

A DIFFERENT Christmas THIS YEAR



BY: DR BILL WEBSTER

“It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.”

With these words, Charles Dickens begins his book, “A Tale of Two Cities”, referring of course to the French Revolution.

But many of us might well apply these same words to this upcoming Christmas season. When someone you care about dies, words cannot express the depths of the grief we often experience. It feels like the worst of times.

When my son Steve died in an accident just a few years ago, I wondered if the pain would ever go away. I can tell you honestly that it does diminish, and you find ways of getting through, yet it is a much bigger challenge than people who haven’t been through it often realise.

Why is Christmas “the worst of times” for grieving people?

With the hype of “the season to be jolly”, Christmas, Hanukkah and other festive occasions can be one of the most painful reminders of what we have lost. These celebrations can be a pretty stark reminder of the fact that this special someone will not be here this year. The empty chair at the table or one less present under the tree makes it an emotional roller coaster after a loss, and many folks wish they could just “fast-forward” through the season.



STRATEGIES FOR A MEANINGFUL CHRISTMAS

While everyone has different ways of coping, here are **some ideas** that might help:

- **Remind yourself:** It's natural to feel sad that someone you cared about is not there this year. Many people report experiencing a range of conflicting feelings such as guilt and anger and a myriad of emotions. They may even wonder if they should have Christmas at all! But grief is not a sign of weakness but an indication that you cared; grief is the price we pay for love.
- **Reassure yourself:** Getting together with family and friends may offer an opportunity to remember the good times. Many people have later told me they regretted isolating themselves and refusing to get together with others. It's important to realise in the midst of grief that having fun is not disrespectful or imply that you miss that person any less. It may help to take some time out, to celebrate and feel good about whom this person was to you, while also giving yourself permission to grieve and to feel sad that they are gone.
- **Relive your Memories:** Grief invites us to **remember**, not to **forget**. Christmas is always a time of many memories and it is important to recall these happier days. You may find that nobody seems to want to mention the fact that someone has died. After all, they surmise, "someone might get upset or emotional". Yet denying the reality of the situation is often harder than facing up to it. Grieving people want to talk about it; they just aren't sure others want to hear it. But remember that "Anything that is mentionable is manageable." There is healing in putting our feelings into words.
- **Celebrate the person's life as well as acknowledging their death:** Perhaps you could light a memorial candle at the dinner table, or take some time to share special memories or stories. Humorous incidents recalled can have a special healing quality to them. Try not to ignore the fact that someone is missing this year, for to pretend that nothing has happened is so unnatural, it actually increases the tension.
- **Take Action:** A ritual is defined as "something you **do** when you don't know **what to do**". Find ways to do something ... anything ... over the Christmas season to remember the person and the life you shared. Maybe you could write a letter to the person about how you miss them ... and then write **their** reply back to **you!**
- **Do what you want to do.** Perhaps you might want to start a new tradition to honour and remember your loved one. For example, light a special candle; have everyone share a favourite memory; or get everyone to take part in a favourite holiday activity like attending a concert or going to see Christmas lights. Do something that would make your loved one smile.
- When you're socialising, avoid "should people" who say, "You should do this," or "You should do that." Smile politely and then do what you feel you need to do for yourself. Don't be driven by "ought's" and "should's".
- How can you look after "**you**" this Christmas season? Be gentle with yourself. Do what you need to do and take care of yourself. When you do **anything** positive, it boosts your mental health and helps you feel a bit better about yourself and your situation.

HOW CAN I HELP A GRIEVING PERSON?



"Nobody made a greater mistake than those who did nothing because they could only do a little."
Edmund Burke

There are many ways to make a difference for grieving people as they make the difficult transition into this new world in which they find themselves.

