

Video Note-Taking Outline

Declining invitations

Accepting invitations

Crying in front of others

Your relationship with God

Christmas: A Reason for Hope

Jesus came to end suffering

Jesus came to deal with sin

By faith, receive the gift of Jesus

HOLIDAY DEVOTIONS

CHAPTER 1:

KNOWING WHAT TO EXPECT

Emotional Ambushes

You pull out the Christmas stockings, and you hold in your hand the one with your loved one's name on it. The emotions overwhelm you.

You go to sign the Christmas cards when suddenly it hits you—*how do I sign this?*

You set the table for the holiday dinner, and without even realizing it, you set a place for your loved one.

The emotions pour in like a flood. Unexpected and unstoppable.

"The level of pain will take you by surprise, and you think, *How did that hit me? How was I not prepared for that?* But there are some things you can't be prepared for, and when you get there and you're shocked by it, then recognize, 'That's a normal part of the process, and the next time it comes around, it won't be so surprising,'" says Lois Rabey.

H. Norman Wright offers sage advice for these tough moments of unexpected emotions: "If we could only control our crying, it would be great, but we can't. Tears come at some of the most inopportune times. I think the way we look at tears is important. Tears are one of God's gifts because sometimes we don't have the words and the tears just come.

"You could be at a holiday gathering, in the mall or in a store, and all of a sudden you hear something or you see something and the tears come. Best thing is, let them come. Take out a handkerchief, and don't apologize. Never apologize for something that is a gift from God. Take charge of it and say, 'I'm crying because I've experienced a devastating loss. That's all you have to say. You're all right. You don't need to be fixed.'"

When the emotions flood in, God offers a place to go where you can find peace and rest. Emotional ambushes can be exhausting.

"The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul." (Psalm 23:1–3a)

Lord God, I'm worn out from my tears, from the constant emotional overload. When I look at the days ahead, I know I can't make it on my own. Please give me the comfort, wisdom and strength I need, and lead me to green pastures and quiet waters where I can be restored again.

When You'd Rather Skip the Holidays

"I used to feel like I would like to go to sleep the day before Thanksgiving and wake up January 2nd," admits Lois Rabey.

It is hard enough to get up and make it through a day when you have lost a loved one. But when the expectations and busyness of Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's are added on top of that, your feelings of loneliness, anxiety, anger and depression can be compounded and hang over you like a dark, suffocating blanket.

Whereas for many, the holidays are a happy time when people take a break from the monotony of day-to-day life—you would love to take a break from your pain, but it's not possible. Grief doesn't take holidays.

"As much as we would like to put a mask over it, to bottle it up and make it go away, that doesn't help," says H. Norman Wright, "because this is the time everybody's supposed to be happy, families are together and relationships are focused on. What is better is to say, 'This hurts. I wish this day wasn't here. This really is difficult, but I know I am going to be able to get through this because I'm not dealing with it by myself. I have the Lord, and I'm going to look to Him. As hard as it is, I'm going to take a couple of steps and make this be different.'"

An important first step is to recognize that the holidays are going to be tough: emotionally, relationally, physically and even spiritually. Be realistic in your expectations, and don't fight the added emotions and burdens. Accept them, let them come, and undergird yourself with prayer and dependence on God. Then keep going forward a couple of steps each day. Even on the toughest days, talking honestly with God and expressing your emotions is a step forward toward healing from your pain.

"But you, O God, do see trouble and grief; you consider it to take it in hand. The victim commits himself to you; you are the helper of the fatherless." (Psalm 10:14)

Lord, I'll follow Norm Wright's advice and say this flat out: This hurts. It's harder than anything I've ever done. I wish it were January when no one will have extra expectations of me. BUT, I know that would only make my grieving process longer and more difficult, so I'm going to admit my feelings of pain and then accept that I need to walk forward in that pain in order to get through it. I can't do this alone, though. There's no way. Thank you, God, that You have all the strength I need and more. Please show me other people I need to spend time with, too, people who will come alongside me and provide support.

Surprised by the Intensity of Your Emotions

"Christmas without my loved one was a punch in the gut. It can surprise you and take your breath away," shares Connie.

Don't be surprised by your emotions. They can be tough, intense, unpredictable and overwhelming. This is normal and to be expected. Let the emotions come, and find people you can express them with who will support and affirm you.

"It's important when you experience a significant loss that you do process your pain. It hurts. There's no way around it. So don't mask the pain, don't avoid the pain and don't try to run from the pain," says Sabrina Black.

"It's natural," shares JoAnne. "Don't be surprised by it; just let yourself cry. Let yourself express those feelings to the people around you. It's normal. It's part of the process."

Sue Lutz explains, "It's easier to have a clean and honest grief that moves you through your pain by being candid about the fact that it is going to be hard. That's different from feeling panicky and frightened and anxious about, *Oh, what will I do?* as the pain floods in. There is a way to respect and take care of your emotions without letting them paralyze you. You respect something by saying, 'Yes, it's here; it's not going away, but I'm not going through it alone. I have to meet the pain. I have to remember that God is with me.'"

You don't have to and should not face your emotions alone. To rely on yourself for support would be exhausting, to say the least. Surrender your feelings and fears to God today. Read out loud this promise from God to you:

"For I am the LORD, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you." (Isaiah 41:13)

Dear God, I'm not sure what to expect, but I'm already feeling dread. How can I make it through without my loved one? How can I do this alone? But with You, Lord, I am never alone. Help me to know Your strength and comfort, to know You and to understand Your love for me and for my loved one. Please tell me when it's time and how to push into the pain, and guide me through this process.

Face the Holidays Your Way and in Your Time

Keep in mind, too, that other people's grief will be different than yours. You might be able to decorate or to cook a holiday dinner; another person might not. You might feel the need to go away for the holidays; another person may prefer being with family and friends. Your grief is your grief. God created you to be you, and you don't need to grieve like someone else around you. You also don't need to grieve or act the way other people may think you should grieve or act.

"There may be some people who are expecting you to be at a certain point that you're not at. That's okay. You're just not there yet.

"God is going to deal with you exactly where you are and little by little. Even though you may not even feel the differences, they are happening because God promises He's going to sustain us. And He does it, and He does it over time," shares JoAnne.

Dr. Tim Clinton, president of the American Association of Christian Counselors, advises, "Grief is a journey. You will find consistently that in this journey, there will be peaks of grief that will come into your life. And how do we respond in the midst of that journey? That's very individually; it's unique to the person who's going through it. We're all different, and we all show our emotions differently."

God knows you inside and out; He knows what you are struggling with, your inner fears and feelings. He never expects you to be anyone other than you. The Bible says that you were created in God's image (Genesis 1:27). You show His likeness as you walk with Him through your grief. The closer you walk with Him, the more you will be like Him, moving in His peace and hope.

"Yet I am always with you [God]; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." (Psalm 73:23-26)

God, please keep holding on to me and guiding me. I know people mean well when they say, "You should do this, or you should stop doing that," but it's not helping. Actually, it makes me feel worse. Thank you for letting me be me, for loving me just the way I am and for always being by my side as I walk through this grief. Help me, Father, to be compassionate and kind to insensitive "comforters" and "counselors."

Cherish the Memories

Warm and happy memories of times spent with your loved one will always be a part of your holiday seasons. Right now the memories may bring up strong emotions, but over the years as you are healing, the memories will become precious and even bring tears of joy amidst the sorrow.

