

Families Coping With Loss at the Holiday Season Should Honor The Memory of Their Loved One and Look to the Future

MANHATTAN -- The holidays are a time of great emotion: the stress of tight finances and finding that perfect gift; the joy (or more stress) of spending time with family; the pressure of having too much to do in too short a time. And when a family adds in the loss of a loved one to this emotional mix, it gets even more overwhelming.

Nancy O'Conner, instructor and clinical director for the Family Center at Kansas State University, said that to deal with the death of a member, families must find a way to talk about that person during the holidays and create new traditions, while not forgetting about old rituals that honor the memory of their loved one.

O'Conner said the holidays are a particularly difficult time for those dealing with a loss because holidays are celebrated by a significant part of the population; the celebration is all around them.

"This makes it challenging for the family because it heightens their sense of loss and sense of being different," she said. "Holidays are often tense times anyway, and then you add a loss and the emotion can become even greater."

The first big holiday after a death in the family is part of the grieving/healing process, O'Conner said. Some families think not celebrating will somehow help because they are not feeling in the holiday spirit anyway.

"What happens is they decide not to participate in the holiday traditions that gave them so much pleasure in the past," O'Conner said. "Many of the traditions center around others and when they don't participate, they can become isolated, thus, intensifying the loss."

On the other hand, rigidly maintaining everything the same as it was is a way of avoiding dealing with the loss. O'Conner said a combination of old and new traditions helps everyone to move on while honoring the memory of the person who has died.

"Developing new rituals that capture both the loving memories of the person as well as the sense of loss allows families to also begin to experience healing because it recognizes the loss and focuses on the future," she said. "It is also important, in the rituals and traditions, to speak about the person who has died and talk about prior celebrations that were joyous. There needs to be a combination of old and new that honors the memory of the person who has died but also allows everyone to move forward."

Often families have memories of how the person who died contributed to making the holidays special. O'Conner said when her father died, no one knew how to cook the holiday meal -- he had always done it.

"That year we laughed about how the stuffing was missing something and how my sister bought gravy in a jar," she said. "This is a simple example of how important the memories are. Our laughter was a way of honoring him and knowing that we needed to figure out how to do this. Since then we have gotten better at managing this meal."

O'Conner said that an important thing families can do at the holidays is spend time with loved ones and share memories of the person who has died.

"Not talking about the person is like pretending they didn't have an impact on your life; it can be very isolating," she said. "The most important thing that friends and family can do is to create an atmosphere that welcomes talk about the person who died and supports everyone as they are remembering the person."

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**Source: Nancy O'Conner, 785-532-2220, conner@humecc.ksu.edu
News release prepared by: Michelle Hall, 785-532-6415**

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