

*Holidays are events many people dread. Whether due to grief, depression, or other emotional difficulties, know what your clients may be feeling and how you can help.*

# *Hope for the Holidays*

*Helping Clients With  
Grief and Depression  
at the Holidays*

BY KATE JACKSON





While the songs, rituals, and traditions of the season suggest that holidays and joy go hand in hand, it's equally true that for many, the holidays and sadness are close companions. Many individuals find themselves temperamentally at odds with the jolly and celebratory atmosphere that characterizes the holidays, perhaps simply because their lives seem lacking in some way. They may be missing distant family, sorrowful because they have few or no relatives or friends with whom to share the holidays, or sad simply because at this time, they somehow feel the weight of unrealized dreams or unfulfilled potential. These feelings of sadness may be particularly intense for individuals who are in the throes of a recent significant loss and still more acute for those with depression that is aggravated by grief.

Intense sadness or depression is unavoidable after any kind of major loss. Kenneth J. Doka, PhD, author of *Disenfranchised Grief*, compares grief to a roller coaster. The bereaved, he says, have their ups and downs, their days when they're doing well, and days when they don't seem to be doing well at all. There are many factors that influence that roller coaster cycle, but the holidays, he suggests, are almost predictable and expected low points.

"Most people view grief as sadness," says Mila Ruiz Tecala, LICSW, DCSW, founder of a private practice in Washington, DC. She observes that although sadness is one of grief's predominant emotions, it is composed of many other emotions, such as anger, guilt, loneliness, disappointment, and betrayal. It would be nice, she says, if all of those feelings came one at a time, but they don't. "Sometimes, they come all at once, and it feels pretty scary, and often that happens at the holidays."

The losses that can produce these grief reactions magnified by the holidays take many forms. Loss is often thought about narrowly in terms of a death, but bereavement may be experienced by anyone who has suffered a major loss, such as divorce, a miscarriage, an abortion, or parents giving up a child through adoption. "Divorce," says Tecala, "may be just as difficult as loss that occurs as a result of death, and people who have divorced are grieving in their own ways." Something dies, she explains, but the bodies are still present, which is sometimes more difficult than when someone dies and there is a burial. One of the problems with divorce in our society, explains Tecala, is that there is no ritual except for the court proceeding. "Our unconscious, however," she says, "doesn't know whether loss is due to death or separa-

tion; it only knows separation. Furthermore, our unconscious is timeless. So if the person had a loss 30 years ago and has not been grieved to that person, it is as if it only happened yesterday. So the cumulative effect of unresolved losses is what pushes the person over the edge."

### *The Season's Sadness Traps*

There are a variety of reasons why the holidays may cause individuals who've experienced loss to feel a multitude of sometimes overwhelming emotions that leave them feeling empty, lonely, and sad.

Holidays are centering moments in our lives, explains Doka, and they're moments that are awash in memories. It's natural, he says, for people to remember particularly poignant past holidays and thus feel loss more keenly. "Often in the holidays, we get lots of subtle and not-so-subtle reminders of the loss. Bereaved individuals may be shopping for holiday gifts and find something perfect for the person whose loss they are mourning. If the loss is relatively recent, not everyone might know, so someone who lost a spouse may still receive Christmas cards addressed to 'Mr. & Mrs. Smith,' or the dentist may send a card to someone's late son," explains Doka, who is a senior consultant to the Hospice Foundation of America and a professor at The College of New Rochelle.

Another great source of pain for those grieving is the holidays' focus on the family. "We turn on the TV, and it's full of all family-oriented movies," explains Doka. "The Waltons are coming back to Walton's Mountain, and the Brady's are having a very Brady Christmas. At these times, we focus on family, whatever family means to the individual," and when a part of the

must suddenly realign their roles and adapt to painful reminders of change.