"The memories are a gift. They're something I can look back on now and take pleasure in. It's a gift that I treasure," shares Mardie.

"My husband was a real character, and he kept us laughing," says Marion. "During the holiday celebrations [after his death], we would reflect on some of the things he would say. If somebody did something funny, we would say, 'This is probably what he would say or do in reaction to that.'"

"It helps me to remember the good times, and there were good times. It's also very helpful when I talk about him and somebody listens to me; that's important to me."

Consider finding ways to preserve the memories. You could create a scrapbook, collage or photo album. Write about happy memories or moments in a journal. Begin a new tradition over the holidays of each person sharing a memory of the deceased loved one, or sharing an important lesson learned from him or her. Don't hesitate to tell other people about special times with your loved one.

We can be thankful to God, for He always gives good gifts.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him." (John 3:16-17)

Holy God, I thank you for all the precious, happy memories with my loved one. My tears overflow when I think of how much love I have for this dear person. Thank you for blessing me with my loved one, and thank you for giving me an even greater blessing that lasts for eternity: the gift of life through Your Son Jesus.

You're Never Alone

Feelings of loneliness are often magnified during the holidays. Loneliness is an emotion you must first recognize, accept that it is part of your life right now and then discover ways to help ease the lonely times.

"The overwhelming feeling I had my first holiday season was feeling very much alone," shares Mardie. "I didn't feel that I was connected to anything or anybody. I just felt very, very alone."

While feelings of loneliness may seem overpowering at times during the holiday season, you are never actually alone. The Bible says that God is an ever-present help in times of trouble.

"When you think about the fact that God is an ever-present help in times of trouble, that's a perfect time to fall on your knees and cry out to the Lord and to experience the fact that He is Emmanuel, 'God with you.' As you're going throughout the holiday without your loved one, keep in mind that you do have Jesus with you. You do have the Holy Spirit. You do have God present, so you're not as much alone as you might think," says Sabrina Black.

Have you fallen on your knees before God? Have you lay face down in His presence, just giving Him everything that burdens you and threatens to engulf your being? He is the Almighty God who loves you intensely, and He wants to show you the healing power of His presence.

"God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging ... The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress." (Psalm 46:1-3, 7)

Dear Father, You are the only one who truly knows the loneliness I am struggling with. It feels like a hard, empty hollow in my gut that often threatens to overtake me. You are the only one who can remedy that. God, I need You to fill that emptiness. I want to get down on my knees and cry to You. I want to know for sure that You are always with me and helping me through. Holy Spirit, help me to know and to live out this truth.

Where Do You Find the Strength?

Where do you find the strength to face the holidays? Read how other people have found the strength to make it through the holiday season after their loved one's death:

In His promises: "If I didn't have the hope and the promise of the gift that God gave us through Jesus, I could not deal with the loss that we've experienced. He promised that I would see Him and I would see my daughter [who died], and that's what keeps me going," says Emmaline.

In His strength: "I learned I had to trust God. There's nobody I can depend on except for Him. At one point I realized how low I was, how hopeless I was, how upset I was with myself. I had to come back and realize that God is all-powerful. He knows what He is doing," says Marion.

In the Bible: "It's important that when you are alone you're not just isolating yourself from the crowd, but you're intentional about spending time with God—that not only are you spending time in His presence, but you're spending time in His Word and allowing the Lord to comfort you," shares Sabrina Black.

In His guidance: "I pray in my closet sometimes," shares Monica. "It's a quiet place where I can be by myself and close the door. I felt really sad during this whole season, and at one point I went in my closet and I felt like darkness was around me: *This isn't what I had planned for my life.* I read Psalm 139, and it said even the darkness was like light to God and all the days in my life were ordained in God's book before one of them came to be. I knew that even though this was dark to me, it wasn't dark to God. If I could just hold on to God, He could lead me through what I needed to walk through."

God's love for you never fails, and His comfort is the only comfort that truly lasts and penetrates deep enough for the hurts we carry. Follow the advice of those people above who've known the deep pain of grief and who also know the healing power of Christ's love. Lean into His love today.

"May your unfailing love be my comfort, according to your promise to your servant." (Psalm 119:76)

Lord, I need Your strength. Mine's useless, and Yours is beyond belief. I realize I can't do this without You.



HOLIDAY DEVOTIONS

CHAPTER 2:

PREPARING FOR THE HOLIDAYS



The Importance of Having a Plan

As you approach the holidays, you will be faced with a myriad of events, memories, traditions, expectations and responsibilities. Having a plan keeps you from becoming overwhelmed. This chapter of devotions will help you prioritize your tasks and keep them at a level where you can walk forward and grow—and not add to your misery.

“Winging it is a poor choice if you’re dealing with the holidays. Often it comes from, *I just don’t want to think about it; I don’t want to deal with it.* But not thinking about it doesn’t mean the holidays are going to disappear,” says Dr. Susan Zonnebelt-Smeenge.

Dr. Robert De Vries explains how to make a plan: “Planning simply means that you can decide what you’re going to do and how much of it you want to do, and prioritizing means that if there are fifteen different activities you might be involved in, which one or two or three are most important to you?” Whatever you plan, be sure to allow yourself flexibility to adjust it. And if you have children, involve them in the planning process; this will be significant in their healing as well.

The thought of making a plan can seem a daunting task. You don’t have to make your plan alone. Involve God in the planning process, and listen for His direction. When a person chooses Christ as Lord of his or her life,* God sends His Holy Spirit to reside in that person. The Holy Spirit will help you better understand the Bible and guide you through life. As you read your Bible and pray, ask God to help you learn to listen to and hear the Spirit’s guidance in your life.

“In the morning, O LORD, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation.” (Psalm 5:3)

God, while my first inclination is to say, “I don’t want to even think about planning for the holidays right now,” I do want to get well, I do want to be able to face the holidays, and I want to honor my loved one this holiday season by moving forward in healthy grieving. But I need Your help. Help me decide which activities to prioritize and which I can set aside, and please grant me the courage and strength to follow through. I will listen for Your guidance.

* To find out what it means to choose Christ as Lord and guide of your life, see page x.

Prepare for Hard-Hitting Moments

“You see two sisters giggling over something Christmassy. They’re making their secret plans, and you think—*that’s not happening anymore,*” shares Emmaline, who experienced the death of one of her two daughters.

As you consider each coming event or tradition, you know that some will be more difficult to handle than others. Take a moment to try and pinpoint which moments will likely hit you harder than others. What specific things will you miss the most without your loved one this holiday season? What events will be completely changed without your loved one present?

Emmaline shares a moment that took her by surprise:

“I pulled down the stockings, and I’m thinking, *What am I going to do with Rebecca’s stocking?* You get blindsided or ambushed with these little things that you never even think about, and wham, they just hit you in the face, and it brings everything back to the forefront.”

Prepare yourself for the possibility of a forceful emotional impact. Understand that this will likely happen, but also know that you can face the moment, lean into those emotions and walk through the moment. At times like these, you will benefit from opening your Bible and echoing heartfelt prayers from the Bible, such as: “Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold. I have come into the deep waters; the floods engulf me ... Answer me, O LORD, out of the goodness of your love; in your great mercy turn to me ... answer me quickly, for I am in trouble” (Psalm 69:1–2, 16–17). The Bible says that God’s Word is living and active and that it is always useful. Praying using the words of Scripture is a practical idea for the tough times, and it is a powerful practice that brings results.

