

Holiday *Survival*

Help for the Season

A survival guide offers facts and tips that help you foresee danger and survive in the wild. Likewise, this Survival Guide will help you anticipate and find the safest path through any emotional jungles you may find yourself in during the holiday season.

This book is meant to be your companion guide for the days ahead, so read the encouraging words, take notes, and complete the exercises to navigate the holidays with a measure of peace and assurance.

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GriefShare®

Chapter 1

Dealing with Your Emotions

You're shopping for gifts when a familiar Christmas song plays overhead. *Not this song*, you think, as your eyes begin to fill with tears. Hearing your loved one's favorite Christmas song reminds you that this person isn't here to celebrate with you. *How will I ever make it to January?* you wonder.

In this chapter you'll find out:

- **What's normal in holiday grief**
- **How to deal with your emotions**
- **Dangers of numbing the pain**
- **How to avoid emotional ambushes**
- **Why writing a grief letter can help**

The Strength to *Survive*

Daily Readings

These short articles will help you know what to expect over the holidays and offer encouragement and support.



When you'd rather skip the holidays

The first Thanksgiving, I was more concerned with just getting through the day,” shares Carol, whose husband died.

“Christmas,” says Willie, “was a day that I really wanted to come—and go. I was glad to be at work because that meant the day went by quicker.”

Lois Rabey, author, shares: “I used to feel that I’d like to go to sleep the day before Thanksgiving and wake up January 2nd.”

It’s hard enough to get up and make it through a day when you’ve lost a loved one. But when holiday expectations are added on top of that, feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and depression can compound your sadness.

These suggestions will help:

- **Recognize** the holidays will be tough—emotionally, relationally, physically, and spiritually. That’s the nature of grief.
- **Don’t ignore or numb** difficult emotions. Accept them as part of your grief journey.
- **Set realistic expectations** for yourself, and respect your limitations.
- **Pray** and ask God to help you.

“But you, God, see the trouble of the afflicted; you consider their grief and take it in hand. ... You are the helper of the fatherless.” (Psalm 10:14)

God, You see and understand what I’m going through. Please give me strength and help me feel Your comfort this season.



Help for loneliness

The holidays heighten feelings of loneliness. “The overwhelming feeling I had my first holiday season was feeling very much alone,” shares Mardie, whose husband died. “I didn’t feel I was connected to anything or anybody.”

“I remember when the calls stopped coming, I just felt so lonely,” says Vaneetha, whose infant son died. “I didn’t even know what I needed from people.” Eventually she concluded, “What I really needed was God. It’s easy to forget that the source of strength and comfort is never going to be other people, ultimately. It’s always going to be God.”

Dr. Elias Moitinho, counselor, reminds us: “Being with people will help you deal with your loneliness. But we need to think in terms of the most important relationship we can ever have—a relationship with God.” When you don’t have friends and family around this holiday season, God is there.

Not feeling connected to people after losing a loved one is common. But it’s important not to cut yourself off from other people. God has given us other people to comfort and care for us during our toughest times. We understand it can be difficult to deal with other people and their lack of understanding and occasional insensitivity. You’ll find helpful guidance on interacting with people this season in chapter 3.

“God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea. ... The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.” (Psalm 46:1–2, 7)

God, You are the only one who truly knows the loneliness I struggle with. It feels like a hollow in my gut that often threatens to consume me. You are the only one who can remedy that. Please fill that emptiness.

Reflect

- When are you loneliest?
- How do you relate to today’s passage from Psalm 46?

Survival Tips

The exercises in this section will help you apply the practical ideas in this book to your own life.

Avoid being blindsided

Emotional ambushes are triggered by activities, traditions, songs, sights, sounds, etc., that remind you of past times with your loved one. Mentally preparing yourself will help lessen the ambush factor.

Author Dr. Robert DeVries, whose first wife died, suggests that before you attend a holiday event, replay in your mind the traditions that always involved your loved one. For instance, "If your father [who died] always cut the turkey, think about who's going to do that. Or if your aunt always came with a banana cream pie, somebody bringing a banana cream pie may trigger an emotion."

Answer the following questions to help you prepare.



Holiday preparations: Your loved one likely had a certain role in decorating for the holidays, cooking/baking, gift-giving, etc. How will holiday preparations look different this year?



Holiday get-togethers: How has your loved one's death affected who you'll be getting together with this holiday, compared to past holidays? (Will you miss seeing certain people; is there potential for awkwardness or discomfort; is there a possibility of conflict; etc.?)



Thanksgiving/Christmas Day: What will you miss most about your loved one's presence on Thanksgiving/Christmas Day?



Holiday help

Articles and videos for seasonal support

[GRIEFSHARE.ORG/HOLIDAYHELP](https://griefshare.org/holidayhelp)

Write a grief letter

Over the holidays, everyone wants to know how you are doing. The questions can wear you out, as you repeat the same emotionally draining responses. People are full of advice and want to cheer you up: “You should do this! ... Go here. ... Take part in that.”

H. Norman Wright, grief and trauma specialist, suggests you write a grief letter before the holiday season (or prior to specific events). Send it to family and friends, or carry copies to pass out to people as needed.

How to write a grief letter:

- Briefly describe your experience and your feelings.
- Let people know what they can expect from you.
- Tell them what they can do and say that you’d find comforting, and share what’s *not* comforting.
- List specific, practical needs they can help with.
- Pass it out by hand, mail, email, social media, or even on your voicemail greeting.

