

# Coping with grief during special occasions and anniversaries



There are many significant events, anniversaries and special occasions which can stir up more grief when you have lost a loved one. These can be previously happy occasions like Christmas, New Year, Valentine's Day, birthdays, Mother's/Father's day and wedding anniversaries. They also include sad occasions such as the anniversary of the death or funeral. This fact sheet provides some ideas for preparing for and coping with these occasions.

While in the past, you may have looked forward to the holiday season and other special occasions, the loss of a loved one, can leave you feeling ambivalent or even anxious about the occasion. There may be many positives about the occasion, such as coming together with family, supporting each other, sharing memories and feeling comforted by rituals and traditions. For most people, there are also some negatives, such as loneliness, sadness and grief over your loss, memories of the road trauma, concern over living up to others' expectations, and guilt for even participating in a celebration.

Many grieverers find that these occasions have a bittersweet feeling – happy moments mixed with painful feelings.

As time passes, we usually learn to handle holiday periods and other special occasions with less fear and reluctance. Feelings soften and pain reduces, but most grieving people report that some sadness and pain remain. The holiday season and special occasions will probably never be quite "normal" again. Here are some keys to assist you to support yourself, or someone who is grieving, during these times.



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## 1 Plan for the event

The lead up to an anniversary or event can often feel worse than the actual day itself. Stress, anxiety and ambivalence are very common. A way to reduce some of the stress is to consider the following and make some decisions before the day:

- What it is that you need to help you cope?
- What do you want to do?
- Who you want to do this with?
- Who else might you need to consider e.g. children?
- Make a list of upcoming events or milestones that could be difficult for you. Start thinking about what would help you to cope with these.
- If there is someone you would like to be around who understands what you're going through at this time, get in touch with them and ask if they will help you in this way.
- Practice some responses to people wishing you a "Merry Christmas". You might want to keep to a simple answer such as "thank you", "I will do my best" or "you too", so that you don't become overwhelmed by trying to explain how you feel.
- Take the time to talk over your feelings about the upcoming event with someone you trust or a grief counsellor. This can help you to clarify what you want and don't want to do.

Road Trauma Support WA provides a free counselling service to anyone affected by road trauma. You can access our service in person, via telephone or by video call.

- Read about what other grievers have found helpful through websites such as What's Your Grief? at [www.whatsyourgrief.com](http://www.whatsyourgrief.com)

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## 2 Practice self-care

Taking good care of yourself physically and emotionally is important when you are grieving. A good diet and regular exercise can reduce stress on your body. Time out to grieve and rest, away from others' expectations is also important. Try not to overschedule yourself or ignore how you are feeling. Allow yourself to cry if you need to, but also do some "grounding" activities such as going for a walk in nature, visiting the beach, going to church, having a massage, listening to your favourite music, watching a funny DVD or simply taking some time out of a busy schedule to have a cup of tea and reflect.

Be aware that your feelings may be quite intense at times of anniversaries and special occasions. Many people find it unsettling when they feel that they have been coping quite well with their grief and suddenly begin to feel like they are not coping. Acceptance and patience are the key to allowing these feelings to come and go, just like a "storm". Generally, once the event or occasion has passed, you will find yourself returning to your normal way of feeling.

Be aware also that it is possible to experience positive emotions at this time. This is okay and not disrespectful to your loved one's memory. It is in fact a sign of healthy grieving to be able to experience moments of happiness as well as sadness.

## 3 Establish a new 'normal'

For many of us, birthdays and Christmas mean celebrating with traditions and rituals. You might find comfort in doing things the same way they have always been done, but don't be afraid to alter things if you need to. Remember that your 'normal' has changed, and you are trying to live in a different reality now.

If events like Christmas are too overwhelming, you might choose to 'cancel' them for the first year, plan a trip away, or decide to do something completely



different such as volunteer at a charity event. If you have young children to consider, it may be better to try to continue with the traditions that they enjoy and look forward to. Grieving children need opportunities to have good “normal” fun. Try to find some balance between the needs of the children, who may become quite absorbed in the joy of the occasion, with your own needs for some quiet time, reflection or expressing sadness.