Individuals experiencing grief, says Doka, feel out of step. "Everyone's saying 'Happy holidays, have a wonderful Christmas or Hanukkah,' and those of us who are grieving don't always feel that way, so it accentuates the fact that we're different in this period." Tecala echoes, "Everyone seems to be so happy, which is the exact opposite of how people are feeling, so it's almost like they're being taunted by all this happiness, and their grief becomes more pronounced." People feel that they're being left out, she explains. "They're there to just watch the world go by, and above all, they feel like their world has stopped while others have gone on, so the holidays tend to intensify their pain.

"Everyone wants you to be happy, but you're not happy," says Tecala, and they want you to do it on their clock, not yours, she adds.

Another reason the holidays tend to intensify grief, suggests Doka, is that they happen in the darkest days of the year. "Whether or not there is something like seasonal affective disorder and a connection between ultraviolet light and emotion, the fact is that people are more isolated in the winter; they're not out as much, they don't have the normal interactive contacts," he says, which only increases the likelihood of sadness.

For many, accentuating this sadness is the fact that their losses are not validated by society. Individuals who experience what is called disenfranchised grief may feel even more removed from the camaraderie of the season and have little or no support for their feelings at this difficult time. "We know that people are attentive

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family is gone, that focus can cut like a knife. Tecala agrees that the holidays are family-oriented, and most people have rituals surrounding the family. All of a sudden, she observes, the family must learn to live with the empty chair. People have roles they play during the holidays, she adds, such as the father who carves the turkey, and in the face of grief, people

to widows who have experienced a holiday—especially the first holiday alone, explains Doka, "But, they might not be attentive to the fact that someone is missing a lover, a life partner, or a member of any of the disenfranchised relationships that people may have." In these cases, he explains, there may not be the same sensitivity, and that sense of isolation may even



grow. According to Tecala, this type of grief might be exaggerated during the holidays by individuals who have had abortions, miscarriages, or have given babies up for adoption. "They all need to be grieved for, but society does not consider them as losses," she observes. "Often they don't have the support they need."

### ***Distinguishing Grief From Clinical Depression***

According to Doka, the holidays are most often periods in which grief is accentuated, and for some of the same reasons, actual depression may be accentuated or grief can easily move into a sustained low. "There is a distinction between grief and depression, but grief can generate depression," he says. "It's crucial, therefore, for professionals to be aware of grief in their clients and to distinguish between grief and depression, be aware of the potential for grief to catapult into a more serious condition, and address each situation accordingly."

"There's a big difference between depression and grief," says Tecala. Most of the symptoms, she suggests, are similar or even identical. "A big difference is that a person who is very depressed has a history of low self-esteem and tends to go further down in mood, whereas someone who is grieving goes up and down and up and down. There's a cycle. Someone who is grieving can experience joy once in a while, but true joy eludes someone who is clinically depressed."

"When I treat people with grief, I usually do a thorough history," explains Tecala. "If a person has had a history of depression or any form of mental illness, they have a tendency to go back to that old way of coping, which is to fall back into depression." Another complication social workers should be aware of is a client who has a history of multiple losses—for example, says Tecala, someone who has experienced several losses in two years, maybe a death, a divorce, a child leaving home for college—all kinds of losses. The multiplicity of these losses is what pushes them beyond endurance.

Although grief and desperation are similar in symptoms, explains Tecala, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* dictates that you not give a diagnosis of a major depressive episode until a person has gone through two months of grieving. Tecala, however, takes a more conservative approach. "I like to give people a much longer time than that because the first two months are really the most difficult, and for the first six months—especially in cases of sudden loss—people are often in shock and are numb."

Tecala stresses the importance of monitoring symptoms. If individuals are having difficulty sleeping, sleeping too much, not eating, crying a lot, can't concentrate, or

losing weight because they have no appetite, they should be evaluated for further treatment, perhaps with medication.

Individuals who have a history of depression prior to experiencing a loss, says Tecala, should be carefully monitored, particularly around the holidays. Pay particular attention, she advises, if they become unable to function or more isolated. Under these circumstances, she says, "I tend to more actively screen for suicidal thinking because sometimes, they're not going to tell you unless asked, and the holidays can push them over the edge if they're already depressed and a loss occurs."

