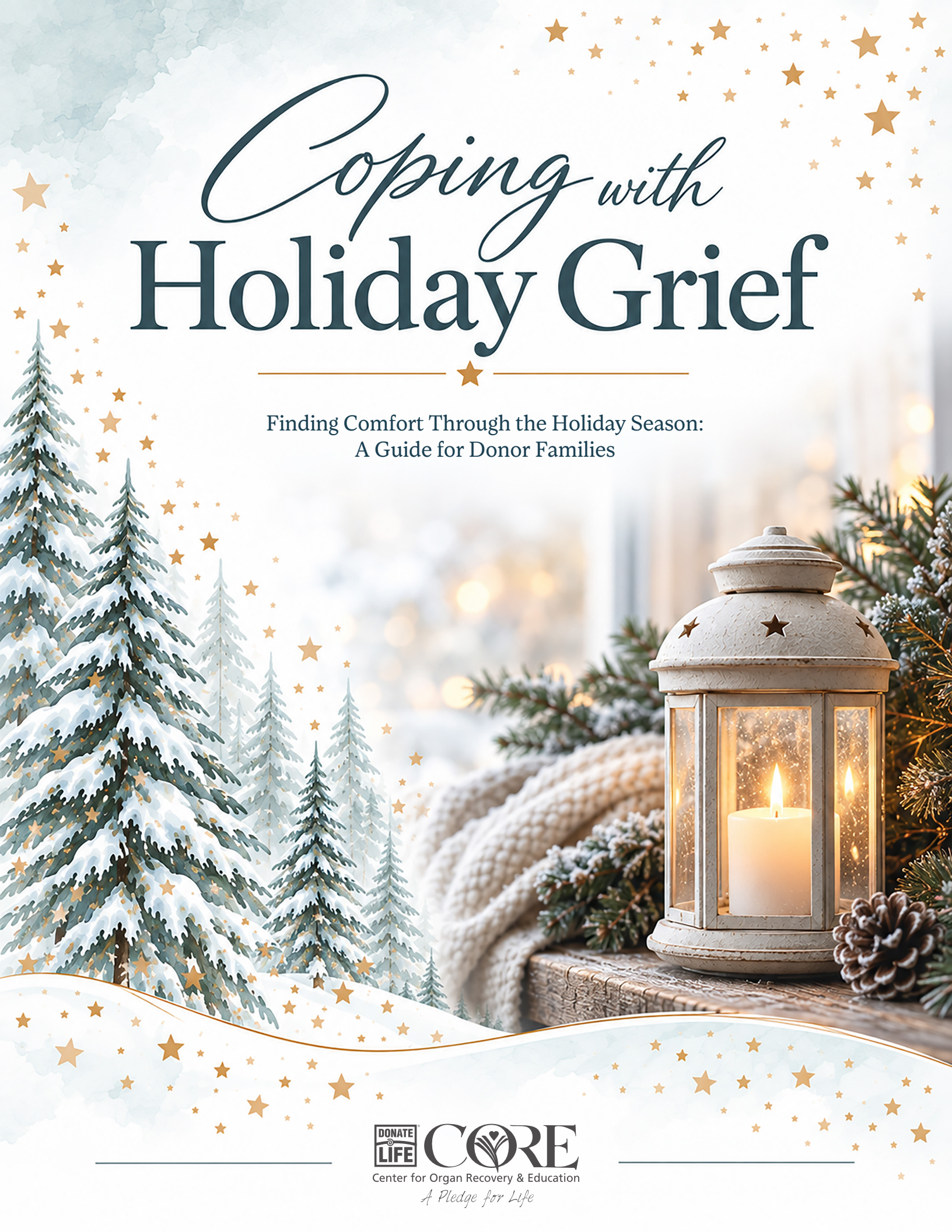




Coping with Holiday Grief

Finding Comfort Through the Holiday Season:
A Guide for Donor Families



Center for Organ Recovery & Education

A Pledge for Life



A MESSAGE FROM

CORE PRESIDENT & CEO

For many families, the holidays bring joy, tradition and time together. But when someone you love is missing, this season can also make that absence feel especially present. A familiar song, an empty seat at the table or a tradition you once shared can bring memories rushing back. Sometimes those memories bring comfort. Sometimes they bring sadness. Often, they bring both.

There is no right way to grieve, and there is no timeline for grief. Whether this is your first holiday season without your loved one or many years have passed, I hope you will give yourself permission to experience this season in whatever way feels right.

At CORE, our commitment to donor families does not end with donation. Our Donor Family Services team is here to support you throughout the year and especially during times that may feel difficult. In the pages ahead, you will find information about holiday grief support, remembrance activities and other resources that may bring comfort to you and your family.

