"The Holidays" and Grief

By Amy Shea Thomas, MSW, LCSW, Grief Counselor

It’s August as I write this. My tomato plants are still producing, I see boaters out on the lake and folks fishing off the side of the bridge. The stores are loaded up with school supplies that soon will give way to Halloween and other holiday decorations. And in my role as a grief counselor with HPCCR, I am beginning to hear from some people whose loved one has died within the past year that they are having feelings of dread about “The Holidays”. They are not alone; they are not in the minority.

Each one of us has our own meanings, memories, beliefs, past experiences, and customs attached to special times of the year, whether we celebrate in a religious tradition (Christian, Jewish, Muslim or another faith) or from a secular approach. As we grieve, the music on the radio and in the stores, the advertisements and portrayals of Thanksgiving gatherings, Hanukkah or Christmas rituals and happy family celebrations on TV are painful triggers of our feelings of loss. There seems to be no avoiding the “holiday fever” that surrounds us in our communities. As we anticipate family get-togethers, gift-sharing, special meals, gathering of one’s faith community, or other annual customs, these may all tend to spotlight the fact that your loved one is missing, and therefore nothing feels “normal” any more.

Coping with grief through the holiday period may challenge you, and you may at times feel overwhelmed. Here are some practical suggestions to help you plan ahead.

1. Expect things to be different for you, but realize others may not understand this. Don’t try to proceed as you always have in the past; reduce your own expectations, give yourself permission to let go of many (maybe most) of the tasks you’ve done in the past.

2. Accept help from others; say “yes” even if you find it hard to do. Remember how good it feels to you to nurture and care for someone you love when they are burdened; allow others to have the blessing of giving….to you.

3. Identify the things that you love about the holiday, and give yourself a chance to breathe in the smells that bring great memories, listen to the music that lifts your spirit, be around those people who are a comfort to you.

4. Self-care is always an important part of coping with grief, including finding ways to eat nutritious foods, drinking plenty of water, keeping up with medical and dental care, avoiding over-use of alcohol or abusing other substances. We now know getting adequate sleep and exercise are also extremely important to reducing stress, and being able to cope with stress. We know that grief is exhausting, which means it’s even harder to give more attention to engage in good self-care. It may be all you can do to set one small goal, like “walk outside for 15 minutes every day”. Acknowledge

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The Advent season has always been my favorite time of year, especially when I was growing up near Houston. The weather wasn’t hot, football was everywhere, and because we lived close to both my parent’s families, my brother and I got to see everyone and received our holiday presents all in one day.

Visits to my maternal great-grandmother were always interesting. For as long as I could remember, the present she gave me and my brother was the same every year: a gift-wrapped shoe box with corn chips, raisins, and black dress socks in it. It even seemed like the wrapping paper color was the same every year. We knew what we were getting, so our level of excitement never changed. We always said “thank you” when she gave us the boxes, but we really wanted to yell out “not again!” - but our parents were usually within arm’s reach so we did not have the luxury to truly express ourselves.

In the spring of 1986, my great-grandmother died in her sleep. Our family went through the entire “grief/funeral/graveside” process. But it wasn’t until a day in late December that year that it truly hit me. While we were doing our family visits, my parents decided to drive by my great-grandmother’s house just to take a look at it. I could hear something deep within me say: “Aren’t we going to stop? … Why not? … Oh, she isn’t there … If she isn’t there, then how are we going to get our presents? … No presents??? … No shoe box, no corn chips, no raisins, no dress socks? … My great-grandmother is gone.”

I don’t remember if I cried, but I do remember it being a hard reality to face. My parents, other family members and friends were there to help when the days got rough. I also tried to recapture the days when my great-grandmother gave me that gift wrapped box by buying those items for myself. My attempts were unsuccessful. For some reason, the corn chips and raisins didn’t taste the way they did when it was a gift from her. And the black dress socks I bought always seemed to get a hole in them. The socks she gave me never got a hole.

As I got older I learned to look at the gifts from my great-grandmother as more than just objects, and to discover the meaning in them. It’s equivalent to J. William Worden’s fourth stage of grief, which is “to relocate the person in your life and appropriately memorialize that person.” It doesn’t mean I have forgotten her; it means that I put her in the highest regard and see how she has positively affected my life.

Here’s how I see it:
The corn chips symbolize sustenance; corn was used to help the early Americans sustain the cold winters. What gives me sustenance in life?
Raisins symbolize preservation; which means to keep alive or safe. What do I want to preserve in my life?
The black socks … well, I always wear black dress socks when I want to look my best, so the socks symbolize presentation and putting my best foot forward!

Who knew so many lessons could come from one shoe box.

Corn chips, raisins, and black socks

By Darryl Jefferson, M. Div
Chaplain, Levine & Dickson Hospice House - Huntersville

Saturday, November 15, 2014
2p
Levine & Dickson Hospice House – Huntersville
11900 Vanstory Drive, Huntersville

Thursday, December 4, 2014
6p
Hospice & Palliative Care - Lincoln County
Lincoln Cultural Center
403 East Main Street, Lincolnton

Saturday, December 6, 2014
3p
Levine & Dickson Hospice House @Southminster
8919 Park Road, Charlotte

Tuesday, December 2, 2014
6:15p
Jewish Community Center, Shalom Park
5007 Providence Road, Charlotte

Thursday, December 4, 2014
7p
Uptown
Elder Art Gallery
1520 South Tryon Street, Charlotte

Tuesday, December 9, 2014
6:30p
Hospice & Palliative Care - Lake Norman
Mt. Zion United Methodist Church
19600 Zion Avenue, Cornelius

...our annual interfaith gatherings to honor your loved ones and celebrate special memories. Start a new tradition of remembrance by attending one.
this as a wonderful success in your start at self-care this holiday season.

