



Grieving the death of a loved one is naturally difficult but during the holiday season, it can become overwhelming. It is our wish that this Christmas Memorial evening will help you through this unique and challenging time and allow you to still embrace hope. We wanted to include some practical suggestions as well as remind you to be self-compassionate and seek and accept the support you both need and deserve.

Many of our fellow travelers along this road of grief and loss have shared with us how meaningful it is to set aside time with family and friends during the Christmas season to honor and remember the person they have loved and lost. This sacred time of remembering has actually allowed them to enter into Christmas in a meaningful way for them. We hope that it helps you find peace and joy in this heartfelt time of year.

When Words Fail Use Ceremony

-Unknown



Cardinals are beloved birds for their beauty and bold colour. For many bird lovers, the sight of a cardinal holds special meaning, sometimes evoking a multitude of feelings. Many people have shared with us that they believe the vibrant red birds are an uplifting, happy sign signalling to us that those we have lost live forever by keeping their memory alive in our hearts.

“If ever there comes a day when we can’t be together keep me in your heart. I will stay there forever”

~ Winnie the Pooh

Death ends a Life but not a relationship. Is it possible to have any kind of relationship with someone after they die? Of course. You have a relationship of memory; precious memories, dreams, reflecting the significance of the relationship and objects that link you to the person who died. You are not closing the door on the relationship with the person who died. You don't ever bring the grief over a loved one to a close. You are opening the door to a different relationship. Objects, like Cardinals, give testimony to a different form of a continued relationship. The need to mourn facilitates and encourages you to pursue this relationship.

As cardinals sing their pleasant song, people may recall cherished memories. The beautiful cardinals are a reminder that loved ones will never be forgotten. Cardinals also offer a bright spot of colour in the winter; they are a symbol of hope that if we mourn well we can live well and love well again.

“Memories are my treasures—they carry my story, my song, my light. As I long for peace, I carry my memory torch with me, a vital link in the chain of humanity”

~ Dr Alan Wolfelt

Grief is a holistic experience, it touches us emotionally, physically, cognitively and spiritually. God many times whispers to us through creation. When someone we love dies, it's like a deep hole implodes inside us. It's as if the hole penetrates us and leaves us gasping for air. We mourn losses from the inside out. When we take time to be spiritually nurtured (inside and out) we discover the courage to mourn openly and honestly. Our exploration invites us to slow down and turn inward, it invites us to feel deeply and to believe passionately, it invites us to get to know our authentic self, it invites us to celebrate diversity and invites us to be open to mystery.

“If we mourn well we can live well and love well again.”

~ Dr Alan Wolfelt

The Bible recounts many stories of God using nature as a method of whispering a message of hope and encouragement. In the story of Noah's ark it was a dove that was sent out to determine if the flood waters had receded and if it was safe to disembark. God used a burning bush with Moses to communicate his desire to rescue his people. Many people have indicated that signs and symbols can feel like little Hellos from your loved one. They are a wonderful way for us to stay connected to them, these are things that forever link us to them and them to us.

“Mystery is to be pondered not explained”

~ TS Eliot

We are drawn to stories because stories have power, they touch us, they teach us, they can inspire us and guide us and many times they can reflect life principals.

Sherrie Moffitt shares her story of how a Mysterious Cardinal Became a Divine Reminder

After her husband's death, the bright red bird brought heaven-sent comfort.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

What is that? I turned to face the glass door in my bedroom.



A cardinal, perched on the planter outside, flew up to the glass, bumping its body against it as if trying to get my attention. I'd seen cardinals in the yard before. They were my favorite birds. But in the 25 years I'd lived here, I'd never seen one this close to the house.

My morning visitor was a welcome distraction. For the first time in months, I woke up feeling something besides grief. Exactly two months before, I'd lost Dave, my husband of 40 years, to cancer. We'd married young, and he'd always been my rock. My children and grandchildren supported me the best way they could, but I didn't know how to face life without Dave by my side.

The little cardinal in the window gave me the first sense of peace I'd had since Dave's death. It gave me the strength to run some errands. *Dave would've known how much joy that bird would bring me*, I thought as I paid for my groceries at the store.

Dave knew cardinals were my favorite bird. He always used to point them out to me in the yard. An artist, he had even painted some beautiful cardinal portraits for me. I was almost tempted to

believe Dave had something to do with it. But it was probably just wishful thinking.

I got home and put away my groceries. When I walked into the bedroom, I heard it again. *Tap. Tap. Tap.* The cardinal was back! He cocked his head, his black eyes peering into mine. *Could there be something more going on?*

For the rest of the week, he woke me up in the mornings from his spot on the planter and appeared again at dusk, as if to say good night. He popped up in various other places throughout the day, usually just when I needed some encouragement.

