

From Grieving A Loss To Celebrating A Life

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Mark Hooey
9/29/1952 - 12/16/2003

Not only was my dad well-known for his sense of humor and passion for Vikings football, but his love of snowstorms and the Christmas season was nearly contagious. I have fond memories of him offering to run and get milk in a blizzard, even though our fridge was stocked. And when he lived in an apartment that didn't allow Christmas trees, he used garland and lights to form one on the wall. He even surprised us one year with a city-wide Christmas lights tour...in Duluth...in a limo.

Our holiday traditions changed drastically when I got the call 13 years ago, just a week before Christmas, that my dad had died suddenly from a heart attack. At the time it felt like I would never want to celebrate this season again. For weeks, it felt wrong to smile and I felt guilty for moments of happiness. For many people that have experienced the death of a loved one, the hardest part of grieving can be the holiday season and are the times when we miss them the most. This is also a time when we don't need to avoid the feelings of grief, but can find ways to deal with them in a healthy and personal way:

Set realistic expectations for yourself: acknowledge the holidays will be different and difficult, decide if you want to continue responsibilities you've had in the past and allow others to help when it's offered.

Incorporate your loved one and your loss: light a candle for them, share precious memories about them or give a gift to someone in their honor.

Create a new tradition and discuss it ahead of time with your family: pass on the turkey carving ritual to another family member, have a moment of silence during a holiday toast or add their favorite dessert to the menu. (My dad's would have been Devil's Food Cake.)

It's important to remember there is no right or wrong way to celebrate the holiday season after losing a loved one. Just plan ahead, get support from others and take care of yourself. After so many years of losing my dad, we can now fondly share the memories of past Christmas mornings, laugh at the stories of his practical jokes and sentimentally thumb thru the pictures of other celebrations we enjoyed together. We have grieved and we have mourned, but now we cherish the love he left behind and continue to celebrate his life.

From our office to your home, Happy Holidays from Northwoods Caregivers!