You can also call us at 800-DONORS-7 (800-366-6777) and ask to speak with a member of our Donor Family Services team. Our private Donor Family Support Group on Facebook offers another way to connect with people who understand the unique experience of donation, loss and remembrance. Information about joining the group can be found later in this booklet.

As I experience my first holiday season as CORE's President & CEO, I am especially mindful of the families who have entrusted us with the stories and legacies of the people they love. I have already had the privilege of meeting some of you, and I look forward to meeting many more.

Your loved ones are part of CORE's story, and we are honored to remember them alongside you. However you choose to spend this holiday season, I hope there are moments when the memories bring more smiles than tears, moments when you feel surrounded by people who care and moments when you are reminded that your loved one's life and legacy continue to matter.

On behalf of everyone at CORE, I wish you and your family peace, comfort and meaningful moments of remembrance this holiday season.

Deborah Maurer

Deborah Maurer, RN, MBA
President & CEO
CORE



CORE

Center for Organ Recovery & Education

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INSIDE THIS

Issue

- 3 Coping with Holiday Grief
- 4 Holiday Remembrance Activities for Grieving Children
- 5 The 12 "R's" of Handling Holiday Grief
- 6 Changing Holiday Traditions: Keeping Holiday Values
- 7 Finding Your Holiday "Why"
- 8 Find Support Online
- 9 Connect. Remember. Honor.
- 10 Checklist of Traditions: Then and Now
- 11 Keeping the Memory Alive

*"Different traditions.
The same enduring love."*



Coping ^{with} Holiday Grief

After someone important dies, holidays are never the same. Things you once enjoyed may become triggers for sadness. Let CORE help you navigate this time.



SCAN TO SEE GRIEF
SUPPORT RESOURCES

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR HANDLING THE HOLIDAYS

by Laura Petherbridge



ACCEPT

Accept the difficulty of this time of year and your loss. Remind yourself that it's a season and it will pass.



SOCIALIZE

Socialize instead of hibernate. Feelings of grief may tempt you to isolate, but consider going out, even if it's only for a short time. You can also invite friends into your home if that feels more manageable.



LOWER

Lower your expectations. Movies and songs can paint an unrealistic picture of the holidays.



TRIMMING

Trimming may be too much. If holiday decorating will cause too much pain, don't do it this year. Put the decorations aside for another time.



GET UP AND MOVE

Take care of your physical well-being. Healthy foods can give you strength, and exercise can help reduce stress. Even better if you're outdoors enjoying the sunshine.



SHOP

Shop online if going to the mall is too stressful.



PLAN

Have the phone number of a faith leader, close friend or family member already stored in your phone. Make the commitment to call someone if difficult thoughts become overwhelming.



SET BOUNDARIES

Clearly explain to your family and friends what you are capable of doing this year and what you aren't. Don't let others pressure you into taking on more than you can handle.

Holiday Remembrance Activities for Grieving Children

by Sarah Cordiero

Holiday excitement knows no bounds during childhood. The anticipation of holiday gifts, sugary sweets, bright decorations, family traditions, time spent with relatives and school vacation is enough to fuel a highly charged, magical holiday experience that sticks with us forever. But grieving children may need some nontraditional holiday remembrance activities to help combat the holiday blues.

Children dealing with the loss of a loved one may not be in the emotional space to spread holiday cheer, especially if this is the first holiday their loved one will be absent.

The biggest barrier to appropriately allowing children to express their emotions during the holidays is the tendency to avoid talking about heavy or sad subjects during what is supposed to be a joyous time. It may seem easier not to focus on the person who has died, but adults close to grieving children should take the lead.

There are several holiday exercises that can be incorporated into your traditions to honor the child's loved one while keeping the spirit of celebration, their memory and their love present. These activities are often beneficial for the whole family.

Ideas to help children remember the loved ones they can't be with this holiday season:



MAKE A MEMORY BOOK

Make a memory book with the child and give them a chance to speak freely about past holidays with their loved one.



MAKE A FAVORITE DISH

Include some of their favorite holiday dishes in your family meal.



SHARE FAVORITE STORIES

Engage the whole family in a remembrance conversation by sharing favorite "remember the year when..." stories.



GIVE TO A MEANINGFUL CAUSE

Donate to a charity or cause that was close to the loved one's heart.



LIGHT A CANDLE

Keep a candle lit in the loved one's memory during the holiday season.



VOLUNTEER

Volunteer with an organization or cause that was meaningful to your loved one.



