

Helping Families Cope with Grief: During the Holidays

Kenneth J. Doka, PhD

Senior Vice-President, The Hospice Foundation of
America

Professor Emeritus, The College of New Rochelle

Why are you here?

- Experiencing grief?
- Friend of individual who is grieving?
- Professional?



Setting the Stage

Framing Expectations

- What we cannot do
- What we can do
 - Validation
 - Coping
 - Yet, emphasize individual lens
 - Hope

Placing Holidays in the Context of Grief



Grief is manifested in many ways

- Physically
- Emotionally
(including positive emotions)
- Cognitively
- Behaviorally
- Spiritually



The Grief Process

A Roller Coaster of Reactions



Grief is not a time bound
process that ends in
detachment

Amelioration of Grief

- Over time pain lessens
- Persons function at similar (or sometimes better levels) than prior to the loss
- Yet, grief still has a developmental aspect

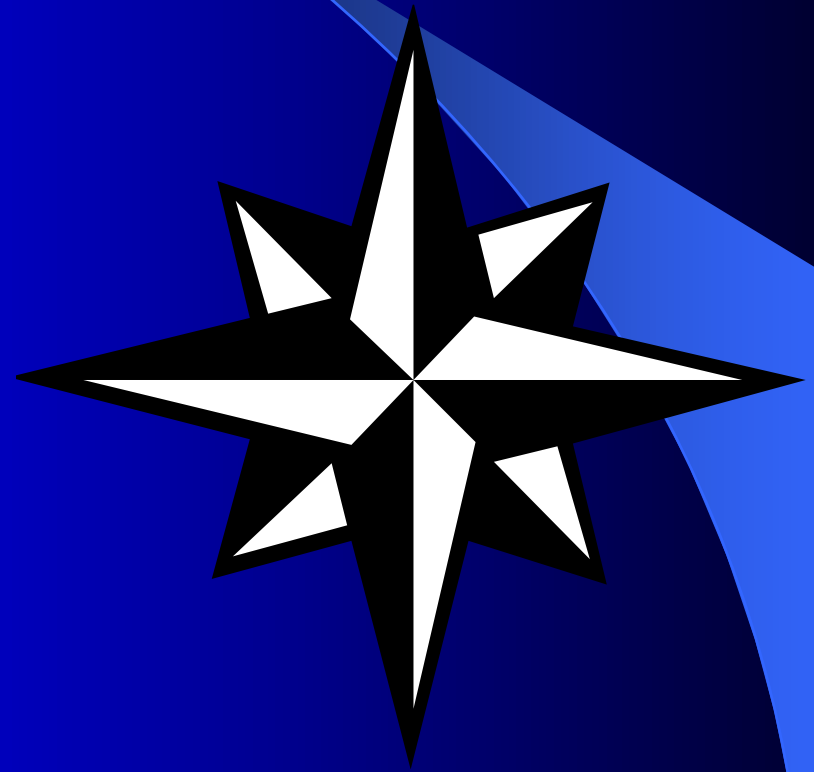
The Last Holiday



- In hospice or palliative care, we may realize we are celebrating a lost holiday
- Understanding Anticipatory Grief/Mourning
- Acknowledging and coping with mixed emotions
- The “Dual Process” of the last holiday
- The Gift of Reminiscence

Holidays Are a Traditionally Difficult Time

- Awash in Memories
- Constant Reminders
- “Hallmark” Expectations
– TV Shows and the
Idealized Family Holiday
- “Out of Season”
- Anxiety
- Stress
- Cold, Darkness – Isolation
and SAD



Yet Not for Everyone

- Individuality of grief
- For some bereaved persons, the holidays offer a time to reunite with family
- Holiday activities offers diversion and respite from grief



There are two strategies to avoid



- Keep everything the same
- Escape
 - Physically
 - Substance abuse

Substance Abuse

- Readily supported in holiday times
- At best, one problem remains



Beyond that, there are few
rights and wrongs in grief



Assess Strengths

- What Helped Before?
- External Sources of Help
 - L, D, R
- Spiritual Strengths
- Family Strengths – review family history



Coping with Grief during the Holidays

- Acknowledge and validate grief
- Challenge negative beliefs – “The Holidays will never be happy”
- The danger of drift



The Three “C’s”



- Choose
 - A bit differently
 - New meanings
 - What needs to be done, how
 - Who to be with and when to leave
 - The choice to decide when to choose
- Communicate
- Compromise

Children, Grief, and the Holidays

- Children's grief – including the normal “self-centeredness” of younger children
- The importance of the holidays
- Respecting children's choices
- Remember adolescents and children may displace anger
- Creating rituals and memorials
- Plan special activities



