



Dear Family,

Life after the loss of your dearly loved child is difficult on the best of days. However, when the holidays roll around, it can seem like an impossible thing to get through. At times you may feel as if you are tiptoeing in a minefield full of grief bombs just waiting to explode with one wrong step.

We know.

We, too, are bereaved parents. We have had to muddle our way through the holidays without the physical presence of one or more of our children. The first holiday season can feel especially unbearable as you may be unsure of how you will even make it through the day, let alone accomplish all of the preparations that go along with a holiday. Be easy on yourself, especially the first year. Things will never be the same as they were before, but somehow you will eventually settle into your new normal.

We have discovered ways to include our deceased children during the holidays like hanging their stockings and filling them with gifts for others in the family. Some of us have started new family traditions by choosing to celebrate in new and different places. Some have kept old traditions such as watching favorite holiday movies together. We have chosen to let go of things that cause added stress during this time of year, like cookie baking or sending cards. Some days we have been able to smile, and other days we have cried our eyes out.

We want you to know that you are not alone. We are with you.

Attached are “6 Ways to Survive the Holidays Without Your Child” printed with permission from author, Angela Miller. These tips have been helpful for us, and we hope they are also helpful for you. You can see more from Angela on her website www.abedformyheart.com.

If you would like to find grief support and resources in your community, please feel free to call or email our bereavement coordinator, Dr. Lisa Clark, at 901-595-2658 or lisa.clark@stjude.org. If you would like to talk to another St. Jude parent who has experienced the grief of losing a child, Lisa will help connect you to a parent mentor.

Wishing you peace,

Quality of Life Parent Steering Council
St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital



5. FEEL YOUR FEELINGS

Feel your feelings, no matter how messy they are. Give yourself ample space to feel however you feel, including opposite emotions at the same time. You might feel hopeful and defeated; joyful and sorrowful; happy and sad; grateful and not; angry and peaceful. And all of these emotions might be even more amplified during the holidays. A wise person once told me that being able to hold space for contradictory emotions at the same time is a sign of extraordinary emotional maturity. It's true. You're not crazy— even though it may feel like it—you're extraordinary. Remind yourself of this often.

Especially every time you feel ripped apart at the seams by your dueling and opposing emotions. It's hard work to continually feel that way. Grief is unpredictable, exhausting, confusing and messy. Do your best to feel all of it until you need a break from feeling. It's ok to take a break and re-set. Deep breathing, chatting with a friend, a brisk walk outside, yoga, exercise, herbal tea, and healthy eating are all good ways to support the emotional toll grief takes on your body during the holidays.

6. ASK FOR HELP

Whether online, or in person, compassionate, empathetic support saves lives. Period. Having a village of support can often make the difference between surviving or not. I wasn't lucky enough to have a village, but I had one person—and that was somehow enough to keep my head above water. Hopefully you have a village, or at least one dearest one who knows how to offer you compassionate and loving grief support whenever you need it. If you don't have anyone, count me in your corner. Seriously.

Everyone needs someone to lean on. There is no worse feeling in the world than feeling utterly and completely alone on your own deserted planet called: Bereaved Parent. Do yourself a favor and ask for help, for whatever you need. Be proactive by having your core support "team" at the ready. For whatever might come. Your "team" might be made up of one person, or ten—it doesn't matter. What matters is that a support person will be there when you need him or her most. It might be your spouse, your best friend, or your therapist. Whether you need someone to listen, cry with you, or lie in the ditch of grief with you, have these dear souls ready. As your safety net, your safe place to land, your whispers of hope. It might be the one sure thing that eases your mind and heart this holiday season, in a way nothing else will.

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(TTY: 1-901-595-1040).

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GRIEF & THE HOLIDAYS

Six Ways to Survive the Holidays Without Your Child

by Angela Miller



St. Jude Children's Research Hospital

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Finding cures. Saving children.

SIX WAYS TO SURVIVE THE HOLIDAYS WITHOUT YOUR CHILD

I. PRACTICE SENSATIONAL SELF-CARE

Give yourself permission to take good care of yourself. You deserve it. And you need it. Trust me. Treat yourself as you would a physically wounded person with deep, visible, bleeding wounds. Just because emotional wounds are invisible, doesn't make them less debilitating, or less real.

Remember that. Remind your loved ones of this too. Treat yourself extra gently this time of year—like the carefully marked packages that read, Fragile: handle with care. More than that, be proactive. Have a plan to give yourself the gift of good self-care all season long.

2. REMOVE ALL EXPECTATIONS

Free yourself to participate in as little or as much holiday hoopla as you'd like. Forget about everyone's expectations, especially yours and people who might not understand your pain. Adjust your expectations to be realistic with what is. Keyword: realistic. This year might look much different than last year, so adjust accordingly with what you can handle right now, as you are, in this moment. As hard as it might be, try not to compare what you are able to do this year with anyone else, including past versions of yourself. Yes, I know. So. painfully. hard. But try to do it anyway. Be realistic, radically kind, and oh-so-loving with yourself.

3. JUST SHOW UP (OR NOT)

Allow yourself to change locations, holiday traditions or defy social norms. Allow yourself to show up, or not. Here's the thing: nothing is "normal" anymore. Normal died the day your child did. Which means you're now living in the land of defying normal. Anything goes. Give yourself permission to do what you need to do this year, even if it seems "abnormal" or outlandish to yourself or anyone else.

- Allow yourself the "5 minute rule," where you decide 5 minutes before an event if you can make it or not. Communicate this with your host beforehand. Thank them for the invitation, and let them know you're not sure if you'll be able to make it, but if you're up to it, you'll be there. That alone might feel liberating and more do-able. Less pressure, and the freedom to honor what you need in that moment.

Laugh when you need to laugh; cry when you need to cry; let yourself wallow if you need to wallow. Don't worry about what anyone else thinks. They're not in survivable mode, you are. Staying in bed until the holidays pass, or ditching town altogether are all completely acceptable options. Think outside the box, and don't be afraid to do something completely different that shakes up all expectations. And possibly your Great Aunt Bertha. What worked in the past might not work now, and that's perfectly okay. Sometimes a change of scenery is exactly what's needed to survive the holidays without your precious child.



4. HONOR YOUR CHILD

Honor your child in ways that are meaningful to you. Keyword: meaningful to you. Light a candle at your holiday table in loving memory of your precious child. Say your child's name. Ask others to do the same. Acknowledge the glaringly empty chair. Participate in random acts of kindness in loving memory of your precious child gone too soon. Donate your favorite grief book to your local library, church, hospital, grief center, therapist's office, or to someone who needs it. Volunteer at an orphanage. Volunteer right in your neighborhood. Or, one of my all-time favorites: donate gifts for children who are the exact same age your child would be.

No matter what you choose to do, spread hope and help others, even if you don't feel like you have much to give. Whatever you give will be multiplied, and it will be more than enough. After all, the true gift is in the giving, especially in the midst of deep grief.