

Coping with College Series

Loss and Grief During the Holidays
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As we return from Thanksgiving and anticipate holidays yet to come, most of us eagerly await gathering with family and friends. For some of us, however, this year's holidays may be jarred by a significant loss. These tradition-filled celebrations are often just the times that losses, past and present, touch us deeply. It's very difficult to be weighed down with grief at a time when the emphasis is on joy. Here are some of the losses that may be touching you or someone you care about this season, along with some coping strategies.

A bittersweet truth is that every single one of our relationships harbors a parting. The death of one's parent, partner, sibling, or child is the deepest of these rifts. Holidays are particularly difficult without a beloved grandparent, a favorite uncle, or a special cousin at the table. Sometimes a friend's death -- perhaps the death of one of the Illinois State students who died this semester -- weighs us down.

A number of "non-fatal" losses can also come into sharp focus in holiday times. A break-up or other relationship rift can bring its own pain. Perhaps a family crisis—a hospitalized relative, a recent divorce—monopolizes our thoughts. Some of us are missing friends or family who are overseas with the Armed Forces instead of home opening presents; others are international students who miss their far-off home.

In the face of these or other losses you might feel shock, despair, loneliness, fear, depression, or helplessness. You might be surprised that you feel angry at the absent person, or guilty, or simply empty. You might have many conflicting emotions. (Some researchers suggest that such conflicted feelings define grief.)

Grief alters time and takes time. Mental focus is rare; energy, lacking. During this time, let yourself be. Expressing your pain and your memories to trusted others can be healing. Allow yourself to make new traditions. Ask for what you need, if you have any idea what you need. Accept help: this is no time to be heroic. You will also want to avoid major decisions.

What if you want to reach out to someone else who is grieving? Often we're afraid to say the wrong things, so we say and do nothing—and the grieving person, sensing our discomfort, goes deeper into their isolation. Don't disappear. Call, write, e-mail, or come over. Listen more than talk. Ask them if

they want a hug, and be with them when they cry. If someone isn't ready to talk, check back later.

What doesn't usually work are attempts to "fix" the person's grief. Minimizing the loss, telling them they'll get over it, or pointing to other relationships -- as if they could fill the emptiness -- all tend to be unhelpful.

Consider acquiring a copy of "How to Survive the Loss of a Love," a slim, inexpensive book that's enormously helpful. If you or someone you care about continues to be stuck in a painful cycle of grief, please give Student Counseling Services a call at 438-3655.