As you cry out to the God of comfort and help, remind yourself of His many promises:

“The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.” (Deuteronomy 33:27a)

God, I am fearful about those moments, but I’ll be better able to handle them if I’m anticipating them and am prepared to face them. Help me take time to sit down and quietly think about what is to come this holiday season. And God, when I start to sink and panic, remind me that Your everlasting arms are beneath me, solid and firm. You provide a safe haven in my darkest times.

You Can't Duplicate Past Holidays

"There may be sadness in facing the fact that a holiday is never going to be the same after a loss. But I think it's better than adopting a crushing burden of trying to recreate something that cannot be recreated," says Sue Lutz.

As you approach the holidays, you might wonder if it's better to try and keep the holidays the same as possible or whether to do something completely different this year. There is no right or wrong answer to this question, as long as you recognize that you cannot duplicate past holidays. You will need to prayerfully consider what is best for you and your family this year, and then next year you may decide to do things differently.

"I was putting too much pressure on myself in my desire to make things as normal as possible for my husband and my father-in-law that first Christmas after my mother-in-law died. I tried to cook what she cooked. I tried to do some extra shopping for my father-in-law, and we put up the tree and decorated it. It was hard, but it was also good to get out of ourselves and to be there for him," says Connie.

"It really helped me to get away and do Christmas differently than we'd ever done it before. The first year after Jody died, I took a trip to South Florida with my sons. It helped not to have those strong emotional memories in my face. We did that for the next four years," says JoAnne.

The fact is that you cannot go back to the past. You can stay where you are right now (do you really want to stay where you are right now?), or you can go forward. And while it is wonderful to look back and cherish special memories, you will need to make a point to turn your head forward this holiday season as you invest in today and in the future. Making this choice honors your loved one and is healing to you and those around you.

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."
(Jeremiah 29:11)

Lord, what would be best for me this holiday season? What plans would be helpful for my healing and still be respectful to my family members? Teach me how to hear Your voice and follow closely after You. You know what's best for me. Thank you for guiding me through Your words in the Bible and through the wise counsel of mature Christian friends.

Traditions: Old vs. New

You will want to maintain some holiday traditions, especially when they involve other family members. But this is also the time to begin new traditions. Remember, though, not to overburden yourself with too many activities or traditions. Keep your plans simple, and keep other family members informed of your plans. Next year you may decide to incorporate more traditions, old and new, so don't feel guilty for only planning a few this year.

As you consider new traditions to develop, perhaps one of these ideas will interest you:

"My children and I light a candle for my [deceased] husband through the whole month of December every night at dinner. I've made a candle for them with a picture of them and their father wrapped around the candle," shares Sheila.

"Before we open presents, we all share a special Christmas memory or what makes Christmas special to us," says Connie.

"I visited a girlfriend of mine who was single and by herself," says Lois Rabey.

"What we've decided to do is to make a 'dad tree,'" shares Sheila, "and we decorate it with all sorts of ornaments that relate to the university he went to, his favorite football team and the things he enjoyed doing, like fishing. We put a baseball cap with his school emblem on the top."

How precious are the thoughts and memories you have of your loved one. So much love and so much pain. Please know how much God loves you, how much He cherishes you and wants to comfort and care for you.

"How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand."
(Psalm 139:17-18a)

O God, You long to comfort me and care for me. Your love for me is so great, yet sometimes I pull away from You, caught in my own anxiety and despair. Wrap me in Your arms, Lord, and show me what I need to do today in order to plan for the holidays.

Take Care of Yourself

This holiday season, in order to take care of yourself, one of the first things you need to do is recognize your current limitations and pace yourself.

"Grieving is exhausting, and dealing with a significant loss is just plain hard work. It isn't healthy to expect yourself to be able to do all the things you used to do. Life is very different now, and you need good self-care. Pacing yourself and having patience with yourself is so important," advises Dr. Susan Zonnebelt-Smeenge.

Be sure that part of your holiday planning includes time for reflection, which is important for your mental and emotional health. Give yourself time to process the new emotions and stresses that come with the holidays. Taking time for reflection is part of working through your grief. As you face a new holiday experience, feeling or memory, write down what happened, how you reacted, how you feel about it now and what you can learn from it. Talk to God about the best way to move forward from that point.

You also need to take care of your physical health. You are probably nodding your head, thinking, *I know, I know, it's just so hard*. Your holidays will be much easier to face if you get enough rest, get some exercise and sunlight, and make wise food choices. "For me," shares Connie, "not getting enough rest made me vulnerable to not just being a weary griever, but also a depressed believer."

Spiritual renewal and focus is a must. Only God can truly heal the pain and daily hurts that arise after the loss of a loved one.

"Open your Bible and meditate on the Word of God," says Sabrina Black. "One of the Scriptures that comes to mind is Psalm 23. The Twenty-third Psalm says, 'The Lord is.' Stop there and meditate on all the things the Lord is—especially during your time of pain, the Lord is your comfort; the Lord is your lover; the Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your safe place; the Lord is your refuge. You've got to embrace the Word of God."

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me."
(Psalm 23:4)

Lord God, sometimes I don't do a very good job of taking care of myself. I know what to do, but then I don't do it. Please strengthen me to make wise decisions about my body, my time, my emotional responses and my spiritual focus. With You, I can do all things, and I can walk forward each day without fear and under

More Practical Ideas to Help You Plan

You can't do it all this holiday season. Whatever you think you must do, consider how you can simplify those plans. These practical ideas can help make your holidays smoother:

Holiday cooking: Consider ways to simplify holiday meals: order out, go out, have everyone bring a dish, lay out a simple buffet with turkey sandwiches and dressing, or ask someone else to plan the meal. You could skip cookie baking, only bake one type of cookie or invite a supportive friend or family member to help. Communicate changes in plans when they involve family and friends; be honest with them about why you need to do things differently this year.

Decorating: You don't have to put every decoration up. Consider which decorations are most important for you to put up. If you choose to have a tree, you do not need to pull out all the ornaments you normally would. Buy some simple, colored bulbs instead. Decorate your tree with small stuffed animals instead of ornaments. Consider a tabletop tree or a meaningful centerpiece that focuses on the true meaning of Christmas.

Shopping: Shopping online and from catalogs can help you avoid a potentially stressful mall experience. Plus, you can have your gifts sent directly to the recipients. You don't need to purchase a gift for everyone this year; even if you've done so in the past. Be up-front with people about changes in gift-giving.

"I have been surprised at how the Lord has given me the strength to reach out to other people and to make decisions to do things differently than I've done in the past," shares JoAnne. "I've made small steps along the way, but it's been very encouraging."

"Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I ... The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail."
(Isaiah 58:9a, 11)

Lord, I need to simplify my plans this year, but I don't want to let anyone down. Help me make wise decisions regarding holiday preparations. Please give me the courage to speak up and let others know I will be celebrating more simply this year and that I'd appreciate their support and understanding.

The Difference Between Planning and Controlling

"Perfect plans cannot ultimately protect you from anything," explains Sue Lutz. "Your experience of loss has proven that. This is a broken world. God doesn't want you to put your hope in nothing going wrong. He says, 'I want you to put your hope in the fact that I will never leave you or forsake you, even when things are going wrong. I will walk you through it.'"

Having a biblical plan is wise and will help you move forward in healing, but trying to create and adhere to "the perfect plan" is neither wise nor biblical! As you know, things happen every day that can change your best-laid plans in an instant.

