

Pet Loss and the Holidays: Four Things To Consider When Grieving During the Holidays

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Sometimes, holidays can be a very painful time for people who are experiencing their first (or second or third, etc.) Christmas or special holiday without their loved one who has died. If this is your situation this holiday season, please know I am keeping you in my prayers. For everyone hurting from grief this holiday, special prayers and love are being sent for you. You are not alone. I hope that the following thoughts and ideas will help you through this time.

1. If you feel annoyed, impatient, turned off or even angry about the holiday glee around you, that's ok. You're not Grinch, you're grieving. After loss, life is different. Our world is not the same. Sometimes, it can even seem strange that the rest of the world continues, let alone celebrates, because our life may seem to be just standing still or filled with darkness. It can even feel annoying to hear all those cheerful songs on the radio and see all those frivolous holidays ads and happy ending movies on television. If your heart is broken missing your loved one this season, seeing and hearing gleeful people and stories around you may seem irrelevant at best and obnoxious at worst. It's hard to feel holiday joy when your heart is deeply grieving.



So when we feel this way, what can we do other than stay under the covers or wishing that the world would just shut up about Christmas being a magical time of the year?

2. Perhaps first and most importantly, we need to give ourselves empathy for our pain. Resisting what we feel, pretending we don't feel depressed or grief stricken because it's Christmas or another holiday and we're expected to join in the frivolity and festivities will only prolong our grief (taking it underground) and postpone our healing.

While I am a believer that we all have the power to shift our vibration to feel even just a bit better in a given moment, it's a myth that we can pop ourselves up an emotional scale from deep grief to joy in a nano second and never feel grief again from a devastating loss. And it's quite a harmful myth that grief shouldn't even exist, as espoused by one famous law of attraction leader who recently publicly apologized for resisting her husband's death by feeling grief. I cringed when I read this, hoping that not too many would mimic her model that feeling grief is somehow wrong, unnecessary and something to be avoided. Grief is not something to apologize for. It is the most natural reaction in the world to the loss of anyone or anything that is meaningful to us. It's what we do with our grief that matters. Pretending we don't or should not feel grief when someone we love dies does not move us toward healing. It places our pain into denial, repressing it only to come out later, perhaps in surprising or

dysfunctional ways.

When we receive empathy and acknowledgement for any painful emotion, the challenge of that feeling diminishes, the pain lessens. When we feel understood, when our pain is acknowledged, we feel less devastated and more supported. Empathy is like a fresh breeze of cool air on a hot, sticky humid day--it is comforting, calming and energizing. There is magic in empathy. When we know we are understood, we feel real.

On the other hand, when we are told by others or tell ourselves that we "should not feel that way" or that we should "let go of grief and be joyful because after all we know our loved one is happy and well in heaven/on the other side and there really is no separation since we know their spirit is alive" it feels more like someone slams the windows shut in a room that is already overly hot and stuffy. Now it is even harder to breathe and we feel more alone, and certainly not understood. Pretending we are not in pain when we are in pain will never, ever make the pain go away. Offering our pain love, offering ourselves empathy and permission to feel whatever it is we feel, is an essential step in healing our grief.

Grief doesn't go away because someone tells us we shouldn't have it or should be over it. Grief lessens and transforms after we acknowledge it, learn from it and honor our whole process.

I'm not suggesting that we wallow in our grief and do nothing to help ourselves heal. There is a healthy balance to be found for each of us between staying in pain indefinitely, doing nothing about it and the other extreme of pretending there is no such thing as grief. A first step is to give ourselves and seek for ourselves the empathy of acknowledgement. We would most probably never say to a beloved animal who is injured or in physical pain, "Gee, just get up and walk already!" Rather than imposing such a heartless edict to hurry up and heal, we would be more likely to place our hands, our love, and our healing energy and prayers onto a beloved animal who is in physical pain to offer our support and help as they heal in the wisdom of their soul's own timing. We need to offer this same gentle loving kindness onto our own emotional pain, as we heal in the wisdom of our own soul's timing.

Listen to the feelings in your own heart and honor them. Don't let anyone tell you that you should not have whatever feelings you have.

A constructive way to combine healing empathy for our real feelings and positive self talk (aka law of attraction) to lift us to more positive emotional states was pioneered by EFT master Carol Look. I've used her techniques myself and find them extremely helpful and powerful.

3. We need to give ourselves the time and space we need to heal, each in our own way. We all have different personality types with varying levels of preference regarding being with people and being with ourselves. There is no one right way to handle socializing at the holidays when we are grieving. Some people feel energized, rejuvenated and healthily distracted from their grief by being with others and attending parties and gatherings. Yet for others, just the thought of putting on a happy face and going to social events is daunting. Neither is right or wrong. We need to listen to our own hearts about what we need and then do that, even if this means others may not understand. This is at time to take care of ourselves, in the ways we know are best for us.



A few years ago when one of my cats died very unexpectedly just a few weeks before Christmas, I knew I needed time alone. Though I was able to be fully present with him through his last days and his death process, the aftermath felt unbearable. I felt a deep need to spend time alone and in reflection. During all of my non work hours, I spent days and weeks sitting quietly in front of the fire with my other cat, looking through photos and alternately meditating, talking with him, and crying out my tears. Sometimes I watched movies or read novels just to escape the intensity. I made an altar with his ashes, photos, candles and the many loving sympathy cards sent after his death. My cat Olivia, who was grieving at least as deeply as I was, spent time both on my lap and by her brother's ashes. We grieved together.