#### **4 Let others know how you are feeling**

Once you've decided what you will do on the day, discuss it with family and friends. Being honest that it's a difficult time for you, and letting them know what you need, can be helpful for everyone involved. Friends and family often don't know what you want, how to act around you, and what to say. They may for example be unsure whether or not it's okay to talk about your loved one to you and may feel worried about upsetting you.

Also know you're allowed to 'change your mind' on the day. Even the best of plans can be cancelled. This is about what you are able to handle, so that you don't become overwhelmed and stressed. For example, if you planned to make a speech at the remembrance service, it is alright to have someone else read it out on your behalf. It's always good to let the person organising the event know how you are coping, or even that you don't know how you will cope on the day, and that you may need to cancel at the last minute, or leave early. Common advice is to “expect the best, but plan for the worst”. That means having a strategy or plan if things don't go well.

Be aware that others may not understand your needs at these times. They may expect you to behave as normal or feel disappointed if you don't participate. Friends and family may forget to acknowledge a significant day such as a death anniversary. You may find it difficult to be around people who don't understand or accept your feelings. This can be the case throughout your grief

journey, but often becomes particularly difficult around special occasions. The best you can do is communicate your needs and expectations, and do what is best for yourself and your immediate family. Try to focus on the things that you can be grateful for, or that bring you comfort, rather than the negative things you can't change or control.

#### **5 Things you can do on the day itself**

- You have permission to not be okay on the day. Allow yourself to be sad, without having to pretend otherwise. Remind yourself that feelings come and go in waves, and this too shall pass.
- Take opportunities to remember and talk about your loved one. Even small sentiments like, “Dad always loved standing around the barbeque with a beer in hand...”
- If you find yourself becoming overwhelmed in the company of others, find an excuse to slip away for a few moments, even if you have to escape to the bathroom for a few minutes.
- Consider writing to your loved one –perhaps a card, letter, email or text. Some people post a Facebook status or send tweets.
- Hold a personal ceremony or ritual. For example, light a candle or plant a tree, flower or shrub.
- Meditate, have a conversation out loud with your loved one, read them a passage or poem, or offer up a prayer.
- Use creativity to express how you feel. This might be through music, dance, paint, creative writing and so on.
- Do something active in your loved one's name. You could donate your money or time to their chosen charity or volunteer organisation, or do a fundraising event.
- Consider doing nothing special today, if that is what you need.



## Support services/websites/blogs

### Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement

[www.grief.org.au](http://www.grief.org.au)

### What's Your Grief?

[www.whatsyourgrief.com](http://www.whatsyourgrief.com)

### Solace Australia

a self-help organisation for those grieving over the death of their partner. [www.solace.org.au](http://www.solace.org.au)

### Journey Beyond Road Trauma

[www.journeybeyondroadtrauma.org](http://www.journeybeyondroadtrauma.org)

### My Grief Assist

[www.mygriefassist.com.au](http://www.mygriefassist.com.au)

### The Compassionate Friends

a self-help organisation for parents who have lost a child of any age.

[www.compassionatefriendswa.org.au](http://www.compassionatefriendswa.org.au)

## Further support services

**Lifeline** 13 11 14

**Kids Helpline** 1800 55 1800 (ages 5-25)

**Crisis Care** 9223 1111 or 1800 199 008 (free call)

**GriefLine** 1300 845 745

**Rural Link** 1800 552 002

## About us

Road Trauma Support WA is a state-wide service assisting anyone affected by road trauma, regardless of when the incident occurred or what level of involvement (direct or indirect) the person had.

FREE counselling sessions are available.

No referral required.

- Information and support;
- Education and training (costs may apply); and
- Counselling.

We are committed to being respectful of cultural and family values and provide our service in a safe, non-judgemental environment.

Road Trauma Support WA is delivered by Injury Matters with funding from the Road Trauma Trust Account and contract management through the Road Safety Commission.



**Every year in WA, thousands of people are impacted by road trauma.** Losing family and friends, dealing with injuries, caring for those injured, causing a crash or witnessing a serious crash can have a devastating and enduring impact.