"Planning is a good thing," but keep in mind, says Dr. Paul Tripp, that "there's a crucial difference between planning and control. We plan what we think is best for situations over which we have no control. It's right to plan, but part of planning is humility and flexibility.

"Planning is looking ahead, trying to anticipate problems and solving them before you get there. That's a responsible thing to do, but we're never going to be sovereign. James 4 says, 'Don't say, "I'll go here and there, and tomorrow I'll do this and that," because you're not in control of your life.' So you've got to hold your plan with an open hand because you're never in control of the people and situations of your life. Our hope is not in control, but in a faithful God."

When a person turns to Christ for help in short- and long-term planning and decision-making—surrendering his or her fears, weaknesses, emotions and control to the living God—that person begins to realize that having a perfect plan and rigidly adhering to that plan is counterproductive. But planning with humility and flexibility under God's guidance becomes a tool of healing.

"Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails." (Proverbs 19:21)

Dear God, I need Your help. You alone have the perfect plan for all people and all situations, so I'd best be discussing this with You! Help me to be flexible with my plans and understand it's okay if things work out differently than I expected.

Help Your Children Prepare for the Holidays

Preparing your children for the changes this season will help alleviate their stress and worries, even for young children who aren't able to articulate their feelings. This season can be a time of healing and bonding in your family as you begin to establish a "new normal" within your home.

"I talked to my children before the holiday season started. I said, 'We're going to do the best that we can and celebrate what the season's about, even though Daddy's gone. He would want us to do that. We're going to have some new traditions, and it will be okay. This will feel different. There may be things that happen that you're going to feel sad about. Come talk to me, and we'll work through it with God's help,' shares Lois Rabey.

"Children aren't going to tell you they're upset about something," says Laura Petherbridge; however, "they may start acting differently around the holiday times, becoming more angry or aggressive, or more sullen and depressed." Be watchful and help your children learn to express their feelings through words and to release their pent-up emotions through healthy outlets, such as clay sculpting, coloring or water play.

Include your children in the planning, says Dr. Robert DeVries. "When my first wife died, we had a very hardy discussion among the three children and myself about the fact that, yes, we did want the tree; no, we don't have to put all the lights up outdoors; we're going to have our normal Christmas brunch, but we don't have to do Christmas cards."

You are only one person, and you are suffering a severe loss. Ask others for help and keep your holiday plans simple. Encourage your children to talk to God about their hurts and worries. Let them know that with Jesus by their side, they can have peace, safety and hope, even when they feel sad.

"And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."
(Matthew 28:20b)

Lord, taking care of my children is so difficult when I'm hurting this badly. Please give me a supernatural strength that will enable me to guide my children through healthy grieving. I will entrust my children to You. I pray that they come to have a relationship with You.

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HOLIDAY DEVOTIONS

CHAPTER 3:

MANAGING AND BENEFITING FROM RELATIONSHIPS

The Trouble with Isolation

The holidays can be exhausting, and sometimes it seems easier to just be by yourself. Making that choice may seem easy, but living with the consequences of too much isolation will make things harder for you.

"When we isolate ourselves, we have one person to talk to usually—us," says H. Norman Wright. "And since we're probably on a negative bent already, we're going to reinforce the negativism. We're going to expand it, and that's going to make it worse."

Sabrina Black agrees, "One of the biggest dangers in isolating yourself during the holidays is negative self-talk, feeling guilty about decisions that have been made and experiencing regret. Sometimes we beat ourselves up when we find ourselves alone." The primary characteristics of negative self-talk are (a) it's not true, (b) it does not build you up or help you grow, and (c) it exaggerates the impact and extent of legitimate problems.

If your tendency is toward isolation, you may have already experienced some of the negative effects noted above. The solution is not to surround yourself with people, the answer lies in a healthy balance of both time alone and time with others—and more importantly, making wise choices regarding what you do when you're alone, the kind of people you're choosing to spend time with and whether you are turning to God for help.

If time alone has resulted in negative self-talk, know that you have the choice of rejecting those thoughts and believing what the Bible says about your situation. When you cut off those thoughts and give them to Christ, immediately ask Him to fill your mind with the assurance of things godly and true. The Bible is full of promises and good things to replenish yourself with.

"Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable ... think about such things." (Philippians 4:8)

Lord Jesus, I sure do know what negative self-talk is. When I'm alone, God, please help me focus on what is good, holy and uplifting. Help me to remember that it's harmful and exhausting to sit around and let the negative seep in, and that it's healing and helpful to intentionally choose prayer, Bible reading, journaling or uplifting music.

Two Healing Tools: Privacy and Interaction with Others

You may prefer surrounding yourself with people and activities during the holidays, which helps you forget your pain, or maybe you'd rather shut your doors and turn out your lights, avoiding people altogether. To heal from your pain, you need a healthy balance of both privacy *and* interaction; and to experience the unique benefits of each one, it's important to evaluate potential situations before you are in them. Here are a few questions to ask yourself before committing to a planned time of privacy or interaction.

If I choose to be with people today, will I be able to:

- Talk about my loved one and share memories about him or her?
- Safely express my grief if I am ambushed by difficult emotions?
- Be honest and ask for any needed help?

If I choose to be alone, will I take the time to:

- Digest my latest feelings and thoughts?
- Talk to God about those feelings, seek His help and accept His comfort?
- Position myself so I won't be easily tempted to do unhealthy things to numb my pain (drink excessively, take drugs, look at pornography, overeat, etc.)?

If, for example, you would answer no to any of the above questions, rethink going into the situation, or take steps to make the experience more beneficial. For instance, if you realize you might not be able to talk about your loved one at a family gathering, write a grief letter to give to those who will be there.* If you realize that, when alone, all you're going to do is gripe about your situation, consider taking a book on healing from grief to read with you instead. The important thing is thinking before committing.

"[Jesus] went up on a mountainside by himself to pray ... He was there alone." (Matthew 14:23b)

"Two are better than one ... For if they fall, one will lift up his companion." (Ecclesiastes 4:9–10b NKJV)

God, even though my thoughts may be scattered right now, give me the ability to think ahead about the situations I'm going to be in. Help me know what steps to take to allow both time with others and time alone to contribute to my healing.

* See page 45 for instructions on how to write a grief letter.

Be with People Who Are Affirming

"It's important to identify who are the safe people in your life? Who are the ones who are going to nurture you, to build you up? Not to berate you or say, 'Well, get over it. You know it's been six months now.' Find those who are going to be good listeners and be willing to go shopping with you or go out and do some activity that you haven't done for a while. After Joyce died, there were times when I really didn't want to go out and do anything like that, but by doing it, once I got there, I perked up a little bit," says H. Norman Wright.

Sabrina Black recognizes that sometimes being with family and friends can be counterproductive: "You know your family. You know the ones who are safe to spend time with and those who always pull you down."

Sue Lutz also encourages you to find friends who will point you to the Lord for true healing: "There are places that only you and the Lord can go in your grief, and you need somebody who recognizes that. You want somebody who knows that ultimately your healing is not going to come from within yourself. Your healing is going to come when you learn to bring all your pain and loss to the Lord. That person will kindly but persistently encourage you in that direction. You want somebody who's not afraid of suffering, somebody who knows you'll get through on the other side and who is ready to walk with you and wait with you as that process continues."