SET A PLACE AT THE TABLE

Set a place for the person at the table during the holiday meal to acknowledge that they will forever be loved and present in your life.



LISTEN TO FAVORITE SONGS

Listen to their favorite holiday songs.



Children experience grief differently than adults, and it's important to remember that young people don't always have the emotional tools or words to express their feelings. The best thing supportive adults can do is listen, let them know it's OK to feel their emotions and create space for memories to be an active and accepted part of the conversation.



The 12 "R's"

of Handling Holiday Grief

1

REALIZE

that the holidays will be difficult. REALIZE that this is a new holiday, unlike any previous one.

7

REFLECT

on things that are meaningful to you and were meaningful in your relationship.

2

RESIST

the temptation to believe you can simply ignore the holiday and it will "go away." Also, RESIST the temptation to isolate yourself completely.

8

RECONNECT

spiritually with your special person.

3

RECOGNIZE

that each person affected by a loss may react differently than you.

9

REMEMBER

to be kind to yourself.

4

RECALL

the memories of your relationship with your special person.

10

REASSURE

yourself and those around you that what you are experiencing is part of grieving.

5

RELEASE

your emotions.

11

REACH OUT

to someone else.

6

REDEFINE

traditions.

12

REST

because grief work is exhausting.

Changing Holiday Traditions;

Keeping Holiday Values

by Litsa Williams

Holidays and special days occupy such a unique space in our minds and memories. I don't remember what I did last Wednesday, but I remember the feelings of Thanksgiving three decades ago. I remember who was there, where we were, sights and smells, feelings of comfort, family and love. Holiday traditions of the past stick with us.

Whether we are looking back or forward to holidays in the future, we often go straight to the details. We remember the who, when and where of holidays. We think back to the homes we were in, the people around our holiday tables and the things we shared. When we look to holidays coming up, the plans we make focus on the same: who we will gather with, where we will go and what we will do.

It makes sense that we find comfort in these details, rituals and traditions. Traditions and rituals connect us to the past. They give us a sense of predictability. Traditions situate us in our families and our histories. They give us a sense of belonging and stability.

After a loss, traditions big and small sometimes have to change. Part of coping with the holidays as we grieve is planning for the traditions we will keep, those we will change and those we will leave behind.



A Refocus on the “Why”

In those moments when all we can see is how much things have changed or the traditions we can't carry forward, it can be hard to see anything else. We often think that if the holidays can't be the way they always were, they can't be meaningful.

No matter what happens, the holidays may be hard and bittersweet. Losing traditions is never easy, even when we adapt. Changes in our lives may mean we can't gather with the same people, go to the same places or celebrate in the same ways we once did.

This is where the “why” becomes crucial. When we ask “why” and look at our holiday values, we can shift our focus from the things that have to change to the things we can retain.



Traditions may change.
What matters most to you doesn't have to.

CONTINUED →

Finding Your Holiday "Why"



When traditions have to change,
your values can help guide what comes next.

Values

Values underpin countless areas of our lives, giving us a sense of meaning and purpose. Sometimes we are very conscious of our values. Other times, we get so caught up in what we're doing that we forget why.

Taking time to reconnect with our values can shift this focus. It can remind us of the meaning and purpose behind the traditions and rituals that mean so much, even when those traditions have to change.

Values can serve as a compass. When the path we were on disappears, our values can serve as a north star. The specific path still might not be clear. We might take some twists and turns. But by staying connected with our values, we can still move in a direction that feels consistent with the meaning and purpose in our lives.

Holiday Values

The thing about values is that they are different for each of us. The values that guide your holidays are unique to you and your family.

The process is simple enough: Sit down, either alone or with family, and start listing the values that are an important part of your holidays.

Next, get creative. Start listing ways, big and small, that you can connect with those values. Keep in mind that it may look totally different than years past. There are no rules, and the holiday may take a very different shape.

But with values at the core, the what, where, when and how become less important. The values provide continuity. They can begin to provide a sense of meaning and belonging even as we shift our traditions.



Williams, Litsa. "Changing Holiday Traditions; Keeping Holiday Values." Dec. 14, 2020.

WHAT MATTERS MOST TO YOU?

Family Generosity Giving
Faith Spirituality Remembrance
Home Reconnection Food
Tradition Legacy Comfort
Friendship Service



Value Review

Once you have made your list, begin a list associated with each value. On each list, write down things that connect with that value that you might do for the holiday. All ideas are fair game, no matter how far outside the box they are. Some may be traditions that you can continue. At this point, don't edit or filter any ideas out.

