



# The Holidays, Grief, and Loss

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**A**dvent is a time of longing and waiting for God to make things right. As we support people longing for God's presence, we can cling to the hope personified in Christ. We can comfort those who grieve and share the love of Emmanuel, God with us. This toolkit shares guidance on caring for those grieving in the holiday season.

# 1

## **Unexpected grief is normal.**

Keep in mind that people who have experienced a loss may feel grief arise during the holiday season in unexpected waves. We can provide preventative care by checking in with them and making them aware that this season can be especially hard.

We may know of recent challenges they are facing. As we talk with them, we can prompt them to be prepared for feelings as they arise.

For example, ask questions such as:

- "Do you anticipate any challenges for this Christmas season?"
- "Do you have experiences of recent loss or any loss associated with this time of year?"
- "Have you noticed yourself dealing with overwhelming emotions or behaviors as the holidays approach?"
- "What are some ways you can care for yourself as you miss your loved one?"

Making space with them to consider how they are feeling will help them become more aware of what they are going through. It can also allow them to process and regulate their responses as they are stirred up. We are helping normalize and validate the emotions around the loss. Do not feel the need to relieve the emotions. Our compassion is meaningful. As we witness their grief, their willingness to articulate their thoughts and feelings may help make their sorrow more tolerable.

# 2

## **Create space to grieve and bring the pain to God.**

Let them know that sadness, fatigue, and overwhelm are normal responses to a time of year when there are many reminders of their loss. The name Emmanuel means God with Us. Help them experience that God is with them in their sorrow. Invite them to bring their pain to him and experience his deep comfort as they mourn. Consider using advent songs such as "Oh Come, Oh Come, Emmanuel" or "Come Thou Long Expected Jesus" to serve as a lament for their pain.

# 3

## **Find ways to create a new normal.**

The stark contrast to what they had before and what is missing now is often jarring. Help them find ways to cherish the past while staying present. Together, consider how to honor their loved one as part of a group celebration or on their own. One question for opening this discussion is, "How can you cherish the memories of the one you lost?" Some suggestions are making the person's favorite dish, sharing memories of them around the table or tree, making space for a time of silence, or holding a private ceremony for their loved one on their own or together.

Help them consider new ways to celebrate. Finding new memories and traditions can help them honor the past while taking steps toward future hope. They might go for a ride to see the Christmas decorations, volunteer

to wrap gifts for a charity, or join a local holiday choir. The new tradition may also be a way to honor the lost loved one like donating annually to a cause connected to their memory.

## 4

### **Talk through self care and positive aspects of the holidays.**

Especially in this season, help people remember to care for their physical, emotional, spiritual needs. Despite the busyness, remind them to maintain self-care habits such as good eating habits, exercise, as well as connections with supportive relationships and community. Good health in all aspects helps people deal with stress and anxiety.

Talk through positive aspects of the holidays that they have enjoyed and can now hold onto: the smell of pine or a decoration from their loved one. If there is a cherished memory they recall from this time of year, it can ground them during the coming weeks. Are there church traditions at Christmas they find solace in like a Christmas Eve service or nativity play?

## 5

### **Be aware of addiction risk.**

The holidays can trigger individuals who struggle with addictive behaviors. Grief can exacerbate their desire to return to old habits. Encourage them to be more mindful of things they find challenging and seek appropriate support in groups and friends. As a church, have a referral list of counselors

and support organizations for people who need a helping hand this time of year.

## 6

### **Be willing to meet their specific needs.**

Ask them how you can be helpful as a ministry provider or caregiver.

For example:

- “What might be a meaningful way to support you this holiday season?”
- “Would you appreciate a text or call the week of Christmas?”
- “Can I have you over for a meal?”

As you listen, learn from them what is helpful and what is not.

**T**he celebration of Christ’s birth is a reminder of the longing we still have for him to heal the brokenness and sin of our world completely. Though those we care for may feel deep loss, we can enter into it with them, just as Christ did. He longs to walk with us in our joys and sorrows. Christ’s first coming and his death gave us salvation and new identity as his children. Though we still live with the pain of this world, we can rest in our assured hope and identity as we long for his second coming when he will wipe all our tears away.