

# 'Tis the season to honor the memory

By Mary McKinney | Posted: Friday, December 19, 2014 9:28 am

'Tis the season of peace, hope, joy, merriment and togetherness — for many. However, after the loss of a loved one, the holidays can also be the season of intensified hurt, sadness, anger, loneliness or even a numbing of pleasant and unpleasant feelings.

The absence of the loved one may be painfully obvious and distressing during holidays. The way a person feels about the type and quality of support received from family, friends, and community is one of the most influential factors for how well the person will move through grief, or if they will get “stuck.”



Honor the Memory

When a family shares a common loss — biological, by law, or chosen — this support may be mutually beneficial or mutually destructive.

Grief, like other difficult life experiences, brings out the best and the worst in people and families. Holidays offer opportunities to purposefully improve these responses. However, negotiating how shared time and spaces will best meet the needs of the family can be tricky.

Through these varying responses, reactions, and opportunities, something new is created for the family and its members. When these responses and reactions include compassion, openness, and respect between members, it is likely to form the new experience as healthy and happy.

A compassionate, open, and respectful joint examination of needs — related to these traditions and rituals — includes decisions about how they will be maintained, adjusted or retired.

Something new will be created for grieving families by new traditions or rituals or in a new way to handle related conflict.

New rituals may be adopted as a response to the change in the family — and the needs of surviving members.

One idea for a new ritual to honor the grief journey is to select, make, or buy a special box to hold letters written to the deceased loved one during each holiday.

Writing these letters will serve as a sort of journal of the grief journey, as it changes across time. If the box is used by multiple family members, a decision can be made whether the letters will be read

together — or not.

Some family members may feel strongly about maintaining the same traditions and rituals that were always part of holidays with the lost loved one, in order to connect to the spirit of memory of the loved one — and because it is comforting.

Some may feel strongly about letting go of (or retiring) those traditions and rituals in the process of moving through grief, and engaging fully in ongoing life, without the deceased loved one.

Other family members may feel strongly about creating new traditions and rituals, whether they be completely new, or by incorporating parts of those that were long-held, as a way to honor memory, while creating a new life without that person's physical presence.

Like many things in life, there is not a “right” way to handle these decisions. The only “wrong” way to handle it would be anything that introduces — or reinforces — damaging patterns of reaction or interaction.

An examination of the parts of the lost loved one's legacy that are especially useful to highlight will assist in this process.

For example, remembering a feisty and devoted grandmother may include starting a new tradition of volunteering, as a family, with a cause that was important to her, while wearing silly hats.

What fun to volunteer at a homeless shelter, soup kitchen or other nonprofit organization, and share a smile with everyone who enters the doors, each time remembering Granny's smile and sly giggle.

Similarly, the sort of personal legacy that is desired will help with decisions about how to navigate this individual and family grief journey.

That is, if the desired legacy includes compassion, it is necessary to react with compassion to differences among family members — about how to maintain, incorporate or retire holiday traditions and rituals.

And, this compassion must be directed toward self and family, even in the face of great pain or conflict. What better way to embody the spirit of Christmas, Hanukkah or other observance?

And, what better way to honor the spirit and memory and the best of the legacy of a lost loved one?