Once you have at least an idea or two for each, you can make decisions, narrow things down and expand on your ideas. Some may be personal rituals and traditions. Others may be family traditions and rituals to be decided together.



Keep a Wide Open Mind

If it's a taco bar for Christmas because that was your loved one's favorite meal, then do it. Maybe movies and board games are what bring comfort. Then movies and board games it is.

If volunteer service was always part of your holidays but your usual opportunity is no longer available, get creative. Find another organization that could use your help or find a way to informally serve and support people you know.

Just remember, there is no one way and there is no right way. Though at the holidays we often focus on family traditions, personal rituals in grief can be just as meaningful. If you keep your values at the center, no matter what, where, when and how you spend your holidays, you will have that "why" at the center.

Find Support Online

Grief does not follow a schedule, and support should be available when you need it. These resources are available to CORE donor families wherever they are in their grief journey.

Taylor's Gift ♥

Taylor's Gift Grief Support Program

Navigating grief after the loss of a loved one can feel overwhelming, and no one should have to do it alone. Taylor's Gift offers free grief support for families of organ, eye and tissue donors, including donor-in-spirit families.

Founded by the Storch family in memory of their daughter, Taylor, Taylor's Gift understands the unique emotions that come with loss and donation. Their Grief Support Program is designed to provide compassionate care, connection and understanding when you are ready.

Support through Taylor's Gift may include:



One-on-one connection with a Caring Guide



Opportunities to connect with other donor families



Helpful resources and gentle guidance along your grief journey

CORE is proud to share this resource with our donor families. If you feel ready to explore additional support, we encourage you to learn more and connect with Taylor's Gift.



Visit CORE's Grief Support resources at:

core.org/donor-families/grief-support



CORE
GRIEF SUPPORT
RESOURCES



CORE Donor Family Services

You can also connect directly with CORE's Donor Family Services team for support, resources and opportunities to remember and honor your loved one.

1-800-DONORS-7 (800-366-6777)

Connect. Remember. Honor.

Whether you want to share your loved one's story or connect with others who understand the unique journey of a donor family, CORE offers online spaces created with you in mind.



CORE

Gallery of Heroes

The Gallery of Heroes is an online memorial where donor families can share stories and photos celebrating the lives of their loved ones and recognizing them as heroes who gave the gift of life.

The Gallery of Heroes is available on smartphones, tablets and desktop computers and was created so donor families and friends can easily upload stories and photo tributes, helping keep the legacy of their loved ones alive. Family and friends can also make a monetary donation in memory of a donor through their tribute page.

Elements of the Gallery of Heroes are prominently displayed in the lobby of CORE's headquarters, further honoring those featured and creating a welcoming environment for visiting donor families and friends.

Create a tribute or visit
the Gallery of Heroes:
coreheroes.org



GALLERY
OF HEROES



Donor Family Facebook Group

The CORE Donor Family Support Group on Facebook provides a safe space for donor families to connect with and support one another along their grief journey. Use this group to share feelings, experiences and tips for coping with grief and to honor those who save and heal lives through donation.

The Facebook group is private and visible only to members. No one outside the group can see who is a member or what is posted. Membership is limited to donor family members and is by invitation after completing the required form. You must have a Facebook account to join.

If you would like to join the CORE Donor Family Support Group on Facebook, please review the Disclaimer and Terms of Use. After agreeing to them, you will be directed to the form to join the group.

Learn more or request to join:

core.org/donor-family-facebook-group



DONOR FAMILY
FACEBOOK GROUP



Checklist of Traditions: Then and Now

You don't have to make every holiday decision at once. Use this checklist to think about what you want to keep, what you may want to change and what you're comfortable letting go this year.



Holiday Meals and Gatherings

- ☐ Continue as usual
- ☐ Host a meal at home
- ☐ Go out for a meal
- ☐ Have a potluck (ask everyone to bring a dish)
- ☐ Have it catered
- ☐ Share a favorite recipe or prepare a special meal
- ☐ Enjoy a meal on a different day
- ☐ Change the menu or try a new cuisine
- ☐ Change the time of the meal
- ☐ Change the type of gathering (for example, sit-down, buffet or casual)
- ☐ Change seating arrangements
- ☐ Set a place for your loved one and place a candle, flower or meaningful item
- ☐ Eat in a different room or a smaller setting
- ☐ Donate your time or a meal to a local food pantry or community organization
- ☐ Other: _____



