

Special Occasions



about grief

Birthdays, Christmas, anniversaries, Mother's Day, Father's Day and other religious celebrations and special occasions can all be particularly difficult times after a loved one has died.

Making plans in advance and discussing with others who may also be anticipating an approaching event can make it easier to get through what can be a tough time.

Sometimes the anticipation of approaching events can be more difficult than the actual date or occasion itself.

It can also be helpful to remember that others around you may feel differently as occasions and events are approaching. Allowing space and time for each person to mark occasions in their way can be important.

Read through these suggestions and think about what you need to do in preparation. Not all of these ideas will be appropriate for you or your situation.

You may decide that you do not want to do anything at these times. It is not so important whether or not you do something, but it can be important that you have made a decision.

Things to think about as you approach the birthday of the person who has died

It is possible that this will always be a significant day for you, but approaching the first birthday after the death can be daunting for some.

You might like to talk about the date either with other family members or friends. Remind those who may not know the date, so they may support you more at this time.

Hold a gathering

You may not feel like a party, but ask a group of friends around who knew the person who died. Ask them all to bring something that reminds them of that person – it may be something physical or perhaps a story or poem.

Make a birthday card

Ask others to join in and create something that reflects what that person meant to each of you. Imagine what you want to tell that person right now and reflect this in the card.

Things to think about as you approach your own birthday

The focus of your own birthday may have changed significantly since the person in your life died. You may have mixed emotions, a feeling of dread, not wishing for the day to happen.

Tell others what you would like to happen on this day

If you don't want people to acknowledge the day, let them know. However, there are some things you might like to plan ahead and do.

You might like to go a favourite spot you shared with your person who died, either alone or with someone who will support you. You might like to buy yourself a gift

Support After Suicide

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A program of
Jesuit Social Services

similar to what the person who died may have given to you in the past.

Because it is all your choice you might just like to light a candle and play gentle music all day. It is more important that you have made some preparations and planned it, rather than what you actually do.

Things to think about as you approach Christmas

The Christmas tree: will you have one or not? Discuss your thoughts with family members and friends if you wish. If you do decide to have a tree, perhaps you could decorate it in a way which remembers your loved on. You could place symbols or mementos on it.

Where will you celebrate Christmas: Will it be the same place as usual or do you want to make it different this year? It might be a good opportunity to try something different; a picnic on the beach, a BBQ in the hills or a meal at a restaurant.

Christmas dinner: Perhaps you could place a favourite flower, plant, or a candle or another object on the Christmas table. Make a toast to the person who has died.

Christmas cards: If you don't feel like writing cards an alternative might be to write one letter, have it copied and send it out. Also, it's OK not to send cards if you decide not to.

Presents: This could be done differently this year. Work out what feels comfortable for you. You might still want to buy a gift for the person who has died – consider making a donation to their favourite charity.

More things to consider when...

Approaching the first anniversary

- don't expect too much of yourself or other family members. It can be a difficult time and remember there is no right or wrong way of doing things

- get rid of all the 'shoulds'. Do what is most important for you and your friends and immediate family.

You may like to:

- visit the cemetery or a special place you shared together
- hold a gathering of special people to celebrate the life of the person who died. Bring photos and mementos
- light a candle for the day
- play music which was special to the person who died.

Some more ideas...

- attach a card or message to a helium balloon and release it
- plant a garden or some special flowers or shrubs in a special place
- make or buy a new frame for your favourite photograph
- write a letter, a poem or a song
- create a special CD of music or video
- create a special meal, prepare and eat your loved one's favourite meal
- begin to make a memory box in which to keep things that remind you of the person—photos, shells, jewellery etc.

Whatever the plans that you make, it is important to let family and friends know that everything may have to be changed at the last minute. If you have chosen to be with others you may suddenly decide that you would like to be alone, or vice versa.

There is no right or wrong way to do it; it can be helpful to build in flexibility so that people do not take it personally and become offended.

It is also good to listen to yourself and your body. If you become tired, then rest. If you need to go home from an event, then that's OK.

Some of these days can be very difficult. In summary, a good approach is to listen to yourself, be flexible, accept what you need, and also the needs of others, and communicate as openly and straightforwardly as you can with those closest to you. ■