complicated. If you are finding it difficult to manage on a day-to-day basis, it may be helpful to see a counsellor or other health professional. It's okay to admit you are struggling with your grief. No-one will think any less of you if you ask for help along the way.