- **Get Involved and Be There:** Often, we are primarily concerned about what we can **do** to assist another, but what is needed is for someone to "be there".
- **Make a specific offer of help:** Ask yourself what the person might need in their unique situation. Make concrete suggestions, such as: "Do you need food, or someone to look after children?; would you like me to drive you somewhere?; Can I go with you to this, or help you with that?"
- **Listen:** Grieving people need to talk and talk. Anything that is mentionable is manageable so allow them to talk while you listen. Simple listening skills such as maintaining eye contact, leaning forward, and nodding your head in understanding encourages the person to open up.
- **Interpret "normal" behaviour:** Grief is not a sickness. It is a normal human reaction to what is always an unwelcome event; a protest against something that has changed their world forever. However, "normal" is different for everyone. Find articles and books on www.griefjourney.com.
- **Give them permission to grieve:** Let them know that it is OK to grieve. To tell a person not to cry or be strong, or to try to change the subject to something more cheerful is telling them their grief and feelings are not acceptable to us. Assure them that we do not mind if they cry or show anger or rant and rave or display any emotions associated with grief.
- **Accept them unconditionally as wounded people:** Grief is like a wound that needs time and attention to heal. It feels like a part of them is missing. So, accept them as they are, which is hurt. Let people know you accept them in their weakness and vulnerability.
- **Don't be afraid to show your own feelings:** You can say, "I find this difficult" or "I'm not sure what to say". By not glossing over the reality of the situation, you help bring about acceptance and empathy. Your grief normalises their grief.
- **Continue support throughout the process:** Grief takes time, usually longer than most people expect. The wonderful support given around the time of the funeral fades away relatively quickly. Your support may be appreciated on the known difficult days like birthdays, Christmas, Valentine's Day, Mother's or Father's Day, by telephoning, or offering an outing
- **Sow Seeds of Hope:** Always encourage the grieving person to hold on to hope that someday the pain will decrease and that life will have meaning again. They may not see it at the moment, but keep reminding them that while they may never "get over it" that they will get through it.

(Dr Bill's booklet "Lost for Words" on how we can help a grieving person after bereavement is available in pdf form in the UK version on our website www.whenlifechanges.com.)

DR BILL'S CONCLUSION

Perhaps, in your circumstances, you are facing this Christmas with some apprehension, and, possibly you might feel like the light has gone right out of your life. Nothing seems quite right, and you wonder if you have the strength to go on.

Remember these Important Principles:

- ▶ Hold on to and focus on what is really important
- ▶ Be thankful for the years you did have with the person and reflect on the memories you still share
- ▶ Celebrate the person's **life** as well as mourning their **death**
- ▶ Enjoy what you **have** as well as grieving what you are **missing**
- ▶ Don't allow looking back at the **past** to spoil what you have in the **present**. Someone may be missing, but are there people who **will** be there this year for whom you can be thankful? They are the **gift**
- ▶ Believe that there are reasons to go on, even though you may not see what they are right now.
- ▶ Believe in people, and in life, in love and laughter, and believe in God, however you understand your spirituality, and have faith in the values and convictions by which you live.
- ▶ Believe in yourself, that your determination will help get you through. Believe that no matter how difficult your circumstances that life is important and can still be meaningful.

And above all, believe in **hope**. People talk a lot about "holding on to hope", but what does it mean? Hope, by definition, is "**The expectation that good is yet to come.**" Trust me, I know from experience after the death of my son that it can seem like your whole life is over. But we have to hold on to hope that even when the circumstances of life don't seem to make any sense or be meaningful, that life can still be good. The one thing we know about life is that "It goes on".

My friends and fellow grievers, no matter how dark your situation may appear to you, remember one thing. Even when there is a spark of hope, that glimmer will always overcome the darkness. It may not banish it completely, but it is never "all dark" as long as there remains one flicker of hope.

And so, as Charles Dickens "Christmas Carol" character Tiny Tim reminds us all again this Christmas, *"God bless us, every one."*

Follow Bill Webster on Facebook and Twitter. Dr Bill also has a UK website at www.whenlifechanges.com.