Holiday Cards and Greetings

- ☐ Continue as usual
- ☐ Condense your list
- ☐ Sign your name(s) and then your loved one's name with a symbol such as a heart or halo
- ☐ Include the obituary or memorial card
- ☐ Write a holiday letter or share a favorite memory
- ☐ Send e-cards instead of printed cards
- ☐ Make a donation in your loved one's name instead of sending cards
- ☐ Don't send cards
- ☐ Send cards for other holidays you observe (for example, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, Eid, Diwali or New Year)
- ☐ Other: _____



Decorations

- ☐ Continue as usual
- ☐ Display decorations for the holidays you observe (for example, Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa or other traditions)
- ☐ Condense your decorating
- ☐ Ask someone else to decorate for you
- ☐ Change your decorations
- ☐ Have family make special ornaments or decorations in memory of your loved one
- ☐ Ask the children to help decorate
- ☐ Use alternative décor, such as lights, candles or symbols that are meaningful to you
- ☐ Change the type of tree or use a different display (such as a menorah, kinara or other items)
- ☐ Don't decorate
- ☐ Other: _____



Holiday Music

- ☐ Continue as usual
- ☐ Choose only some selections
- ☐ Listen to music from the holidays you observe (for example, Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa or other traditions)
- ☐ Include songs that were meaningful to your loved one
- ☐ Listen and allow yourself to express your emotions
- ☐ Avoid listening to holiday music
- ☐ Create a special playlist in memory of your loved one
- ☐ Other: _____



Gifts and Giving

- ☐ Continue as usual
- ☐ Shop online
- ☐ Shop before holiday decorations are up
- ☐ Make your gifts
- ☐ Give small keepsakes or pictures of your loved one
- ☐ Shop alone
- ☐ Shop with family or friends
- ☐ Have a list of gifts prepared before shopping
- ☐ Shop in only one store or support local/small businesses
- ☐ Have someone else wrap your gifts
- ☐ Give a gift in memory of your loved one to a charity, school, library, place of worship, animal shelter or family in need
- ☐ Buy yourself something your loved one may have bought you
- ☐ Eliminate gift-giving
- ☐ Other: _____



Other Holiday Traditions

- ☐ Continue as usual
- ☐ Bake cookies or other treats
- ☐ Buy cookies or other treats
- ☐ Ask others to bake for you
- ☐ Don't have cookies or treats
- ☐ Attend a religious or cultural service (for example, church, synagogue, mosque, temple or other place of worship)
- ☐ Have a personal service or time of reflection at home
- ☐ Visit the gravesite
- ☐ Light a candle in remembrance
- ☐ Open gifts on a different day or at a different time
- ☐ Attend holiday parties or community events
- ☐ Decline invitations to parties
- ☐ Visit relatives or take a trip
- ☐ Volunteer or participate in a service project
- ☐ Start a new tradition
- ☐ Other: _____

Keeping the Memory Alive

There are many ways to make space for your loved one during the holidays. Choose what feels meaningful to you and your family, whether that means continuing a tradition, creating something new or simply taking time to remember.



Create

MAKE A HOLIDAY MEMORY BOOK

Have family members write favorite holiday stories and place them in a three-ring binder with holiday photos that include your loved one.

MAKE A MEMORY BOX

Fill a special box with memorabilia of your loved one.

CREATE A KEEPSAKE

Let children or grandchildren choose something that belonged to their loved one and wrap it in holiday paper. Include a personal note about the keepsake.

MAKE A SPECIAL ORNAMENT

Purchase or make a holiday ornament in memory of your loved one.

CREATE A REFLECTION BOX

Purchase a recipe box and label it "What I've Learned About Living From..." Place 3-by-5-inch cards inside with the heading "I have learned that..." and invite family members to fill them out. Keep the box somewhere it can be revisited often.



Remember Together

HANG A SPECIAL STOCKING

Have family members fill it with notes to your loved one.

SHARE A MEMORIAL DINNER

Prepare your loved one's favorite holiday food and offer a toast in their memory.

SHARE MEMORIES

Talk together about birthday memories, holiday memories, happy memories, sad memories and silly memories.

PLAY A MEMORY/BUBBLES GAME

Each time someone shares a memory, have them blow bubbles into the air.


*Their love
continues to bring
us together.*



Honor

LIGHT A CANDLE

Keep a lighted candle in memory of your loved one at the holiday table.

CREATE A SCHOLARSHIP

Create a scholarship fund to help keep your loved one's memory alive.

PLANT A TREE

Plant a tree in honor of your loved one.



*"Different
traditions.
The same
enduring love."*



Looking for More Support? Recommended Reading for Holiday Grief

Books can offer comfort, perspective and practical guidance for navigating grief during the holidays and other special [occasions](#).

Scan the QR code to explore CORE's recommended reading for adults, families and children.



RECOMMENDED
READING



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