



What Grieving People Wish You Knew at Christmas



Article by [Nancy Guthrie](#) 

Guest Contributor

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“Happy Thanksgiving!” “Merry Christmas!” “Happy New Year!” As the end of the year approaches, everywhere we turn someone is telling us we should be happy.

But for those who’ve recently lost someone they love, the holidays can seem more like something to survive than to

enjoy. The traditions and events that can add so much joy and meaning to the season are punctuated with painful reminders of the person we love who is not here to share in it. Many have wished they could find a quiet place to hide until January 2.

While those of us who surround grieving people can't fix the pain of loss, we can bring comfort as we come alongside those who hurt with special sensitivity to what grief is like during the holidays. Grieving people wish we all knew at least five truths, among others, at Christmas.

1. Even the best times are punctuated with an awareness that someone is missing.

I remember a conversation I had with a friend as we prepared to head out on a holiday trip shortly after our daughter, Hope, died. "That should be fun!" she said. I sensed I was supposed to agree wholeheartedly with her.

What I didn't know how to explain is that when you've lost a member of your family, even the best of times are painfully incomplete. Someone is missing. Even the best days and happiest events are tinged with sadness. Wherever you go, the sadness goes with you.

2. Social situations are hard.

I have never been able to figure out why crowds are difficult when you're grieving, but they are. Small talk can be unbearable when something so significant has happened. Meeting new people will likely bring questions about family. To walk alone into a room full of couples when your spouse has died, or into an event filled with children when your child has died, can be a soul-crushing reminder of what you have lost.

If you've invited someone in the midst of grief to your holiday event, let them know that you understand if it seems too hard at the last minute and they have to cancel, or that they may only be able to stay for a short time.

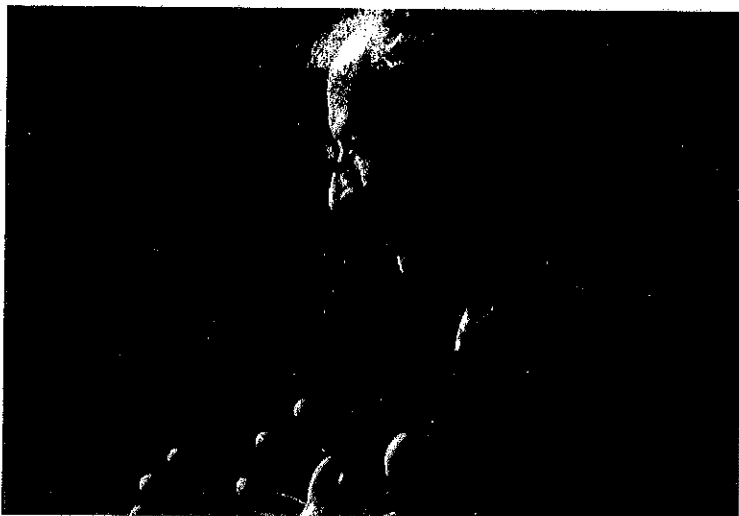
If you're going to an event, give a grieving person a call and ask if you can pick her up and stick with her throughout the event for support. When you come upon a grieving person at a holiday social event, let him know that you are still thinking about the person he loves who has died, and invite him to talk about his memories with that person. Don't be afraid to say the name of the person who has died. It will be a balm to the grieving person's soul.

3. Extended family can be awkward and uneasy.

Grief is often awkward — even, and perhaps especially, with those to whom we're closest.

My husband and I host weekend retreats for couples that have lost children, and the difficulty of being with family at the holidays is often a topic of conversation among these couples. They know that some family members think they've grieved long enough and want them to move on. Others want to initiate a conversation about the person

who died but aren't sure how. What often happens is that the name of the person who died is never mentioned, and it feels to the person who is grieving that they have been erased from the family.



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Do you know a grieving person heading to a family gathering for the holidays? You might ask about their expectations when they're with family. And if they have a strong desire for their loved one to be remembered in a certain way, combined with a fear that it may not happen, you might encourage and help them to write a letter to their family in advance stating clearly what would bring comfort, rather than expect that their family will instinctively know.

4. Tears are not a problem.

For most of us, grief tends to work itself out in tears — tears that come out at times we don't expect. Sometimes grieving people sense that people around them see their tears as a problem to be solved — that tears must mean they aren't doing very well with their grief. But it makes sense that the great sorrow of losing someone we love would come out in tears. Tears are not the enemy. Tears do not reflect a lack of faith. Tears are a gift from God that help to wash away the deep pain of loss.

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. An even greater gift is to shed tears of your own over the loss of the person they love. Your tears reflect the worth of the person who died and assure them that they are not alone in missing that person.

5. It can be hard to remember why Christmas should be so merry.

In "O Holy Night," we sing, "A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices." Grieving people around you feel the

weariness of life and death in this world and wonder how anyone around them can rejoice. They are in desperate need of the reality of Christ to break through their loneliness and despair. While we don't want to preach at them, we do look for the opportunity to share with them the comfort and joy to be found in the coming of God himself in Christ to rescue us.

The life of Jesus that began in a wooden cradle will culminate in death on a wooden cross. But it will not be a senseless, meaningless death. It will be a death-conquering death, followed by new resurrection life. The writer of Hebrews explains, "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 NLT). The power death has now, to bring so much sorrow, will not be the way it is 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, and the hope we have to share with those who are grieving 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 does, "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).

Some Thoughts on Holiday Coping (Virgil Fry)

- ▶ Personalize family remembrances (*empty chair, candle, shared stories, ornament, etc*)
- ▶ Balance private time along with social events
- ▶ Simplify personal expectations, begin small new traditions
- ▶ Use meditation, journaling, reflective music, prayer, walks
- ▶ Recognize the bittersweetness of the holiday season
- ▶ Acknowledge: families can huddle or splinter in grief
- ▶ Utilize: Support groups, trusted companions, therapist
- ▶ Participate in Services of Remembrance, service projects benefitting others
- ▶ Especially: Be gentle with yourself and remember—
*“Being in grief is not being crazy:
it just feels like it.”*

SOME ALTERNATIVE STATEMENTS WHEN CONFRONTING THE CRISIS OF GRIEF by Virgil M. Fry

Instead of: I know exactly how you feel.

Try: I can only imagine what you are going through.

Instead of: At least he doesn't have to suffer anymore.

Try: He suffered through a lot, didn't he?

Instead of: It's God's will.

Try: One comfort I find is God's promise never to abandon us.

Instead of: Take this pill—it will calm you down.

Try: Do you feel like talking right now?

Instead of: She wouldn't want you to grieve.

Try: It's hard to say goodbye, isn't it?

Instead of: Don't cry—you'll only make it worse.

Try: Sometimes tears are the best way to express our feelings.

Instead of: This death is a great victory for God.

Try: Even with the promise of resurrection, it's hard to give someone up.

Instead of: You can't be angry with God.

Try: God understands even when we're upset.

Instead of: At least you have other family members.

Try: There's no way to replace the one you've lost, is there?

Instead of: Don't you think it's time to get on with living your life?

Try: Everyone has to grieve in their own way, don't they?

Instead of: Don't talk about the funeral—it'll only make you sad.

Try: We can talk about whatever you want.

Instead of: Time heals all wounds.

Try: Time lessens the pain, but you'll always have him/her with you.

From Disrupted: Finding God in Illness and Loss, Leafwood