

Helping older adults cope with the “Holiday Blues”

Older adults or anyone experiencing grief, loss or the blues may need extra support to get through the weeks between Thanksgiving and the New Year. Experts feel approaches for coping during the holidays will vary according to people’s needs.

Dr. Mary K. O’Neill, a clinical psychology post-doctoral fellow, working in private practice in Northeast St. Petersburg offers these suggestions, which will not only help the aged experiencing grief at this time of the year, but adults of all ages attempting to cope with the loss of a loved one during this holiday season:

1. *Don’t isolate yourself.* Dr. O’Neill said she considers this to be one of the most important suggestions she can offer. “Find somehow to be around people. Even if it is nothing more than going to the store and engaging with the cashier. The more time you spend home alone, the more time you will have to dwell on your loss and get caught up in sadness.”

2. *Vary your traditional holiday routine.* Dr. O’Neill noted that for many people it just might be too painful to maintain the same rituals they enjoyed with their deceased loved one. If that is the case, she says don’t be afraid to develop new rituals or rearrange those you did in the past.

3. *Focus on the living.* In keeping with developing new routines, consider “reaching out to others by volunteering for a local charity or cause.” Reach out to family or friends who may be equally as lonely as you. Send a card to someone who has moved away, or visit an acquaintance you know is alone.

Another gesture, which can be therapeutic for you or someone you know in grief, “is to find a way to support that bereaved individual. It may be something as simple as sending a note to the daughter of a deceased person you knew, letting her know how much you enjoyed the time you spent with say her mother. The daughter will deeply appreciate hearing about the joy her mother brought to you.”

4. *Be flexible regarding your expectations.* If you don't feel comfortable accepting an invitation to a particular party or dinner, Dr. O'Neill says to simply decline the invitation. This also holds true for other common traditions: If you don't feel like buying gifts, wrapping presents, mailing out holiday cards, or decorating for the season, that's okay. Dr. O'Neill says there is "nothing abnormal about feeling this way."

5. *Be open to talking about your loss.* Dr. O'Neill says, "Talking about feelings is something particularly hard among the elderly. Sometimes telling stories is easier. Focus on fond memories, and share those warm memories with others." You may be surprised at who is interested in listening. If you choose to create a scrapbook or "memory book", do it with others and share the experience.

6. *Stay active.* Schedules get disrupted over the holidays for various reasons, but try to stick to yours as closely as possible. If you usually meet up with friends for lunch on a certain day, keep going! Try to get outside, walk, swim, or do whatever activities you usually do.

It is very important to spend the holiday season in the company of supportive and caring people. As families, traditions and life changes, be open and embrace the fact that each holiday season is different and should be enjoyed in its own unique way.