

Blue Christmas

Experts supply strategies for dealing with grief around the holidays

By Courtney Casey
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For the average person, the stress associated with the holidays can sometimes overshadow the joy.

But for those grieving over the death of a loved one, the season can feel like an even weightier burden.

“Holidays are especially difficult for people, because ... every holiday brings back memories of all of the previous holidays,” said Dr. Howard Belkin, an attending physician with Beaumont Hospital, Royal Oak, who also has a private practice in Birmingham. “It’s almost like opening a painful wound all over again, kind of like a reminder that the people who used to be with you aren’t there anymore.”

According to Belkin, a disproportionate percentage of depressive episodes —25 percent—occur during the winter holidays, as the strain of gift-giving, familial mingling and “unrealistic expectations” fostered by TV shows and movies combine to produce a potent cocktail of stressors.

Financial difficulties also exert pressure, especially these days, as people may feel they can’t spend as much as they once did, or feel envy or guilt as they encounter friends and relatives who are faring better or worse economically, he said.

For someone facing a void left by a loved one, that struggle is compounded.

“When a large personality is missing, it can really, really make the holidays more difficult to get through,” said Karen Monts, grief support services manager with Hospice of Michigan. “You become very challenged in that your emotions and your body want to stay home, beginning, many people tell me, right before Thanksgiving. ‘I want to get in bed, pull up a blanket and wake up on Jan. 2.’”

But Belkin and Monts urged people to fight the temptation to lapse into reclusiveness.

“You really have to get out,” said Belkin. “The more you isolate, the worse the feeling is going to be. If you seek out others, you can share things with them—the

happy things, the sad things. You see other people have a lot more in common with you than you think.”

It’s not necessary to accept every invitation or linger for every party’s entirety; perhaps choose one that seems appealing and plan to drop by for an hour, suggested Monts.

The apprehension of confronting the holidays, she said, is often more severe than the reality of it.

“ I always tell people, the anxiety of the approaching day is ... the worst, most times,” she said. “ All these thoughts begin to start when ‘ I’m Dreaming of a White Christmas’ starts on the radio. Most of us find when the day gets here, you make it through it, and it wasn’t as hard as thinking about how I’m going to get through it.”

Belkin encouraged families experiencing a shared loss to work through their grief together. And other support resources also are available: Hospice holds group sessions in the fall that resume in January, and offers a hotline for one-on-one counseling.

Bagnasco and Calcaterra Funeral Home in Sterling Heights, along with many other local funeral facilities, holds a remembrance service each December to provide an outlet for mourning individuals and families, with participants lighting memorial candles and recounting tales of their lost loved ones.

Speakers also read passages specifically dedicated to the passing of certain family members —parents, children, siblings, spouses —that encourage attendees to treasure the memories and the decedent’s lasting impact on their lives.

Funeral Director Gia Mellendorf said the service has drawn as many as 300 people in the past.

“ It’s just to tell them they’re not alone,” she said. “ We’re going to give them tools of what to do, different ways to memorialize (their family member). We tell them not to be afraid to say their name.”

Survivors should handle the loss however feels appropriate, whether it means placing gifts already purchased for the now-deceased relative under the tree or setting an empty place at the Christmas dinner table, said Mellendorf.

There’s a point when professional assistance may become necessary.

“ If you can’t get out of bed in the morning at all, if you’ve got real dark, black thoughts, if you’re feeling hopeless, helpless, worthless, or if you have any thoughts that you want to hurt yourself or suicide or you’re so angry at someone else that you want to harm them, that’s a real clue that you need to see somebody,” said Belkin.

Don’t feel guilty or inadequate if you’re not up for indulging in the usual trappings of the season, said Monts.

“ Be honest with your emotions, your feelings about what your limitations are,” she said. “ Maybe I don’t feel like a tree. Maybe I don’t feel like doing the cooking. If the

cards and getting stamps and buying toys and going to Black Friday sales, if that's stressful, with your grief already being on high, then you probably need to avoid some of the stress."

And while acutely painful, grief can have a silver lining for the healing individual, as it often recalibrates perceptions of the season's true purpose, she added.

"It's a really good opportunity to look at the holiday more for the symbolic and spiritual meaning for you," she said. "Maybe this year won't be about trees and gingerbread houses ... maybe it'll be more about family and love and spiritual love and things like that.

"There really are no strong right or wrong answers," she added. "Be gentle with yourself and patient with yourself."

For more information on Hospice of Michigan, call (313) 578-5000 or visit <http://www.hom.org/>.

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