"Grief is not an illness, but it's like a cold and pneumonia. A cold can sometimes develop into something far more serious. Grief can trigger depression, anxiety disorders, and a whole range of other illnesses, so you certainly want to assess all of those. You want to assess if the person is destructive to the self or others. That's a clear anger sign. Another area to assess is a person's ability to function. Has grief really become disabling? It's one thing, especially early in grief, to have sleepless nights, to not be as efficient at work, less focused in the family, or not be eating as well as one might or should. Those are normal and natural, but if they persist, then that's a danger."

Measures such as medication, says Doka, may be appropriate for individuals with a true clinical depression but are not likely to be necessary or useful for individuals coping with grief.

"You can't simply medicate a person because they're grieving," he explains. "There is a legitimate role for medication if a person really is in a sustained depression. If, in fact, grief has become disabling and the individual is not eating or sleeping and can't function at work, then there is a value to antidepressants. Those who are simply experiencing uncomplicated grieving can be helped in simpler ways."

According to Neal Niznan, MSW, from the Cancer Counseling Service at

the University of Pennsylvania, Abramson Cancer Center, combining both grieving the loss of a loved one and the feelings engendered around the holidays can lead to an enhanced expression of depression. With the similarity of symptoms between grief and depression, it would be easy for family, friends, and even trained professionals to try to lift the person out of the depression without acknowledging the issues of grief at its source. One of the tasks inherent in grieving is acknowledging the feelings of sadness and loss and give it voice. Grief is not something we need to run and hide from. As painful as it feels, grief can be felt, expressed, and shared with others in a way that will lead to healing the sense of loss. The process of grieving is something that can be done both alone and with others who share in the grief.

### ***Helping Clients Navigate Holiday Grief***

It's important, suggest experts, to remember that what helps one grieving client may not help another. Each person must use an individual approach, but the key is for the client to remain within his or her own comfort zone.

According to Doka, acceptance and planning are the keys to getting the bereaved through the holidays. You can assist by helping your clients to understand and accept that it's normal and natural to feel as they do. Help them understand, he suggests, that the holidays are tough times and there is nothing wrong with them for experiencing sadness.

"Managing the anticipation of grief during the holidays is often harder than the holiday itself," explains Niznan. "Anticipating what it will be like may lead some to cancel the holiday altogether, fearing that it will be spoiled by intense emotional pain that will drive them deeper into despair. I think the question is not what will the holidays be like this year, but what would I like them

## ***Strategies***

**S**trategies for coping with the holidays begins with being aware of what you are feeling and then choosing how you would like to express those feelings. The grieving individual and those around them need to work together to plan out how they will handle the upcoming holiday. The following points can be considered in managing the holiday season:

- Allow those grieving to call the shots on what would be best for them. Plan out what to include/exclude in the celebration. Do not try to do everything. It takes too much emotional/physical energy you may not have.
- Include the memory of the deceased in a special way.
- Do not isolate others or force them to be part of the celebration if they are not up to it.
- Avoid canceling the holidays.
- Avoid excessive alcohol consumption.

— Neal Niznan, MSW



to be," he says. "Families can come together and plan out what elements of the celebration they would like to include or exclude. Don't avoid mentioning the deceased to protect others from emotional pain. Plans to include the memory of

Trying to decide what to do at the holidays and how to acknowledge or ignore loss can be overwhelming. Says Doka, "I sometimes use what I call the three Cs: choose, communicate your choices, and then sometimes find reasonable compro-

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*Don't avoid mentioning the deceased to protect others from emotional pain, says Neal Niznan, MSW. Plans to include the memory of the deceased in some ritual way (eg, setting a place for them at the table, a moment of silent remembrance) allows others to talk openly about the deceased and eases the grief process.*

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the deceased in some ritual way (eg, setting a place for them at the table, a moment of silent remembrance) allows others to talk openly about the deceased and eases the grief process. I often encourage mentioning the deceased early in the celebration. This 'breaks the ice' and gives others permission to then express their feelings."

