Suicide Loss and Special Occasions: Tips for Coping During Difficult Moments

Special occasions like holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries can be particularly difficult for those who have experienced a suicide loss. The following tips and resources may help support your healing when certain moments bring up complicated emotions. Above all, know that there is no "right" way to handle special occasions – you and your loved ones may decide to try several different approaches before finding what is best for you, and that is okay.

You Have the Right to Grieve on Your Terms: 8 Healthy Boundaries You Can Draw for Yourself

- You have the right to not observe or celebrate a holiday, birthday, anniversary, or other special occasion. If what you need is to skip it, and not participate in any of your usual traditions or rituals, that is okay.
- You have the right to not participate in activities. You do not have to do things like send cards, exchange gifts, attend parties, or listen to holiday music if you are not feeling up to it.
- You have the right to say, "Time out." You can arrive late to family or other social gatherings, and leave them early. If you feel overwhelmed, you can take time alone to grieve in quiet.
- You have the right to tell others how you are feeling, or to keep it private. You are not obligated to answer questions or respond to comments about your loss, because it is never impolite to honor your boundaries.
- You have the right to a full range of emotions. You have the right to cry and be angry, and also to smile and laugh, even when you might not be expecting it.
- You have the right to not be joyful every single moment of the occasion, but if you experience joy and love during holidays or other occasions, you have an equal right to that, too.
- You have the right to long for your loved one to be back, and the way your life was before losing that person.
- You have the right to honor and remember your loved one during holidays and special occasions, in whatever way feels best.

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It's Okay to Not Be Okay: Tips for Coping With Grief

Consider Whether Usual Traditions May Be Comforting or Challenging

Some people find comfort in keeping their usual traditions but adapting them in some way, while others cannot imagine carrying on with their usual traditions. If continuing longstanding traditions feels too overwhelming or painful, consider developing new traditions. There is no right or wrong way – consider what works for you. It is also okay to take a year off from your usual traditions and decide next year if you will resume them.

Anticipation Can Be Harder Than the Event Itself

Anticipating an event can often prove more difficult than the event itself, and feelings of anxiety do not always mean the event itself will be difficult. It may be helpful to let supportive people in your life know you are concerned about a special occasion, so they can help you figure out what may be most helpful to you.

Communicate Your Needs in Advance

Friends and family often want to be helpful during special occasions, but may need some guidance. For instance, it can help them to know whether you want to talk about your loved one, or if you would rather grieve in private. Talking openly with friends and family about your preferences in advance allows them to better support you on difficult days.

It's Okay to Leave An Event Early

Preparing a strategy to leave early or take a break from an event may allow you to feel more at ease beforehand. It can be helpful to inform others of your plan ahead of time, especially if you may need their help initiating it.

Consider Traveling

If you have friends or family living in a different city, consider visiting them – a change in scenery during the holidays and other special days may be helpful. Some people find that planning a trip or traveling gives them something else to focus on rather than the date itself.

Consider Volunteering

If and when you feel ready, look online for volunteering opportunities in your area. Many people find meaning in helping others, and it's a great way to honor your loved one or acknowledge an important date. At the same time, it's okay if your loss feels too recent and you're not ready to volunteer – you may not ever feel ready, and that's okay, too.

Sometimes Special Occasions Are Just Difficult

Even without the loss of a loved one, occasions like holidays can be stressful. Do the best you can, and remember that healing takes time, and everyone's experience is different. How you feel this year may not be how you feel in a future year, so it's best to take it one occasion at a time.

Take Care of Yourself

Leading up to and during special occasions, it is especially important to get enough sleep, eat well, drink plenty of water, refrain from or limit alcohol intake, and practice healthy self-care. Activities like exercise, stretching, or meditation may help to reduce stress during this difficult time. Most importantly, engage in activities that feel restorative to you.

Remember: healing takes time, and it is not linear. Processing a loss is different for everyone. Never be ashamed of reaching out for support. Be kind to yourself, during special occasions and all year round.