When thunder shook my house, the cardinal sat out in the rain to comfort me through the whole storm.

One Sunday, when I came back from church, I dreaded walking in the front door. The house always felt so lonely at the end of the weekend, the time Dave and I used to set aside to spend together. But my spirits soared when I noticed the bright red bird waiting for me.

Of course, I told my family all about my new friend. My grandchildren especially wanted to see him for themselves. "I can't say for sure when he'll come," I warned them when they came for a visit. "Don't be disappointed if he doesn't happen to be around while you're here."

I shouldn't have worried. The cardinal stayed close by the grandkids throughout the day, as if he wanted to visit. This was just the beginning. For the next three years, the cardinal continued to make regular appearances. He seemed to know just when my grief would hit me, and would show up when I most needed to be uplifted.



One summer evening, I was taking a walk around my property. I was heading up my gravel driveway when I spotted the cardinal on a power line. He didn't usually accompany me on my evening walks, but by now, I knew he might appear anywhere, anytime. *I wonder why he's come to me here now*, I thought.

The cardinal flew a few feet before landing back on the line. Again and again he flew a few feet and stopped, as if trying to keep just ahead of me. Suddenly, he dove off the power line, swooping down and landing on the dark gravel. He was about 15 feet in front of me and—I gasped when I saw it—one foot away from a snake. I would have walked right into it if the cardinal hadn't warned me.

I froze in place. So did the cardinal. It didn't move until the snake had finished crossing my gravel driveway. The cardinal looked back at me, making sure that I was safe, and then, mission completed, flew off into the trees. If there was any doubt about the purpose of the cardinal's visits to me, they disappeared that warm summer evening.

I smiled, watching him disappear among the leaves. The message was clear. God understood my pain and wanted me to feel his presence in a real and tangible way. Although Dave could no longer be by my side, God always would be.

“Hebrews 13:5 Never will I Leave you Nor Forsake you”

~ God

Comfort

from the Latin word *comfortare* meaning to strengthen greatly.

Grief is one of the hardest emotions you'll ever experience. It feels different for everyone, and there isn't a textbook response or a way to know what to expect.

Everyone grieves differently.

You learn that, while the one thing you want most isn't an option, there are other comforts that will help when you need a moment to yourself, or to step away from your emotions and collect yourself at the end of the day, Grief can be exhausting so when you feel up to it try a few of these simple activities. Investing in self care creates the capacity to ride the waves of grief as they wash over and through us.

1. Have a walking meeting with your favorite colleague. Getting outside will feel great, and the endorphins from exercise help too.
2. Go get a treat during your break. You may need a change of scenery, and a dose of one of your favorite drinks or snacks won't hurt either.
3. Find a place that's just yours and go there when you need to catch your breath. When things get overwhelming, having a spot that's all yours that makes you feel safe is a huge help. Whether you need to cry for a minute or stomp your feet, it's okay.
4. Treat yourself to your favorite dinner or dessert. Pampering yourself after a hard day is a good way to remind yourself that there are still things to be enjoyed, especially when you may not feel like eating.
5. Watch your favorite comedy shows. You may not feel like laughing, but you can count on your favorite shows to bring a smile to your face, even if only for a moment.
6. Ignore the news. The news is adding to your stress, even if it's not related to this particular tragedy. It's okay to tune it out for a bit.
7. Take a break from social media. When a tragedy gets sensationalized, it spreads all over social media. When strangers who have nothing to do with it are posting about something that is very personal to you, it can be

hard to process. Unplugging can help you begin to heal.

8. Get out into nature. Whether you are resting on a beach or taking a walk in the woods, breaking up your usual routine will help distract you for a while.
9. Draw a bubble bath or take a long shower. You may not feel like you have the energy to take care of yourself, but you'll feel better when you smell like your favorite soap.
10. Curl up with your favorite book. Books can be treasured friends and a welcome distraction when you're grieving. You may not get as far as you usually would when reading, and that's okay. But being invited into another world, even for a few minutes, is a huge relief.
11. Attend your favorite exercise class. You may be angry and frustrated, and it can help to channel that energy into your workout.
12. Hang out with your loved ones. Friends and family are likely experiencing the same feelings that you are. Being reminded you aren't alone gives you a support system to call when you need help.
13. Let yourself mourn. Whether it's crying, screaming or being silent, it's normal, natural and necessary to release that emotion in whatever way feels right to you. It's healthy to acknowledge your feelings and allow yourself to mourn.
14. Call a loved one. Getting in touch with someone you haven't spoken to in a while, or whose voice you love to hear, will add a sense of stability in an uncertain time.

Finding little ways that energize you or return peace to your day can help you get through this devastating time. Even though it feels like healing will never come, finding ways to pamper yourself will make a profound difference.