Possible Activities



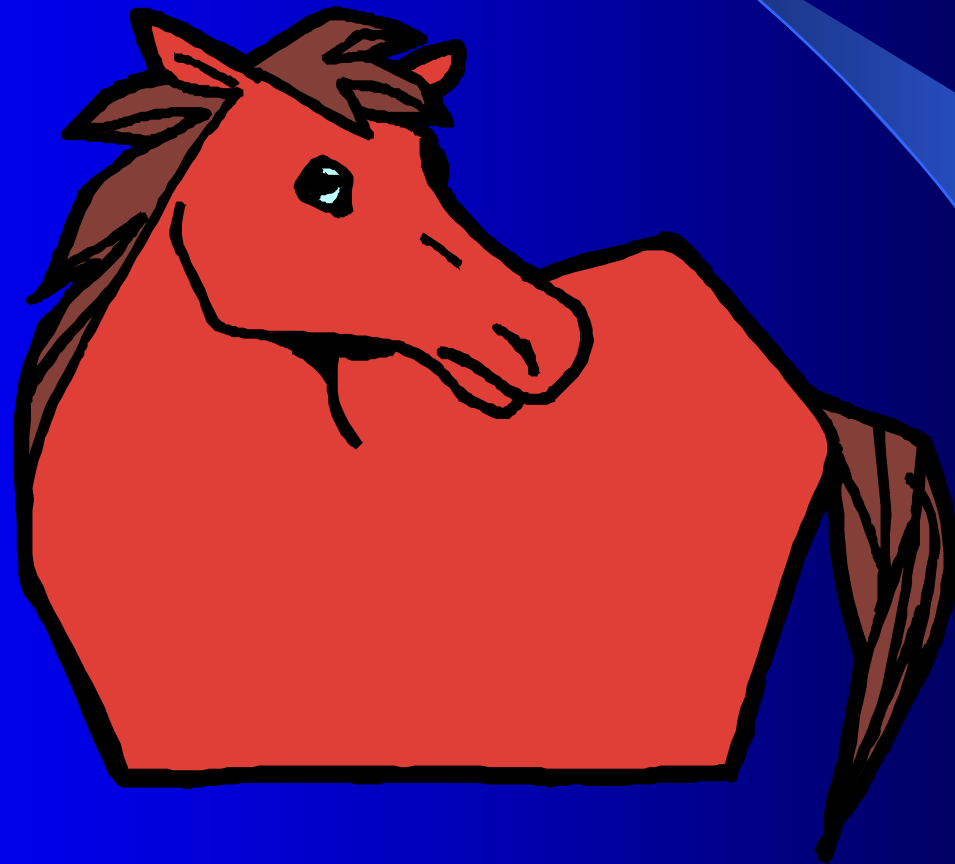
- Memory boxes
- Charitable or memorial activities – plant a tree, donate etc.
- Gift for the deceased
- Personal actions – baking cookies for nurses who cared for Grandma etc

Children, Grief, and the Holidays

- Remember how well parent's function is a major predictor of how well children will do
- Model your grief and coping
- Take care of your child – do not expect them to take care of you
- Draw on extended family and intimate network



The Horse on the Dining Room Table



The Important of Ritual

*Bringing the Deceased into the
Holiday*



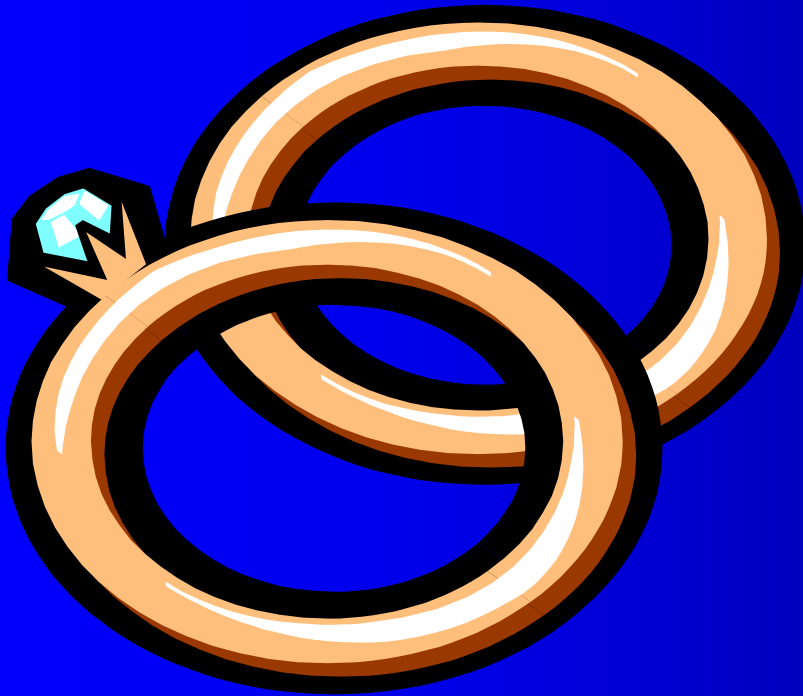
A Holiday Ritual

- Candles may represent many things such as grief over loss, courage in grief, memories, and love