5. Remember your loved one in a special way. You may make a small donation to a cause that was important to her; you may start a new tradition at a family meal as a remembrance of him. Light a candle and spend time reflecting and sharing memories; read a special prayer, or go together to visit a place your loved one enjoyed. The ways to memorialize your loved one are only limited by your imagination.

6. If expressing your feelings of grief with a friend who cares, and talking openly about your loved one with people who know what you are going through doesn’t seem like enough, consider joining a support group, or seeking individual grief support. With offices in Lake Norman, Lincoln County, Uptown Charlotte and South Charlotte our licensed professional grief counselors are here to help. We understand the challenges of grief, especially this time of year, and we welcome your call.

7. The ‘gift’ of grief is that it presents us with the opportunity to heal and grow.

- Jewish Proverb

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### In Good Company

**Event Calendar**

(All are welcome!)

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<td><strong>Homestead Grill</strong>&lt;br&gt;1st Tuesday of each month&lt;br&gt;357 North Generals Blvd.&lt;br&gt;Lincolnton, NC&lt;br&gt;5:30 pm&lt;br&gt;Contact: Kathy Douglas&lt;br&gt;704.887.6437</td>
<td><strong>Two on Earth Bakery &amp; Cafe</strong>&lt;br&gt;(Corner of Main Street near RR tracks)&lt;br&gt;1st Thursday of each month&lt;br&gt;333 Main Street&lt;br&gt;Pineville, NC&lt;br&gt;10 am&lt;br&gt;Contact: Marge Brokaw&lt;br&gt;704.335.4308</td>
<td><strong>Rippington’s</strong>&lt;br&gt;2nd Tuesday of each month&lt;br&gt;109 W. South Street&lt;br&gt;Waxhaw, NC 28173&lt;br&gt;11 am&lt;br&gt;Contact: Marge Brokaw&lt;br&gt;704.335.4308</td>
<td><strong>Bob Evans Restaurant</strong>&lt;br&gt;2nd Thursday of each month&lt;br&gt;16707 Northcross Drive&lt;br&gt;Huntersville, NC 28078&lt;br&gt;6 pm&lt;br&gt;Contact: Amy Thomas&lt;br&gt;704.602.0930</td>
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<td><strong>Panera Bread</strong>&lt;br&gt;(Arboretum Shopping Center)&lt;br&gt;3rd Tuesday of each month&lt;br&gt;Pineville Matthews Road&lt;br&gt;Charlotte, NC 28277&lt;br&gt;10 am&lt;br&gt;Contact: Marge Brokaw&lt;br&gt;704.335.4308</td>
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<td><strong>Julia’s Coffee</strong>&lt;br&gt;4th Tuesday of each month&lt;br&gt;1133 North Wendover Road&lt;br&gt;Charlotte, NC 28211&lt;br&gt;10 am&lt;br&gt;Contact: Marge Brokaw&lt;br&gt;704.335.4308</td>
<td><strong>Bob Evans Restaurant</strong>&lt;br&gt;4th Thursday of each month&lt;br&gt;16707 Northcross Drive&lt;br&gt;Huntersville, NC 28078&lt;br&gt;11:30 am&lt;br&gt;Contact: Amy Thomas&lt;br&gt;704.602.0930</td>
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Registration has begun for upcoming “Grief: The Reluctant Journey” support groups. The meetings start early February 2015 at our various HPCCR locations. A pre-group interview with one of our grief counselors is required before registration. To find out more, and to schedule an interview, please email cummingsg@hpccr.org, or call 704.335.4334. For our Lincolnton support groups, email journigan-douglask@hpccr.org, or call 704.887.6437.

What’s On Your Plate?
Are you feeling anxious as you anticipate the upcoming holidays? Please join us for a workshop, where through discussion and creative arts, we simplify what’s on your holiday plate. Maybe you’ll even have room for dessert!

Hospice & Palliative Care Charlotte Region (South)
7845 Little Avenue
Charlotte, NC 28226
Thursday, November 13 from 1 - 3:30 pm
To register call 704.335.4334

Hospice & Palliative Care Charlotte
Myers Park United Methodist Church
1501 Queens Road, Room 110
Charlotte, NC 28207
Monday, November 17 from 6:30 - 7:45 pm
To register call 704.335.4334

Hospice & Palliative Care Lincoln County
Lincoln County Senior Center
514 South Academy Street
Lincolnton, NC 28092
Monday, December 1 from 9:30 - 11:00 am
To register contact: Kathy Douglas at 704.887.6437

Hospice & Palliative Care Charlotte Region (Main)
1420 East Seventh Street
Charlotte, NC 28204
Thursday, November 13 from 6 - 7:30 pm
To register call 704.335.4334

Hospice & Palliative Care Charlotte Region
Levine & Dickson Hospice House
11900 Vanstory Drive
Huntersville, NC 28078
Thursday, November, 20 from 6 - 7:30 pm
To register call 704.335.4334

Hospice & Palliative Care Charlotte Region
1420 East Seventh Street
Charlotte, North Carolina 28204
704.375.0100
● hpccr.org