Another crucial task for the bereaved at the holidays is to recognize that they have choices. "I always talk about making choices, and it's even a choice to say 'I'm not going to make a choice.'" Often, Niznan explains, people drift into the holidays and drift into events or occasions that they really don't want to participate in. "Someone calls a widow and says 'I'm not taking no for an answer; I want you there this Christmas,' and the widow acquiesces, but it's not really where she wants to be." In his grief groups, Doka begins in September and October to help people think about where they want to be during the holidays, who they want to be with, and where it's safe to be.

"A great part of helping," he says, "is to remind people that they do have choices, even in the midst of their loss, and they can take steps to take care of themselves." There will be a lot of pressure on your clients from well-intentioned people, says Tecala, but it's not advisable, she says, to push people into activities when they aren't ready.

Your clients may want to avoid people for fear of bringing others down during the holidays. But, most experts suggest that isolation is best avoided. Tell your clients, says Doka, to think about who they feel safe with. "Who are the people who aren't going to be embarrassed and if they break down aren't going to call you the next day and say their little display really ruined the holiday?" Ask your clients, "Who is safe and who can tolerate the fact that you're unsafe at this moment?"

mises. So, if you have two young children who want to go to grandma's house because that's what they've always done, but you just can't face it this year, what can you do? Can you stop there for a while? Can a sister take the kids over there for a while? While we must honor our differences, we also must be respectful or at least attentive to the needs of others."

People must do what is comfortable for them, but there are two routes that tend to be counterproductive, says Doka. One is trying to keep the holidays the same as they always have been because nothing will be the same. The other is attempting to circumvent the holidays or ignore or minimize the loss. He recommends that people actively bring their loss into the holiday. In his own life, for example, he does this by creating new rituals. "The first three ornaments we put on our Christmas tree every year are memorial ornaments of my mother, my father, and my godson's father. It's a way of acknowledging and saying 'we miss you' at this time. It might be lighting a candle, it might be offering a toast at Thanksgiving, but often creating a ritual where you acknowledge that loss at the time of the holidays is helpful. When my son and daughter-in-law got married, my mother had recently died, and my daughter-in-law's grandmother had died. Before the ceremony, we lit two candles in their memory, and that was a poignant but good moment because we acknowledged that we would have loved to have them here. Everyone was thinking that, but it gave voice and it named that feeling."

Well-intentioned individuals may attempt to pressure your clients into activities for which they are not ready or may attempt to hasten the grieving process. Encourage your clients to remain within the boundaries of their

own comfort and not to move more quickly through the grief process than they are comfortable traveling. Tecala tells her clients to say, "Thank you for your good intentions, but I'm not ready. I'm working on it." Some people will hear that, some won't. Some people say that they feel like they should pretend, and I tell them that's certainly an option, but the problem with pretending is that they eventually become resentful. So it's better to be honest and say I'm trying my best to just put one foot in front of the other—sometimes that's all you can do."

"People don't get past grief; they travel through it," explains Doka. "Probably the best message for someone trying to help the bereaved is to say, 'Wherever you are, I want to be alongside of you.'" Concludes Niznan: "The holidays can be a way to grieve with others in a communal, supportive fashion. Gathering together with family and friends to celebrate the holidays paradoxically emphasizes the loss of those who are no longer there by their absence and simultaneously provides a forum to express a collective grief among those who care for each other. The holidays are not to be avoided, canceled, or postponed. The celebration can be redesigned to include the memory of the deceased in a way that helps accept the loss and continue the legacy of the individual within the family."



— Kate Jackson is a staff writer at **Social Work Today.**

#### **Client Resources:**

Hospice Foundation of America  
[www.hospicefoundation.org](http://www.hospicefoundation.org)

*How to Go on Living When Someone You Love Dies* by Therese A. Rando

#### **Professional Resources:**

*Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy* by James William Worden

*The Treatment of Complicated Mourning* by Therese A. Rando

*Disenfranchised Grief: New Directions, Challenges, and Strategies for Practice* by Kenneth Doka

*Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*, Eds. Dennis Klass, Phyllis R. Silverman, and Steven Nickman

*Men Don't Cry, Women Do: Transcending Gender Stereotypes in Grief*, by Terry Martin and Kenneth Doka