Your emotions will be unique to you, but here’s an idea of what to write:

Friends and family,

As you know, I'm going into this holiday without _____. I don't want to ruin the holidays for everyone else, but to be honest, I have no holiday cheer. I'll probably have to excuse myself early from events or go off alone in another room. I don't feel like talking much.

I might cry—perhaps in the middle of your party. My tears are part of my healing, so don't be embarrassed by them. Pat my shoulder and give me a brief hug to let me know you're there. Words are not necessary.

Please talk about _____. It would hurt me so much if you avoid speaking _____'s name. I like to hear stories and memories about him/her.

My energy level is going to be low this season. I can't do everything I used to do. If someone could help me with some home and holiday tasks, that would be appreciated. Specifically, I need help to put up and take down my tree. I could use help with housework too (I can't seem to keep up with it).

Thank you for caring about me and praying for me. Your love and concern are a comfort.



Holiday Journal

What to do with your holiday emotions

Journaling can help you slow down your thoughts and sort through the tangled emotions you're experiencing this Thanksgiving and Christmas season, providing some peace of mind.

Use a separate notebook or journal to write your responses to one (or more) of the topics below. This is for your eyes only, so don't worry about spelling, being neat, or guarding your words.

- Psalm 147:3 says that the Lord heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. Tell Him in what ways your heart is broken this season, and ask Him to bind up your wounds.
- Read the comment below and share your personal thoughts about crying or showing emotions in public.

"Emotions are natural for all of us, and yes, other people may become uncomfortable with them. The Bible is filled with examples of people weeping in public. Crying is not shameful at all. A good show of emotion from time to time, even at a party, shows authenticity for the significant loss you've experienced in your life." Dr.

Robert DeVries, author whose wife died

- Make a list of the emotions you've been dealing with recently. For each one, write down: What memories, beliefs, or desires are associated with this emotion? Regarding any desires you jot down, are there ways to satisfy them in a healthy way? (Breaking this up into multiple sittings can be helpful.)

Having a Plan

When baking bread, following a recipe helps ensure that the bread will hold together. If the recipe isn't followed, who knows how the bread will turn out? In the same way, creating a flexible holiday plan will help you know what to expect and give you a degree of control this season.

This chapter discusses:

- **Whether or not to continue holiday traditions that are so hard without your loved one**
- **Why having a plan is crucial**
- **How to create a straightforward, yet flexible, plan**
- **How to take care of yourself and your children this season**

Survivor Stories

Having a plan in place—one you hold loosely—can help you face social events. Read how Cindy and Bekah handled holiday get-togethers.



“As I approached the first Thanksgiving, I put a plan in place, but I held it loosely. It was helpful to have a planned answer ready for when people would ask, ‘How are you?’ I might say, ‘I have good days and bad days. Today is a good day’—so I could be honest and authentic about my feelings without making them uncomfortable.”

Cindy Bultema, author



“The first year after Rob died, I avoided invitations. I said no to almost everything. But I’ll admit that when I said no, I was worried that they’d never ask again.”

Bekah

The Strength to *Survive* Daily Readings

Find ways to reduce stress and create a meaningful, doable, flexible plan suited to you.



The importance of having a plan

Writing it is a poor choice if you're dealing with the holidays. Often it comes from, *I don't want to think about it or deal with it.* But not thinking about it doesn't mean the holidays are going to disappear," says Dr. Susan Zonnebelt-Smeenge, whose husband died.

This season you will be faced with memories, traditions, expectations, and responsibilities. Having a plan keeps you from becoming overwhelmed. Author Dr. Robert DeVries, whose wife died of cancer, shares:

- **Planning** simply means you decide what and how much you want to do.
- **Prioritizing** means if there are 15 holiday activities you might be involved in, you choose 1 or 2 that are most important to you.

Whatever you plan, be flexible in allowing yourself to adjust it. And you don't have to make a plan on your own! Ask someone to help you. If you have children, involve them in the planning process; this will also aid their healing. The charts and tips in this chapter can guide you.

"Commit to the LORD whatever you do, and he will establish your plans." (Isaiah 41:10)

God, please help me to create a plan during the holidays and stay flexible. And help me feel Your presence as I navigate this new season.



Laying the foundation for your plans

As you make decisions about what activities to participate in, who to spend time with, and how to handle unexpected situations, you'll want to lay the right foundation for your plans. Dr. Paul David Tripp, counselor, offers three tips:

- 1. Know yourself.** Know your strengths and weaknesses. Make plans that focus on your strengths, and be cautious about those that bring out your weaknesses. For instance, if spending time with grandkids brings you joy, plan a visit. If at the office party you might be tempted to numb yourself with alcohol—don't go. Put things on the calendar that will refresh your spirit: Lunch with a friend? A hike alone with God? A special church concert?
- 2. Consider who's best for you.** You have a good idea of what type of advice or support your friends and family will offer you. Plan to spend time with those who will listen to you, lift you up, and encourage you in your faith. Avoid those who will rush you in your grief or pressure you to lower your moral standards.
- 3. Commit to reading and studying your Bible** to learn more about who God is and what He promises. As you dive into His Word, you'll find peace and reassurance for life's uncertainties. How do the verses below help ease any worries you have as you anticipate and plan for the coming holidays?

"The LORD comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones." (Isaiah 49:13b)

"Ah, Sovereign LORD, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you." (Jeremiah 32:17)

"For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations." (Psalm 100:5)

God, You know me better than anyone, and You have promised to be with me in all situations. Help me to be prepared for the days ahead.