Types of Ritual

- Transition



Types of Ritual

- Reconciliation



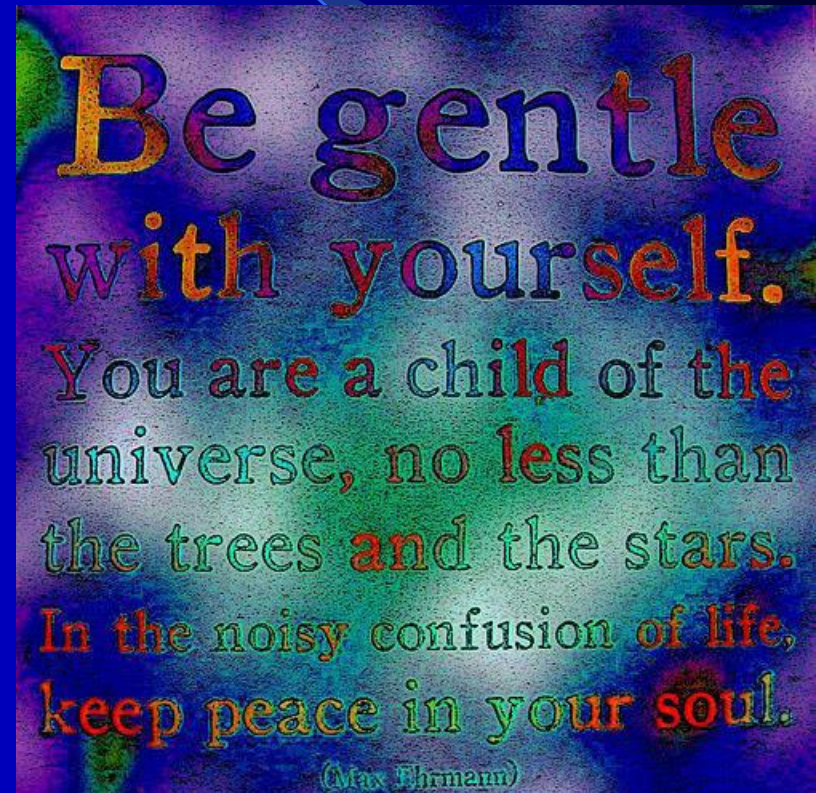
Types of Ritual

- Affirmation



Remind Families of the Need to Be Gentle with Themselves

- Cope with Stress
- Good Self-Care
- Acceptance of Tough Time



Gentle with Others



- Coping with Insensitive Comments
- Linn's Questions
 - Why did it hurt?
 - What did it mean?
 - How could I respond?

The Hidden Holidays

- These same principles can be used for other holidays – Mothers and Fathers Day, Easter, Passover
- Or personal days – Birthdays, Anniversaries etc.



Late October/Early November Holidays



- Historically a time of “thin places” – where the boundary between the dead and alive is more permeable
- Recognized today in observances such as:
 - Halloween
 - All Souls and Saints Days
 - Day of the Dead (Mexican)
 - Samhain (Wiccan, Celtic roots) – final harvest, end of summer – spirits journey

Grief Surges

- Remember other dates or seasons may have significance as well—i.e. one father who lost an adult son, experienced grief surges at the start of the baseball season and the World Series as he and his son often watched gamers together.



Grief Surges



(c) Cooking On The Side

- Other times, grief surges can be aroused by smells, tastes, sounds, touch, or sights—any of the senses

Grief Surges



(c) Cooking On The Side

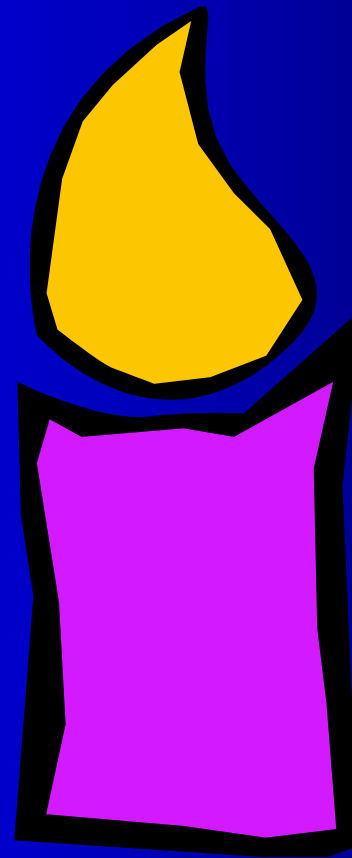
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Remember Spiritual Diversity



- Remember there is increased spiritual diversity in the US beyond Judeo-Christian Faiths – even including Native Americans, Humanists, and Wiccans
- <http://www.interfaithcalendar.org/> for an Interfaith Calendar

The Importance of Reassurance and Hope



How Organizations Can Help

- Counseling and Support
- Educational Programs – *How to Handle the Holidays etc.*
- Memorial Events – Tree Lightings etc.
- Using Emails/Social Media/Mailings



How Organizations Can Help



- Partnering and Educating Local Resources
- Example – Darkest/Longest Night/Blue Christmas Services

Hope

- Ovr time most people find pleasure in the holidays
- Even if there are occasional surges of grief



Dame C. Saunders Essence of Care

- Stay with me
- Care for me
- Listen to me

