



The Empty Chair: Grief and the Holidays

By Evelyn Pechter, PsyD

Grief and the holidays... what a paradox! They just don't feel or sound like they go together, do they? Yet, here you are, facing the holidays while you're grieving. Unfortunately, grief and the holidays are meshed together in ways that feel inexplicable and symbolic.

Our old memories need nurturing, while new memories are beginning to evolve into the "new normal." At first, those old memories can be so painful that you might attempt to stay away from them. Other times, they might feel comforting and give you a sense of closeness to your beloved and family. There is no right way to do it. Just listen and follow your heart. The new memories will begin to birth and help you find your way.

Grieving in community helps you to discover and seed those new memories — discoveries

that come from sharing, exploring and listening. Creating a plan, such as inviting friends to your home or attending an event in your community, is a good way to start. If you avoid people or stay isolated too often, you

only get better at avoiding rather than better at being in community. Yet, in early grief you may choose to be alone.

You'll know what's right for your heart this year.

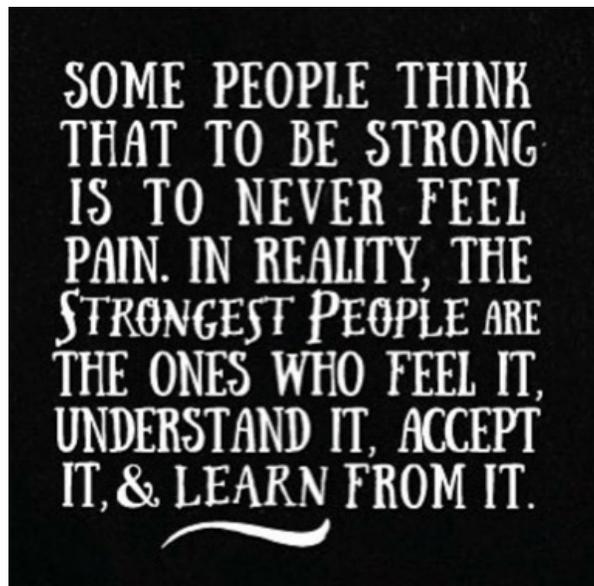
Inevitably, there is that empty chair. It can be a beacon of light and a reminder of blessings, but it's also a reminder that your loved one, who

always sat there, is no longer here.

It might be helpful to find ways to soften that empty chair and its symbolism.

These are a few examples:

Include your family and decorate the chair. It might bring smiles while honoring your loved one.



Place notes on the chair from everyone at the table, let them know they're loved and missed.

Light a candle in honor of the loved missing from that empty chair.

Spend a moment verbally acknowledging your loved one and then allow yourself to be with others at the table.

Sit in the chair as a way of remembering, feeling close and honoring.

Recently a group member, when discussing the "firsts" of holidays and also other events during the first year of loss, asked "will the second time be any different than the first?"

The answer is probably yes. The anticipation you felt during the first holiday season will

not be as much on your mind, at least not as intensely, during the second and third holiday seasons. It's often the anticipation that is more anxiety provoking than the actual holiday event.

It can be helpful to remind yourself on particularly rough days, when you are sure you can't possibly endure the holidays, that your track record for getting through rough days is 100 percent. That reminder may help you to change the way you're thinking and help you to find room inside to soften and somehow know that somehow you will get through. The old memories will eventually be soft reminders of the blessings of your relationship instead of just the pain of the loss.