I did not have it in me to celebrate a holiday and go to parties and dinners. My feline son had died very abruptly and my world was off its axis. So I took all the time I needed alone to go within and begin to heal. This is not to say that everyone should do this, or that I will always feel called to have so much alone time every time I experience a loss. With previous losses, I have held both large, celebratory memorial celebrations and small, intimate services. Not only does every person and animal grieve in their own unique way, but every situation of loss is different. Listen to your heart about what you need now, and follow it.

If you are a family member, friend or loved one of someone who has experienced loss, one of the greatest gifts you can give them during the holidays is to ask them what they are most comfortable with regarding time together, regarding socializing and the need for time alone. Support them if and when they decide to spend time alone rather than socializing. Don't take it personally! And don't attempt to impose on them what you would do, or what you think they should do. This is their loss. Find out what they need and support them accordingly. And when you are with someone in a social situation who is grieving a loss, make an acknowledgment of their loss rather than pretending it did not happen. Honor their loss. Honor the relationship they had with their loved one. Make a toast in a group if appropriate, or make a kind and loving comment in private. You don't have to fix anything or espouse your beliefs about where their loved one is, why death happens or how they will or should heal (in fact please don't do any of this--it doesn't help unless they have asked for your opinions). Merely acknowledging their loss and that you care and supporting their desire for social or alone time is a great gift.

4. It is empowering and healing to take stock of our blessings, to reflect upon and document the many gifts we've received from our time on earth with our loved one. As dark, heavy and endless as our grief may feel, in the overall timeline of the years with our loved one, their death and our grief from their death is only one of the chapters. It is very empowering and healing to take time to reflect upon all the chapters we've had together--the memories, the learning and the lasting gifts from all the days of our lives together. One way to honor our relationship is to honor all we've received from it. This, of course, does not erase our grief but it does place it into the context of a broader whole.

One of the rituals we do in my grief workshops is called What I've Lost, What I Still Have

and Cherish and What I am Creating. The purpose of this process is to help us view and consider a "complete" picture of our loss and grief in the context of our life at this time. We have lost something of inestimable value. And we also still have much for which to be grateful, much that we can cherish. And we have new experiences in life ahead.

To do this ritual, take a piece of paper, perhaps 8 1/2 x 11 inches and position it horizontally. Then fold it in thirds so you will have three columns in which to write. Label the first column "What I've Lost," the second column "What I Still Have and Cherish," and the third column "What I am Creating."

In the "What I've Lost" column write down everything that comes to mind about what your loss represents. Perhaps it is the loss of everyday physical affection, everyday activities, and all of your physical, sensory experiences together. It may also be the emotional exchanges that were part of your life such as the tremendous love you got to express in person. The fun you had. The roles you filled for one another in your relationship. It may also include what your animal gave you that you don't yet know how to give to yourself (at the death of my first animal I realized that for me this was unconditional love). Write down everything that comes to you. You may want to write this over time rather than in one sitting.

In the "What I Still Have & Cherish" column describe what you still have from your animal--specific memories, on-going communication, all the learning, the gifts and of course the love and blessings from your animal that will always be a part of you. You may also want to list other blessings in your life for which you are grateful. When we are in the grief of loss, it can be hard to remember that we even have other blessings. Perhaps a home, other animal and human family loved ones, work we enjoy, work that pays the bills, and all things that bring us contentment, satisfaction, and meaning. The energy of gratitude that comes forth when we are consciously aware of our blessings lifts us, even if just a little, from the heaviness of grief. It does not mean that if we have an abundance of blessings in other areas of our life that we have no right to grieve the loss of our loved one. However, conscious awareness of other blessings can help us remain grounded in our life on earth at times when it feels too hard to even be here.

In the "What I Am Creating" column write about what you will be doing with the gifts and legacies left you by your loved one, how you'll be investing them in your life. List other areas in your life where you are continuing to grow and create. This doesn't mean you aren't grieving. It means that you are acknowledging that there are other areas in your life (either right now or that you are creating) that are fulfilling and meaningful.

When you feel your columns are complete, that you've written all that comes to mind, sit with what you have written. Reflect upon it. See the organic movement of your loss, what you still have and cherish in your life, and what you are creating. See how your loss is very, very real, and, how what you still have and will be creating is also real. You have a place here on earth, sad as it may feel, even without your beloved animal. Your life continues. Your animal would surely want you to come back to fully engaging in your life and enjoy it. As you see the patterns and picture of your loss and your life, let the tears flow if they come, and let the smiles come also.

Know that grief and joy, sadness and contentment, and yearning for what is lost can co-exist with what is also good in your life. All are real. All are part of the tapestry of your life, part of you taking the opportunity to create wisdom from the energy of your life loss.

When you are ready (and you may not be ready right after writing it--you will be ready when you are ready), gently and slowly tear off the "What I've Lost" column. You may want to fold it and crease it first, perhaps folding it back and forth a few times to make gentle

tearing easy. You can cut it off with a scissors, but tearing it with your own hands is much more symbolic of you taking the initiative and being ready to let go of what is lost.

Have a fireproof bowl or other container nearby in which to place this paper. Light a match to it, and allow it to burn while affirming to yourself that while you have lost something almost unbearable to lose, you have borne it, you have grown and will continue to grow, and that the loving relationship between your soul and your animal's soul will be connected in love for all time.

Take the remainder of the page with your words below "What I Still Have and Cherish" and "What I am Creating" and place it somewhere where you will read it many more times. Perhaps in a journal, by your bedside or on your desk.

The holidays come every year. Thankfully, major losses are typically not part of our lives every year. But when these two intersect, there are things we can do to take care of ourselves and to give ourselves empathy, space and rituals to heal and not feel overrun by cultural assumptions that holidays are joyful and light for everyone, every year.