Surviving The Holidays

With good reason, holiday seasons are often among the most difficult of times for people who have experienced the death of someone loved and the pandemic has added yet another dimension. Holidays are intended to be times of joy, family togetherness and thankfulness. Yet, after a death, holidays often underscore the absence of the loved one and bring feelings of loss, sadness, and emptiness. While there are no simple guidelines to follow that will make it easier to cope with the grief you may experience during the holiday season, perhaps the following suggestions will make this more bearable.

1. Realize that the anticipation of pain during the holidays may be worse than the actual day.
2. Be aware and tolerant of your inability to function at optimum levels during the holidays. Feelings may leave you fatigued with low energy. Don't set unrealistic expectations for yourself. Break plans and tasks into smaller, more manageable chunks, goals you can achieve.
3. Acknowledge and accept your feelings. Sadness and tears are normal and do not ruin the holiday for you and others. Sometimes you may have feelings of guilt if you do find yourself enjoying some of the festivities. This does not mean you are forgetting your loved one, you are simply feeling a sense of being alive. Be compassionate with yourself and let emotions happen.
4. Communication - decide with your family what is important to make the holidays meaningful and bearable. Re-evaluate priorities and re-examine family traditions. Ask yourself: Do I really enjoy doing this, or am I doing it just to be doing it in the spirit of tradition? Would Christmas be Christmas without it?
5. Don't be afraid of change. Realize that doing things differently this year does not make it a

permanent change. Create new traditions; alter old customs slightly so that they don't highlight the absence of the loved one. Below are some suggestions from families who have already experienced a holiday time without their loved one:

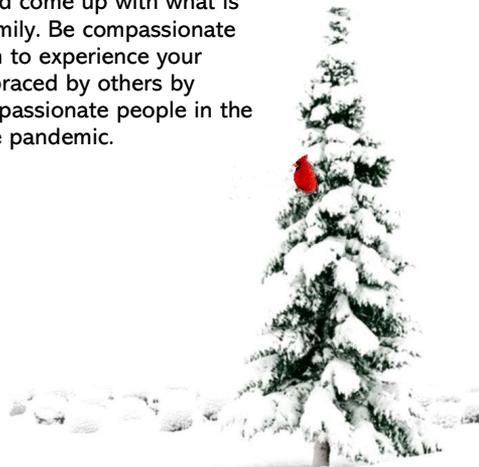
- have holiday dinners at different times from past years.
- open presents on Christmas Eve instead of Christmas morning.
- let children take over decorating and cookie baking.
- prepare different holiday dishes.
- celebrate holidays at another family member's home.
- Prepare a favorite recipe that was special to the person you have lost

6. Plan ahead. Schedules often help in not being caught off-guard which may result in fear, panic and anxiety. Be flexible in making schedules and plans and allow for changes. Make shopping lists so that on a "good" day you can get a lot done and feel productive. If getting out to shop is the problem right now either because of how you are feeling or Covid 19 guidelines, perhaps do your shopping online.
7. Embrace your treasure of memories. Memories bring sadness, but they also bring the warmth of remembrance. They are an important part of your life and should not be ignored. Include your loved one in conversations; reminisce about past holidays you shared together. This is part of the grief process necessary for healing to occur, it does not stop just because it is a holiday. In fact, the holidays usually intensify it. Give yourself permission to have joy when you can and grieve when you have the need.
8. Rethink the meaning of the holidays. Explore your faith and belief systems. If these have been an important part of your life, use them to draw hope and strength

9. Remember and honor your loved one with a memorial.
 - *place a special ornament on your Christmas tree.
 - *have a memorial candle to be lit during the holiday season
 - *make a donation to a favorite charity in memory of your loved one.

10. If you feel you have the energy and are ready within yourself, do something for someone else. Although you may feel deprived because of your loss, reaching out to another can bring you some measure of comfort and fulfillment. Many of the volunteer opportunities have changed because of the pandemic but you may find a way to reach out safely during the holidays
 - *supply food to a needy family.
 - *drive a route for Meals on Wheels during the holidays
 - *charitable organizations may have suggestions that are Covid safe.

These holidays will be different, and for grieving people it is easy to become overwhelmed. There are no right or wrong answers; no absolute rules. Everyone handles grief differently, what works for some may not work for others. COMMUNICATION with your family is so important. Talk it over and come up with what is most comfortable for you and your family. Be compassionate with yourself, give yourself permission to experience your feelings, and allow yourself to be embraced by others by surrounding yourself with caring, compassionate people in the ways you have found to be safe in the pandemic.



Wishing all the best
to you and your family
this holiday season.

Ros and Glenn
And The Coping Centre Staff