Yes, God has given us friends and family to love us and care for us, but an even greater gift of friendship is in His Son, Jesus Christ, who promises to be with us forever if we accept His free, divine gift of love.* God loves you exactly as you are. He does not require you to act a certain way, speak certain words or do good deeds. He loves you as you are today, right now.

"Love each other as I have loved you ... I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last." (John 15:12b, 15–16a)

Lord Jesus, thank you for loving me, saving me and being my friend. Show me how I can act on this love that You've given me. Grant me wisdom in choosing whom to spend time with and whom to steer clear of this holiday season.

* See page x for details about God's free gift to us through Jesus and how to have a relationship

Be with People Who Understand Your Pain

Does anybody see how much I'm hurting? Does anyone understand how deep my sadness is?

"One of the best ways to work through your grief is to make sure you're around some other people who understand the same pain that you're going through," says Laura Petherbridge.

A great way to find people like that is in a GriefShare support group.* These groups are made up of people who are living in the aftermath of a loved one's death. They understand the depth of your emotions, the seriousness of your questions and your feelings of desperation.

While participants are encouraged to share their emotions, these Christ-centered groups are not organized crying sessions, they're places where people meet who want to learn to walk forward toward healing and wholeness.

- You will discover what emotions are typical in grief and how to cope when these emotions ambush you or go from one extreme to another.
- You will learn what to look out for in the coming weeks and months and how to best prepare yourself for those moments.
- You will gain practical advice and learn of resources to help meet your needs.
- You will learn you are not alone and that healing is possible.

"When I've had such desperate feelings of loneliness, especially at the holidays, it's been important for me to see how other folks have felt the same way and to be told, 'Hang on; it feels like you might not make it, but you are going to make it,'" shares JoAnne.

"I will turn their mourning into gladness; I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow." (Jeremiah 31:13b)

God, this looks like part of the grief work I need to do. Help me do my part in taking steps forward toward healing, whether I want to or not! Please guide me every step of the way.

* GriefShare support group programs are located across the U.S., Canada and around the world. To find a group near you, go to www.griefshare.org/findagroup or call 800-395-5755.

How to Handle Holiday Invitations

Other people do not know what to expect from you during the holidays. Should they invite you to their party? Should they insist you come? Should they leave you alone? Not only do others not know what's best for you, you're not sure yourself! You're probably torn between desiring to please your family and friends—and being uncertain if you can even make it through a social event without an emotional breakdown.

These practical suggestions will help lower the stress of facing invitations and events:

- Decide in advance to attend some events (including family gatherings), but to say no to others. Communicate this to people up front. Give them time to process and accept that you're doing things differently this year.
- Only plan to stay a portion of the time. Tell your host of this possibility beforehand.
- Learn to say "no." When someone insists it would be "good for you" to attend, explain that right now you're not capable of handling as many functions as before. As Norm Wright says, "You're going into the holiday season in pain. There's been a major loss in your life. Instead of trying to meet the expectations of others, it's best to say, 'Thanks for offering that advice [or invitation], but here's what I've decided to do.' When they pressure you, repeat word for word what you've already said."
- Never feel guilty about not going at the last minute. Sabrina Black says, "If you don't feel up to it, give yourself permission to still grieve. Let your host know you're not able to make it. Thank your host for the invitation, and encourage him or her to invite you again. You need to do what's best for you in this hour."

"Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you." (1 Peter 5:7)

God, worrying about how to respond to holiday invitations can be such a burden. Forgive me for holding on to my burdens; they are dragging me to the ground! You care for me, and You can take these burdens from me. Here, God, I will name each burden I can possibly think of, and I will give them to You. Thank you for being here for me.

How to Handle Holiday Events

Getting together with other people, whether it's a small family gathering or a large office party, is a recipe for the unexpected when it comes to a person in grief. While this is true, you can still be prepared for certain aspects of grief that might hit, and take steps to lessen the intensity of those moments.

Set the example of talking about your loved one: After the death of Dr. Zonnebelt-Smeenge's husband, she was invited to her in-law's home for Thanksgiving. "When I got there, it seemed like no one wanted to talk about Rick. I kept waiting for somebody to bring up [his name]. After a while I couldn't stand it anymore. I excused myself and left and bawled all the way home. Later I decided maybe they were waiting for me to decide if it was okay to talk about him; maybe they were afraid if they said anything, they'd make me feel worse. From that time on when I went to an event, I found a way to let people know I wanted to talk about him and I wanted to hear their stories."

Excuse yourself if you need to: "One day when visiting family, I didn't want to be around people, and I excused myself to a back room. I think it made my family uncomfortable, but I chose to take care of myself instead of worrying about making other people comfortable," says Charlaïne.

It's okay to laugh or enjoy yourself: Joy and sorrow can exist in a person, strongly, at the same time. God has created us in this unique way. "It may be at that party you can be laughing at eight o'clock and crying at eight-thirty because something triggered it. Don't be embarrassed about laughing, because even in the midst of our sorrow there's joy. It's all mixed up together, and it doesn't come in sequence," says Dr. Robert De Vries.

"And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:19)

God, no matter what I face today or in the days to come, I can make it through. I can be open in communicating with people; I can face unexpected emotions. And not only will I "make it through," but I'll still be standing strong on the other side—because of You.

What to Do in Awkward Moments

People don't know what to say to you and often will say the wrong thing. Not only that, you may unexpectedly cry in front of people, and then they really don't know what to say or do!

"Don't be afraid to cry in front of people if they say something that makes you cry; just make sure you have lots of tissues with you. When I'm in a group and start crying, I feel embarrassed. But it's grief—we're going to cry; it's how we are wired," says Laura Petherbridge.

As you know, tears and emotions can be triggered by something as simple as a smell, a certain food, a holiday tradition or a sound. "One reason people don't want to go to events around the holidays is because they're emotionally fragile. They become embarrassed about the tears that may come because they don't know quite when it's going to happen," says Dr. Robert De Vries.

"It's important to recognize that emotions are natural for all of us, and yes, other people may become uncomfortable with them. In our society many folks are uncomfortable with what they call negative emotions, but they're genuine emotions. The Bible is filled with examples of people weeping in public, Jesus weeping at the tomb of Lazarus. Crying is not a shameful thing at all. A good show of emotion from time to time, even at a party, shows authenticity for the significant loss you've experienced in your life. And hopefully people will respond appropriately to that."

While people may continually say the wrong things or react in ways that are hurtful, Jesus came to heal the brokenhearted. He came to heal you. Talk to God about all your worries, and let your tears flow honestly before Him. He will be faithful to comfort and mend you.

"A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out." (Matthew 12:20a)

Lord God, with You, there are never awkward moments. What an amazing comfort to be able to share my thoughts, fears, worries and sadness with You, without judgment or insensitive, hurtful remarks. You are always faithful to support me and to meet me in my pain.

Help Others Who May Need You

Consider spending Thanksgiving, Christmas or New Year's with someone who is alone this holiday season: it could be someone who has experienced a loss, someone without family nearby, a person in a nursing home or someone who is divorced and could use a friend. If God puts the thought of a certain person on your heart, don't immediately dismiss that person because you don't think he or she would be interested. Take a chance. You may be pleasantly surprised.*

"After my mom passed away, the first holiday was Thanksgiving. I decided we shouldn't go to the home that my parents shared together because it would be so hard, so I invited everybody to my apartment. I also invited two students from the university, two young men from India, to share Thanksgiving with us. We were so busy trying to make these people feel at home that we didn't have time to wallow in our sadness," shares Lorraine Peterson, a featured expert in the GriefShare video program.

