

Holiday Blues

The holiday season is in high gear. City streets and neighborhoods are decked with lights. Christmas music seeps out of the stereos of stores and coffee shops. Santas from the Salvation Army are ringing bells at your local grocery store and guarding the doors at your favorite mall. For many people, the holidays are a wonderful time of the year. With all the parties, presents, family, friends, chocolate and high carb and high fat foods, what's not to love?

On the flip side, if you are grieving the death of a loved one, the dissolution of a significant relationship, the loss of a job, or a major health issue or injury, this time of year can be especially difficult. In the best of circumstances, grieving often involves frequent mood changes. People sometimes describe the experience like going through an emotional blender. You may find yourself cycling through feelings of emptiness, numbness, sadness, fear, anger, guilt, anxiety and hopelessness. You may also have headaches, feel tired and find focusing and sleeping to be more difficult than usual. Unfortunately, even if you had gotten to a place where you felt grounded and stable, the greeting cards, seasonal songs, and Christmas trees might dredge up painful memories and magnify your sense of loss. Furthermore, the fact that the world around you seems so festive and happy may make you feel even more isolated and alone in your pain. Even if people are supportive, you may feel guilty reaching out for support or even being around others for fear of bringing them down. This may be especially challenging if you aren't "out" or your family and friends don't completely accept your sexual orientation or gender identity.

Be gentle with yourself, even if you feel pressure from your family, friends, or boss to "get over it," "get a backbone" and/or "toughen up." Don't expect yourself to be Superman or Wonder Woman. As much as it sucks, it's important to let yourself feel all the emotions that are swirling through your system, even the painful ones. Avoiding those painful feelings won't make them go away; it will just prolong the time it takes to heal.

While it's not a good idea to avoid the feelings, there are some things you can do to jump start the healing process. First, accept that your functioning simply isn't up to par right now. You are probably not going to be able to knock off all those things on your "To Do" list. This is a good time to set your priorities and let those less essential things go. Your pantry can probably survive without being cleaned for a few more months. On the other hand, you probably need to keep balancing your checkbook.

Second, acknowledge your feelings as they arise. I know, it hurts, but the grieving process really is a "pay now or pay double later" sort of process.

Third, forgive yourself for feeling crappy. As I mentioned before, feeling like you are spinning around in an emotional blender is normal. So is feeling angry, guilty and embarrassed about being in that emotional blender. It's important to accept this and send extra love to yourself when these feelings come up.

Fourth, find people who will listen, and talk things through with them. Let them know you need to talk about your loss. They might not know how to respond, but most people who care about you will understand your need to get things out. If you aren't seeing a counselor, this might be a good time to

find one. A good counselor will know how to listen, create a place where you can feel your pain without getting lost in it, and help you find ways to let some of that pain go. She or he also ought to be able to remind you that what you are feeling is normal and help you see that it's OK to be where you are. It may sound silly, but just having someone tell you that you are OK, that your feelings are OK, and that it's OK to feel this way can be incredibly helpful.

Fifth, find things to do that are self-nurturing. You might try doing art, playing music, journaling, writing poetry, and/or spending time in nature. You should also be gentle with yourself and let yourself take naps, read fiction, and watch your favorite movies.

Sixth, it's important to take care of your body by paying attention to what you eat and by exercising. It's probably a good idea to balance the chocolate chip cookies you had for breakfast with some milk. Perhaps you should also add in things like fresh fruits, fresh vegetables, and non-fried protein of some sort into your diet as well. The cliché, "you are what you eat" does have a great deal of merit when you are struggling with grief. A junk food diet can make even happy people depressed. If you don't believe me, watch the documentary, "Supersize Me."

Finally, remember that these feelings will not last forever. Over time, you will realize that you are grieving less and have more energy for living. Over time, you will even be able to find comfort rather than pain in some of the memories that right now feel so shattering. In the meantime, be gentle with yourself when painful holiday memories get stirred up.

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