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A Not So Jolly Christmas

by Dr. Bill Webster

According to the song, “It’s the most wonderful time of the year.” But this year may not seem quite so wonderful for you. Oh, it’s more than the usual “bah humbug!” stuff. This year Christmas is going to be different for you, yet the world doesn’t seem to notice or care. It is the season to be jolly, but you feel anything but jolly.


In fact, this year the Christmas bells will have a different ring for you. Perhaps someone you care about has died. There may be an empty chair at the Christmas table but it will not compare to the empty feeling in your heart. Pulling out the old familiar decorations and tree ornaments will be a painful reminder of what you have lost.

Remember the old song “All I want for Christmas is my two front teeth”? If I asked what you would like for Christmas, I think I

know what it would be. All I wanted for Christmas 1983 was my wife back, for life to be back to normal or the way they were last Christmas before she died. I really do understand those feelings.

Perhaps you’re anticipating these holidays with some apprehension because of a significant loss. Probably nothing will make these holidays perfect, but perhaps there are a few suggestions to make them more bearable:

- **Reduce the pressure:** There is always a lot of pressure around Christmas with a thousand and one things like shopping, baking, cards, etc. This year you may not feel like you have the energy to do very much, and frankly, you just aren’t excited about it. So ask yourself: “How much can I do?” and “What do I want to do?” Figure out what you should do, compare it with what you can do, divide it by what you want to do – and stick to it.



And what of the future? You may wonder if you will ever feel happy again, or if life will ever be the same. Those feelings are understandable, and probably little I say will convince you today that you are going to be OK or that you will find a way through this.

- **Redefine your expectations:** Realize that you are responsible for your own happiness. So act rather than react. Don't wait for others to decide what to do, and hope they'll include you. Decide what would be a meaningful way to spend this difficult holiday. Do the things that are important and special to you. Do your best in the difficult circumstances and, above all, go easy on yourself. If something doesn't work out this year, you can change it and try again next year. Feel free to do whatever is right for you.

- **Relive your memories:** Christmas is always a time of many memories. This one may be especially nostalgic. I think it is important to relive those memories. It is amazing how often we try to avoid the subject of loss. You may find that no one seems to want to mention the fact that someone has died or that there has been a loss or a change. After all, they surmise, "someone might get upset or emotional." Yet the situation is on everyone's mind ... and hey, we are upset whether we acknowledge it or not. Denying the reality of the situation is often harder than facing up to it.

- **If someone has died,** can we find a way to celebrate the person's life as well as acknowledge their death? Perhaps you could light a memorial candle at the dinner table, or take some time to share special memories or stories. Humorous incidents recalled can have a special healing quality to them. Try not to ignore the fact that someone is missing this year, for to pretend that nothing has happened is so unnatural, it actually increases the tension.

And yet, even though this Christmas may not be so jolly, can you be thankful for something? Of course you are sad because someone you care about is absent, or your situation has changed, and that is natural and it is right. But can you be thankful for the years you did have and the memories you still share? Celebrate what

you have as well as realize what you're missing. Don't allow looking back at the past to spoil what you have in the present. Yes, you miss the person who will not be there, but are there children, relatives and friends you can enjoy today? It may not cancel out your sadness but it certainly makes it easier.

And what of the future? You may wonder if you will ever feel happy again, or if life will ever be the same. Those feelings are understandable, and probably little I say will convince you today that you are going to be OK or that you will find a way through this. But it is important that you hold on to that hope. You may not be able to see it, and you may not even be sure you can believe it, but you must hold on to hope that there will be days that are brighter.

When a famous Scottish artist was asked to paint a picture representing "Hope," he laboured diligently on the masterpiece. But when the drawing was finally unveiled, those who had come to see the work were astounded. For he had depicted hope as a battered and bowed woman in tattered clothes playing a harp. The harp had only one string left intact, and yet the woman was plucking on that one string with unbounded determination and zeal. That is hope. When buffeted by the trials and tribulations of life, hope plays on the only strings left to it.

So here we are at this festive season, and perhaps you feel like your life has been battered and broken by cruel circumstances. Don't spend all your time looking at the broken strings. What are the ones that are still intact? You may have had a devastating loss, and nothing and no one should minimize the importance or the difficulty of that. But you haven't lost everything. Even though you may feel that you have lost a lot, you can find ways to make the most of what you have left.



Gifts for a Grieving Christmas

by Dr. Bill Webster

I love Christmas.

It is probably my favourite time of the year. Knowing how important it is to me, my two boys and their families make every effort to make it home for the festive season, or as will happen this year, we travel to be with them.