You could also volunteer to help serve a holiday meal at a shelter, nursing home, Salvation Army, fire or rescue station, church, school or hospital. Find out what opportunities are available in your community. Other ideas would be making and delivering cards or cookies to shut-ins or making encouraging phone calls.

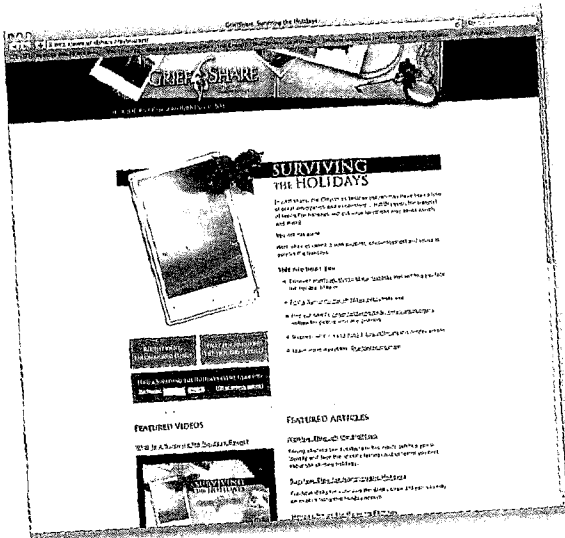
"At the times I felt so low and so lonely," shares Mardie, "help came at just the right time, and if I can be that same gift to somebody else, what a blessing that is to me."

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows." (2 Corinthians 1:3-5)

Father God, who needs my help and support? Who is hurting or alone or in need? Help me to look at the people around me with new eyes. Help me to give Your comfort to someone else this holiday season. So many people are hurting, and many are putting on masks, pretending everything is fine. Lead me to them. And give me the courage and energy to follow through.

* Always remember that inviting an individual of the opposite sex is not a wise idea if you have lost a spouse. You may think that starting a new relationship is the last thing on your mind, but please understand that the other person may be at a different place than you. Your healing is of utmost importance, so do not jeopardize that.

Holiday Survival
Find even more help on our special website



Practical articles, videos and other resources to help you survive, and even thrive, this holiday season.

www.griefshare.org/holidays

HOLIDAY DEVOTIONS

CHAPTER 4:

**FOCUSING ON THE TRUE
MEANING OF THE HOLIDAYS**

The Reason for Celebrating the Holidays

After the death of a loved one, you may find, if you're not careful, that your loss becomes the lens through which you view all of life's circumstances. You begin to see things only as they relate to your lost loved one, as opposed to viewing the circumstances for what they are. This is often true during the holidays. "It's important to remember that the holiday wasn't created simply for the relationship you had with your loved one, but that the holiday itself has a meaning that goes far deeper than any one relationship might have gone," explains Dr. Robert De Vries.

"Christmas is the birth of Jesus Christ and it's the entrance of the Son of God into this world to redeem us from our sins. Right in the midst of our grief we have God Himself coming to us as an infant child, saying, 'I will go through the grief of the cross in order to find a way through this grief that you are experiencing, so that you can have new life.'"

Make a point this season to focus on the true meaning of the holidays, and you'll begin to understand how the holidays are much more than a time to be with family and friends. What spiritual importance is associated with this holiday? When you answer that question, you'll find that it gives you a different perspective on your loss.

"That baby and that crucifix should remind us: God's story is a story of love. God so loved the world that He sent His one and only Son [John 3:16]. That's because He sees me. He sees my pain, and He knows my loss. What Jesus did in coming to save me is enough. That gives me hope, and it's hope we most desperately need. That baby in the manger, He's what we're looking for. No matter what the circumstance. No matter what the loss, He's the hope," says Laura Petherbridge.

"But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.'" (Luke 2:10-11)

Lord and Savior, You are the reason for hope. You came to this earth as a baby, ministered Your healing, and then died on the cross and rose again for everyone to experience eternal life with You in glory—including me. I have hope for heaven and for living a full life here on earth, filled with the fullness of a life lived for You. Forgive me for my sins, and draw me close to You. I want to live my life based on the hope-filled foundation of Your promises.

Consider What Jesus Came to Do

Don't limit your thinking to the fact that Jesus came. Consider what He came to do: Jesus came to save us from sin and death. He came to make salvation possible.

Sue Lutz explains, "Christ came for a purpose, and that purpose has to do with us; it's very personal. He came to defeat the sin and the sorrow that overwhelms us at the holidays. He came to a beautiful but fallen world to people who are both sinners and sufferers, and He came to deal with the root of all of those problems. When you focus on this, it helps you get past the everyday trappings of the Christmas season that can tear you down. When you look at the eternal perspective of what Jesus came to do, it sweeps you up into the lasting things that God is bringing to your life through His coming."

This holiday season you will see images of the baby Jesus and hear stories or songs about Him, whether in church, at the mall or driving down the street. Let these moments be reminders not only of a birth, but of His life and sacrificial death that enable us to live forever with Him—out of the darkness of this broken, difficult existence, into a new life of peace, joy and daily hope.

"Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." (Ephesians 5:2b)

"And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son." (1 John 5:11)

"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people ... [He has come] to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace." (Luke 1:68, 79)

Lord Jesus, You came to bring me hope, peace, joy and strength that I can rely on, even through the most horrific times of life in this world. Your plan not only includes me, but everyone in this world who has ever experienced hurt, pain, bitterness and despair. You just ask that we believe in what You have done for us, that we confess that we are sinners and choose You as Lord of our lives. Thank you for rescuing me.

An End to Suffering and Death

"One of the greatest hopes I have as a Christian is that there will be a new heaven and a new earth [Revelation 21], that there is an end to all of this suffering that we have in this world. It's important to take that promise of what's going to come at the end and pull it into your present reality here, so that regardless of whatever brokenness you may have experienced in your life, you know that by committing your life to Christ, He will carry you through whatever else is coming in this life. He will carry you through to the end," says Dr. Robert De Vries.

One way to focus on the true meaning of what Jesus came to do is to read and meditate on God's words in the Bible. As you read, ask the Holy Spirit to help you understand what you are reading. The more you study your Bible, the more you will begin to see the "big picture," which promises a future of living with hope in an existence where there are no more tears and no more death.

"He will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces ... The LORD has spoken." (Isaiah 25:8)

This is a promise in the Bible for a reality that is yet to come, but that can be lived in the hope of today. Our world can be tough, miserable and bleak at times. Why is this so, and when will we be free of the sorrow and pain?

"There is a curse on the world. Sin has come and stained and distorted everything. We lose people we love, sometimes in ways that are cruel and deeply painful. We're dealing with evil in this world. None of this is the way it was supposed to be. Suffering is an outgrowth of the fact that sin has taken hold of our hearts and our world," explains Sue Lutz. "It would take God to solve the problem."

How did He do it? He sent His Son to begin making all things new. The Bible refers to this as "God reconciling all things to Himself." This involves God making a new heavens and a new earth, and in the process defeating all His enemies. The last enemy that He will destroy is death.

"For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death." (1 Corinthians 15:25-26)

God, I want to live where there are no more tears or dying. Help me to understand and embrace what You came to do and what Your plan is for this world and the people in it. Help me to see beyond my own limited perspective and be a part of this amazing existence that You are inviting me to be a part of.

