



H.O.P.E. - HELPING OVERCOME & PROVIDE ENCOURAGEMENT

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.Here is some wisdom offered by Clara Fentress offered when she was 97 years of age. No stranger to loss, she says that “the death of my young son Joel after he was stricken with polio inflicted on me the most painful anguish of my entire life.” That summer many neighborhood children had gone to a nearby swimming camp, and many contracted polio there. “But of all the children, my dear Joel was the only one to die.”

After the initial shock of her son’s death wore off, she recalls that “unrelenting grief set in.” Yet, she found consolation in “remembering each day the happiness Joel brought me in his short life.”

Looking back over her life, filled with both sadness and gladness, she says: “Today, at the age of ninety-seven, I have realized more than ever that *attitude* makes all the difference in how one lives life....An attitude of gratitude gives me grit and gusto for living. Life is too short to dwell on what I do not have; instead, I focus on what I do have.”

HAPPY HOLIDAYS? - COPING WHEN YOU'RE GRIEVING

Happy holidays? How can this be? My wife died 8 months ago. While everyone else is going to be festive, I've got to be

combative, feeling that a holiday 'army' is mercilessly advancing toward me - Thanksgiving, Hanukah, Christmas, New Year's Eve, New Year's Day. These events are all around me, coming at me from different directions. While others are celebrating, I'm going to be busy surviving.

Those expressions come from a man whose grief is intensifying with approaching holidays. Like others who have had a loss, the holiday period beginning late November and continuing into early January is challenging. Yet, there are steps which can be taken to make the holidays less painful and more hopeful. Here are some guidelines.

- **Have a family conference.** Before making plans, call together the members of the family who need to be involved in planning. Sit down together and discuss how they want to celebrate this year. Be honest about your feelings. As the one who feels the lost most deeply, other family members need to hear and respect your wishes.

- **Monitor your attitude.** It's all too easy to become negative, cynical and despairing. This, of course is merely a mind game, one which you don't have to play. Place your focus on the positive, the hopeful, the beauty offered by the season.

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(from preceding page)

- **Take care of your physical self.** That advice is offered by Susan J. Zonnebelt-Smeenge and Robert C. De Vries in their book *The Empty Chair: Handling Grief on Holidays and Special Occasions*: “Holidays can be physically draining, especially if this is your first experience with a holiday since the death of your loved one. Respect your mind and your body. The acronym DEER (drink, eat, exercise, rest) may help you stay focused on taking care of yourself.” They also note that “holidays take enough energy by themselves without the additional gut-wrenching pain of a death. Failing to take care of yourself physically will only add to your fatigue and frustration.”

- **Let a friend help you.** You have wise and compassionate people in your life. Reach out to one of those during the holiday. Share your hurts and your hopes with that person. Be guided by this wisdom from Dr. George Elton Mayo, an Australian psychologist: “One friend, one person who is truly understanding, who takes the trouble to listen to us as we consider our problem, can change our whole outlook on the world.”

- **Consider how you want to do holiday shopping.** Many grievers can relate to the plight of one woman whose daughter died a few months before the holiday season. “Just the idea of being in a mall where I’d see all those happy shoppers and hear festive music was really upsetting me. Then, a friend made the wonderful suggestion that I do most of my shopping on line and via catalogues. Suddenly, shopping became a joy and not a dread.”

- **Smile.** Many times the simple act of bringing a smile to your face can generate inner peace and offset sadness. In his book, *Be Free Where You Are*, Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh observes: “There are times when your joy produces a smile. There are also times when a smile causes relaxation, calm, and joy. I do not wait until there is joy in me to smile; joy will come later. Sometimes when I am alone in my room in the dark, I practice smiling to myself. I do this to be kind to myself, to take good care of myself, to love myself. I know that if I cannot take care of myself, I cannot take care of anyone else.”

- **Avoid isolation.** As tempting as it can be to withdraw, retreat and isolate yourself during the holiday, try to remain connected. While you don’t have to accept every invitation or be the last one to leave a gathering, it is therapeutic to spend time with others. Fred, widowed after a 28 year marriage, remembers his first holiday season without his wife: “The last thing I wanted to do was be with people. Emotionally all I wanted was for this season to be done. Yet, friends phoned and emailed me invitations for various events. As hard as it was to get myself out of the house, I found my feelings of loneliness lessened considerably each time I attended a gathering. And, the big bonus: I met other people who had also been widowed. They were tremendously encouraging and supportive of me.”