We have lots of special family traditions around Christmas Eve and the day itself. We don't go in for lavish decorations, but we always have a nice tree, covered with twinkling coloured lights, which I love to sit and look at it, with the gifts scattered around the base of the tree. Somehow there is a feeling of warmth and security about being home for Christmas.

Childhood Christmases were not always like that for me. My grandmother died on Christmas Eve when I was 10 years old. Ten days before, she had just gone out for a few minutes to mail some Christmas cards, but as she was crossing the road to get to the mailbox, she was hit by, of all things, a speeding bicycle. She was knocked to the ground and suffered a serious head injury, and while recovery looked possible at first, she suffered several setbacks and succumbed to her injuries on the evening of December 24.

Obviously that Christmas was difficult for everyone, especially my mother, as she and all of us mourned the loss of someone who had been such a special part of our lives. That is understandable. Bereavement is never easy and possibly more difficult when everyone else wants to celebrate the "season to be jolly."

But, sadly, in the years that followed, subsequent Christmas celebrations were never the same as before. Out of what I am sure she felt was respect for her mother, my mum never again put up a tree or any decorations, and while

the season was noted and my sister and I always got gifts, it was never again a joyful time in our family. Sometimes people feel guilty about enjoying ourselves, as if this would be disrespectful to the memory of the person who has died. But we need to balance grieving what we have lost with appreciating what (and who) we still have.

While I loved my granny, and loved and respected my mum, I decided long since that in my home and family, we would not carry on that particular tradition. Christmas is a special time for kids and families alike, and every one of them should count, regardless of circumstances.

So what can we say to people struggling to cope with a loss at this difficult holiday season? Here are a few practical suggestions:

- 1. Recognize that this Christmas is different.**
- 2. Plan ahead.** What would make Christmas meaningful for you? Decide what you want to do.
- 3. Re-examine your priorities.** What is really important to you ... and what is not! Avoid all those "shoulds" and "oughts" that clutter the season.
- 4. Take responsibility for your own happiness.** Act rather than react. Make the changes you think are best for you this year. Try to find something positive in your life. And when you feel like it, take a break from things.
- 5. Stay in touch with your feelings** ... be honest about them, and if you are feeling sad, that is OK. Grief is a sign that you cared, not a sign of weakness.
- 6. Don't be afraid to relive your memories.** Tell stories about the person or other family occasions, especially ones where you will laugh and remember good times.

We all need to remember that we can be thankful for yesterday, but today is what we have. Look for the joy in each moment.

7. Acknowledge your loved one's presence. Create a special tribute, like lighting a memorial candle for the room or table.

8. Look after yourself. Don't abandon healthy habits. Learn to say "No." Be compassionate with yourself about not being perfect.

9. Ask for and accept help. Balance solitude and sociability.

10. Set differences aside. Don't allow the holidays to become a "weapon" or an opportunity to air grievances or grudges over things.

11. Take care of children and make it great for their sakes.

12. Face the future with hope. Remember, there will be other Christmases.

I try to encourage people in this season of the year especially to hold on to what is important.

- To not to spend so much time grieving what we have lost that we fail to appreciate what we still have. Both are necessary and bring a sense of balance.
- To celebrate the person's life as well as acknowledge their death.
- To not allow looking back at the past to spoil what we have in the present.
- To enjoy what we have as well as grieving what we've lost.
- To believe that there are reasons to go on, even though it may not be clear what they are right now.

- To believe in people, in life, in love and laughter, and in hope!

- To believe in God, however we understand Him (or Her), and even more to have faith in the values and convictions by which we live.

- To believe in ourselves, that our determination will help get us through.

- To believe that no matter how difficult the circumstances that life goes on and can still be meaningful.

- And above all, to believe in a brighter tomorrow, and in possibilities beyond our bravest dreams.

We all need to remember that we can be thankful for yesterday, but today is what we have. Look for the joy in each moment. Today is tomorrow's "good old days." Find the blessing in every opportunity and every person you have in your life. Celebrate what you have as well as regret what you're missing. And trust that there will be brighter days ahead.

While this Christmas, Hanukkah or festive season may not be perfect, and perhaps not even merry, can you find ways to make it meaningful for yourself, your family and for others?

Whatever this season means to you, may it be a good one, filled with peace, light and hope.

Dr. Bill Webster is a grief counsellor, author, TV host and increasingly well-known international speaker. He brings a unique blend of personal experience, academic education and many years of practical application to his work. Visit his innovative website at www.GriefJourney.com.

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