The Basis for Hope!

Jesus says, "Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy ... I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." (John 16:22, 33)

The holiday season does not have to be a time you fear or dread. Each day, no matter what the season, is a day that God provides hope for this life and for eternal life. He is an unchanging, faithful, loving God, who always keeps His promises and always provides comfort. Trust Him with your fears and your feelings of emotional overload. Allow Him to love and take care of you.

"When you've experienced a deep loss, it tends to dominate your life; you're overwhelmed by it. You feel despair, but Jesus came to give you hope. You feel sadness, but Jesus came to bring joy into your life. Your life is in turmoil, yet Jesus came to bring peace to your life. Much of your time is dominated by tears, but Jesus came to wipe away every tear and to give you something in this life that no one else could ever give to you. He is your source of strength, and He is your stability," says H. Norman Wright.

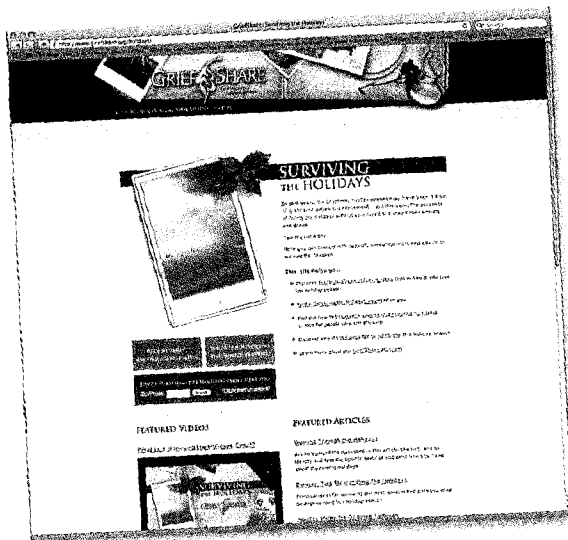
"God is the anchor," says Laura Petherbridge. "He's the one thing that will never change. There's much comfort in knowing that one thing in life never changes. There's not a person, place or thing that in the next thirty seconds could not be gone in my life. But God never changes.

"When you take that first step closer to Him, and you find yourself embraced by God or you feel those everlasting arms underneath you, you never want to leave that place because there's nothing else like it. I'm grateful God chose to teach me how to love Him and how to trust Him."

The Bible is full of hope-filled truths: "When God our Savior revealed his kindness and love, he saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He washed away our sins, giving us a new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit. He generously poured out the Spirit upon us through Jesus Christ our Savior. Because of his grace he declared us righteous and gave us confidence that we will inherit eternal life." (Titus 3:4-7 NLT)

Faithful God, I can trust You. You never change. You will always take care of me and my family. Through You, we have the promise of everlasting life in an amazing place called heaven, a place that is just as real as the air I breathe.

Holiday Survival
Find even more help on our special website



Practical articles, videos and other resources to help you survive, and even thrive, this holiday season.

HOLIDAY DEVOTIONS

CHAPTER 5:

**USING THE HOLIDAYS
TO HEAL FROM GRIEF**

Take Charge of Your Grief

"I started to come to the realization that 'You know what, Susan? If you don't do something about this, if you don't take charge of your grief, no one else can do it for you,'" shares Dr. Susan Zonnebelt-Smeenge.

Take action to deal with your grief by following Drs. De Vries' and Zonnebelt-Smeenge's five steps in working through grief.

Accept the reality that your loved one has died and will not return. Talk about your loved one at family gatherings and with other people. Consider having a candle-lighting ceremony or ornament-hanging service where good memories are shared and loved ones are remembered.

Express every emotion that you feel. Learn to get the emotions out in a healthy way. Talk. Cry. Share. Don't worry so much about "bringing other people down" or feeling awkward.

Store the memories you have, treasure them, share them, but begin moving from the past to the present. "This is how the holidays used to be, but now they will have to be different."

Begin new traditions. What new traditions will you begin? Your love for the departed in no way lessens by starting a new normal.

Reinvest in life. Understand the holidays will never be the same again, but holidays normally change as years go by, as we age and family dynamics change. Life brings constant changes. You have purposes for still being on this earth that go beyond the relationship you had with the one you lost. Discover what God is calling you to do. Fulfilling your God-given purpose will honor God, your family and your loved one and will give you a new perspective.

"I can do everything through him who gives me strength."
(Philippians 4:13)

God, I can't do any of those five steps on my own, but with You, I can do all things. Give me the courage to take control of my grief, relying on Your strength and guidance as I walk forward in this new normal.

Be Honest about Your Pain

"I didn't want to put a damper on anyone else's joy, and I didn't want to be the dark cloud over the celebration that everybody else was having. So I put on a happy face and tried to be the sister, the daughter, the aunt, that everybody wanted to see. Putting on that happy face was a heavier burden than I was emotionally able to carry at the time," shares Mardie.

Pretending you are doing fine not only hurts you, but is unfair to those around you. Consider Dr. Zonnebelt-Smeenge's words:

"Other people have different expectations than. They expect that you're doing well and that you won't need any more from them. You're sabotaging yourself if you aren't honest with yourself. It's just going to come back again next year or the next time something hard comes up that reminds you of that loss."

Think about times you've said, "I'm doing okay," when inside you were screaming the opposite. Are there certain people you pretend with every time you are with them? How does this help you and other people when you are not honest about where you're at in the healing process?

Being honest about your pain is a large part of moving forward through grief. You have experienced a devastating loss. The fact that you are not feeling holiday cheer is normal. You are the one who needs to set the example for those around you that it's okay to talk about your lost loved one, it's okay to cry during a party or celebratory event, and it's okay to be sad when other people around you are happy. Your honesty now sets a precedent for future times when your friends or relatives may be experiencing a deep personal struggle themselves, and you would want them to be truthful with you.

"Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." (Galatians 6:2)

Lord, okay, I admit I've put on that happy-face mask. I don't want to bring down everyone around me; plus, I don't want people to think, "Wow, shouldn't he/she be over this by now?" Sometimes I just don't want to go there. But it didn't occur to me that my mask is dishonest and harmful. Help me to be honest with myself and with others so I can move forward and not backward in my grieving. Give me the humility to accept help, support and prayers from others.

Are You Numbing Your Pain?

If you numb your pain, your pain will last longer and will be increasingly difficult to heal from. How do you know if you are doing this?

See if any of these descriptions fit you:

- Working more and more hours because it gets your mind off your grief
- Overactivity, such as church activities, holiday socials, volunteer work, etc.
- Spending money on things you don't need because it momentarily feels good
- Taking alcohol or drugs to temporarily numb the pain
- Any increased behavior or action that you do because it helps you forget about your grief

"Many behaviors have the ability to numb you or distract you when you're in a lot of pain. The problem is they don't heal you. Sex, drugs, alcohol or shopping unfortunately just add a layer of isolation to your life because you're not depending on God; you're not depending on others; you're not even building on the good part of your past; and they don't give you anything to move forward into your future. All those behaviors keep you in the place where you're most unhappy. They help you dig the hole deeper. They add a layer of guilt and shame, and sometimes they'll add a layer of physical dependence, which just adds to your trouble," explains Sue Lutz.

Sabrina Black offers this advice for healthy grieving: "Sometimes that void is so large, you'll begin to fill it with other things if you don't fill it with God first. When you're feeling lonely, reach out in prayer or reach out for God's Word. Because there's that sense of emptiness right now, you want to make sure you fill it with an overwhelming presence of God."

