

Coping with Grief at Christmas

Sinead Murphy Nov 2023



Ahhh, Christmas. The bells are ringing, the children are singing, and all is merry and bright! ...Right?

Despite what the jovial carols and jubilant commercials tell us, Christmas certainly isn't a merry time for many. From battling with feelings of loneliness to losing sleep over financial stress, there are lots of reasons that may have us wishing for the day the decorations come down.

However, one of the most challenging aspects of Christmas is the absence of loved ones who are no longer with us. While the process of grieving isn't universal, the festive focus on family and togetherness has a funny way of making that space at the table even more apparent.

Why is grief harder at Christmas?

As anyone who has lost someone will tell you, grief never fully goes away. It ebbs and flows with the passing days, becoming more manageable as we slowly adapt to their absence. But there will be times when emotions are more heightened than others. During these times, the sense of loss can feel greater. Christmas – the season that celebrates love, family, and friends – is definitely one of those times.

The festive season can trigger some powerful feelings for people coping with loss. Maybe you feel anger and jealousy towards those who haven't lost someone important to them. Perhaps you feel sad because you miss that special person. If you catch yourself actually enjoying Christmas, you may even feel guilty for having fun. However you're feeling, just remember that you're not wrong for feeling it.

With National Grief Awareness Week taking place between 2-8 December, we wanted to share some steps you can take to make the season a little more manageable if you're struggling.

Don't feel pressured to partake

If you're finding the holidays too difficult to face, step away until you're ready to take part. Don't try and force yourself to have fun for the sake of others or because you feel that's what you *should* be doing. Instead, take some space and try to be kind to yourself for not being able to get involved. There's always next year – and your wellbeing is far more important than the prospect of letting people down.

Do something completely different

Just because it's Christmas, doesn't mean you have to celebrate the traditional way. If the idea of doing things the way you did before you lost your loved one is

too tough, it's perfectly fine to do things differently this year. You might want to take a trip to somewhere you've always wanted to visit, teach yourself a new skill, or cook your favourite foods instead of a Christmas dinner. Allow yourself to spend the period exactly as you see fit – free from guilt or expectations.

Find ways to remember them

When you're ready, you can find special ways to remember (and include) loved ones who have sadly passed on. Whether that's starting a new tradition in their memory, upholding an old one you shared together, crafting a decoration using a treasured photo, or donating to a cause you know meant a lot to them, there are many ways to make those who have departed feel a little bit closer this Christmas.

Be kind to yourself

Grief can be physically and mentally exhausting – especially when you are trying to hold it together for those around you. That's why it's so important to look after your own needs during this challenging time. If you feel tired in the middle of Christmas dinner and want to take a nap, do it. If you'd rather go for a quiet walk while the family opens presents, don't hesitate. Just make sure you're listening to what your mind and body are telling you so that you can respond in a healthy way.

Reach out for support

Whether it's your first Christmas since they died or you lost them many years ago, there's no need to struggle in silence or seclusion. Reaching out to someone you trust can help you process your feelings and find different ways to move forward. This might be a family member, a friend, or within the safe space of a local bereavement support group.

If you're struggling with grief and your employer offers Vivup's Employee Assistance Programme, there are lots of useful resources that can help you navigate this period. This includes downloadable self-help workbooks on bereavement and a 24-hour telephone helpline for responsive, confidential, and totally independent advice should you or a colleague need support.

Remember, the best gift you can give yourself when facing grief at Christmas is to recognise and honour your feelings – regardless of what those feelings might be. Just as their memory matters, your mental and physical wellbeing does, too.