

Should I Leave Town for the Holidays?

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The first holiday seasons after the loss of a loved one can be one of the most profound times in a person's life. The messages of hope, joy and reaching out to one another are in harsh contrast to the grief experience of numbness, sorrow, isolation and despair. Those first few years also involve getting to know yourself in a new way and trying to sort out a new lifestyle.

It is not surprising that there is much controversy about whether to leave town at these times. Well-meaning friends and relatives often pressure the bereaved to leave or stay depending on their stance on the issue. Those who believe it is important to leave will say things like, "Get away, start over, have some fun. You need some time of your own." Those who support staying home and holding with tradition will espouse things like, "You need your family around you. Don't run away from your pain. Its important to carry on as you always have."

The reality of the situation is that all of these statements could be true, but they may be beside the point. Grief is a very personal and tender experience that needs a very personal and tender response. And the needs of a grieving person are constantly changing as the healing progresses. Going away for the holidays could be exactly the right thing to do one year and possibly very destructive the next.

Talking with bereaved families over the years, has lead me to encourage people to sort out what they are needing in that particular season to help them heal rather than go on tradition or what others think they "should" do.

Often in the first holiday season after a death, the bereaved person, or family is still in a state of shock and numbness. It is very difficult for them to imagine "carrying on". Trying to participate in holiday events can feel like an insult to what they are going through. The focus is very inward, and frequently described as "dreamlike". Healing during this experience seems to call for lots of time and space to let the numbness thaw and gradually realize the magnitude of what is happening.

Staying close to family and friends who can accept this state of grief is very helpful to some people in this state of grief. Staying home during the holidays, with the freedom not to participate in the festivities, but simply be around familiar surroundings and family can be a huge comfort. One man described this as, "...my family was on standby, holding reality in the world for me to touch on whenever I briefly came out of the 'fog' and then giving me the freedom to withdraw when I needed to insulate myself from that reality."

Others need to get away in order to stay numb. Different surroundings help them to insulate from the pain until they are ready to deal with it. "I had to go to New York and float through the museums. Getting lost in one painting after another seemed to help protect me from the cruel pain that I could not bare during the holidays when you're

supposed to be happy and hopeful.” The woman who quoted these words, was able the next year to remember the holidays and her family because she had this freedom in the first year after her husband’s death.

Still others have to leave town in order to feel the pain. One woman told me that the pressure to care for others who were grieving kept her from her own pain after the loss of a child. She said she had to go somewhere so she could just be with herself and not worry about what her pain would do to someone else. “Then I was able to finally feel that horrible pain and begin to let it move through me.”

Bereaved families have very special needs. Children move in and out of grief, needing to cry and miss their loved one so deeply one minute and then in the next moment, they need to remember that their life goes on and experience the joy and hope of the season. This can be hard on parents, and often taking a trip or visiting relatives can provide structure for the kids. Relatives who are willing to “swing” with the kid’s moods can also help protect the parents. I was very impressed with one family who decided to get hotel rooms on the riverwalk the first year after the father had died from a long illness. All the relatives came. They did new and fun things with the kids, but were able to have some very tender times at their church and grandma’s house on Christmas day. The mother of this family told me “It was such a relief to see that my children were not going to be consumed by their pain, but we had ways to comfort them when they did feel it.”

Other families take great comfort in tradition. Staying home and celebrating the holidays the way they always have, can allow children to feel continuity in their lives, and a closeness to the loved one that they have lost. “We used the holidays that first year to remember my Dad.” said a father of two school age boys. “The holidays kindled fond memories and funny stories. It was sad sometimes, but the boys seemed to want to remember and we also had some good laughs.”

The stories could go on and on. How the holidays are experienced after a death is as unique and precious as each relationship that has been lost. There are times when a person needs to be insulated, get away, or simply get through the season. There are other times when a person feels a conscious need to experience the bitter-sweet pain of loss that the holidays can trigger. Leaving town or staying home is not the issue. The issue is whether you can create a time that allows for you to be comforted and continue your long journey of healing.