If you have a void inside, you need to fill it with something. Choose wisely.

"God's Son holds [His children] securely, and the evil one cannot touch them ... Dear children, keep away from anything that might take God's place in your hearts." (1 John 5:18, 21 NLT)

Oh God, this is so hard. I can't do this alone. I can do this with You. Fill me with You—Your comfort and reassurance, Your promises, Your wisdom and strength.

Moving One Step Forward at a Time

Taking charge of your grief does not involve cutting yourself off from others, being independent and relying on your own strength. But it does involve taking a few steps forward at a time and not having a victim mentality. Our grief experts offer wise words on moving forward in healthy grieving:

"It's important to not maintain a victim mentality where you say to yourself, 'I'm a victim of these circumstances.' There is a period of time where that's true and you have to absorb that pain, but then you have to lay down that victim mentality and say, 'It's true that happened, but now it's my responsibility to get up and take care of myself.' That's biblical. God is often saying to people, 'Stand up now and move on. You're not going to be doing this by yourself. In fact you can't do it by yourself. I'm with you, but I don't move a parked car,'" advises Lois Rabey.

"If people are inviting you out, if they want to engage you in some activities, try it a little bit," suggests Sabrina Black. "It may be that you don't stay at the party as long as you used to, but at least go by. It may be that when you have company, they don't stay as long as they used to, but at least open your doors and extend hospitality. Press yourself. You'll be surprised at what you're able to accomplish."

If you decide to press yourself, that's great. But remember, pressing yourself doesn't mean you have to do everything you used to:

"You don't have to do it all. Picking one or two holiday events or traditions and trying to make yourself get through those is all you need to do. You can take that responsibility and make it through," encourages Dr. Susan Zonnebelt-Smeenge.

"Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint." (Isaiah 40:28-31)

Lord God, empower me today to press forward one step at a time. Not only will I make it through the holidays, but I'll be further along in my healing. Thank you for walking with me.

Take Inventory

When the holiday season comes to a close this year, we encourage you to take inventory of these past several weeks. What was the most difficult part of the holidays? What ideas did you implement that worked well? What didn't work or was stressful? Think about what you would like to do differently next year. We recommend that you write down your responses to these questions in a notebook or journal.

Each holiday after your loved one's death will bring new changes, more memories and new questions of "Will it be any easier this year?" Be encouraged that it does get easier.

"It may seem like you'll never get through dealing with this loss and pain, but with hard work and God walking alongside you, you will," encourages Dr. Zonnebelt-Smeenge. "When you get to the other side of that loss, you'll be able to remember the loss situation, and the positives and negatives associated with the person who's now lost. You'll be able to look afresh at what your life has at the present and the people who are around you. You'll be able to see your new purposes, and perhaps even the silver lining of how God uses pain to show us joy, and how sometimes going through difficulty will point us in directions we never would have believed were possible."

You will be able to laugh and enjoy the holidays again. You will be able to walk in thankfulness and joy through each day of each new year. Because of Christ, you can live forward-minded, eternity-minded, as you draw closer to Him and come to know Him intimately. With Jesus, darkness can never overcome you because He has defeated darkness, brokenness and death.

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." (Isaiah 9:6)

Savior God, because of You, I have hope to keep me moving forward, one step at a time. I place my life in Your hands, knowing You are a sovereign God with a perfect plan—a plan that is much bigger than I can comprehend. I trust in You, God, realizing now that there is no one else to trust, no one like You. Forgive me for the times I've moved away from You or doubted You. Draw me into Your loving arms and empower me to walk forward in this life with You. Amen.

After the Holidays

The holidays are coming to an end, and the new year is approaching. As you continue to walk forward through the grieving process, you will need help and encouragement. The Bible says we were created to be in relationship with other people: to interact with, care for, encourage and support. God wants us to accept help from other people.

"Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!" (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10)

A GriefShare support group program is a place where you can interact with people who truly know what you are going through.*

"One of the biggest things I learned from my GriefShare group was that other people were hurting like I was," says Mardie. "I was able to learn from them and count on them for support, not just in the holidays but every day. Some of the people in the group have remained good friends to this day and are people I can call on anytime I need somebody. The friends I've made in GriefShare, who absolutely get what's going on, are some of the best people to have around me."

Ask God for wisdom as to whether you should get involved in a GriefShare group, and pray that He will lead you to people who will be a strong support in your life.

"Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken." (Ecclesiastes 4:12)

Lord, thank you for providing a safe place to express my feelings and for guiding me to people who will support me without judgment. Give me the courage to take the step of attending a Christ-centered grief group. In this new year, Father, I pray for an even greater awareness of Your presence, Your help and Your comfort in my life. I know You will take care of me and will help me continue forward on this journey of grief and healing. Thank you.

*To find a GriefShare support group near you, go to www.griefshare.org/findagroup or call 800-395-5755.

Holiday Planning Checklist

To help you organize your thoughts and create a plan for the coming days, first make a list of every activity and tradition that you associate with the holidays. Then, prayerfully consider each item on your list and ask yourself, Do I need to do it this year? How important is this to me and to others in my life? If I choose to do this, how could I simplify it? (List additional items in the blank boxes or on another paper.)

Remember that you only need to choose a few items to do this year! Scale back on the amount of activities you participate in; ask for help in accomplishing some of the tasks you feel you need to do.

	I can't do this, maybe next year.	I need help pulling this off.	I can do it, but I need to scale it back.	I'd like to try and do this the way I always have.
Thanksgiving:				
Prepare Thanksgiving meal				
Visit family & friends				
Participate in other Thanksgiving traditions				
Other				
Christmas:				
Send Christmas cards				
Decorate house				
Shop for gifts				
Go to Christmas parties				
Visit family and friends				
Maintain Christmas Eve traditions				
Maintain Christmas Day traditions				
Other				

How to Write a Grief Letter

As you interact with friends and family members over the holiday season, you will find they sometimes say hurtful words in their attempts to help. Other times they wear you out with their "kind" questions—you often end up repeating the same emotionally draining responses over and over again to different people, especially because the holidays are a time you come in contact with people you don't normally see. Other friends or relatives may barge in and try to take over the task of your healing: "You need to do this, eat this, read this, go here, go there."

A helpful suggestion by H. Norman Wright is to write your family and friends a grief letter coming into the holiday season, or prior to specific holiday get-togethers or events. While you may feel awkward giving someone a grief letter, this will help ease the stress of your situation.

How to write a grief letter:

1. Describe what you have experienced and how you are feeling about it.
2. Let people know what they can expect from you in your current state.
3. Give your friends instructions on what they can do to help during this time. Let them know what is needed and when it is needed.

Give this letter to everyone you know. The people who receive the letter will appreciate knowing how they can better help you, and you will have less stress and more appropriate help suited to your unique grieving style.

If you don't have energy to write, ask someone to help. Specify what you want written and have that person pass it out.

H. Norman Wright shares this sample grief letter in his book, *Recovering from Losses in Life* (Revell, 2006):

Dear Friend (family, pastor, fellow workers ...),

Recently I have suffered a devastating loss. I am grieving and it will take months and even years to recover from this loss.

I wanted to let you know that I will cry from time to time. I don't apologize for my tears since they are not a sign of weakness or a lack of faith. They are God's gift to me to express the extent of my loss, and they are also a sign that I am recovering.