



The
Compassionate
Friends

Coping with Christmas

A nationwide organisation of bereaved parents and their families offering support after a child dies.

Coping with Christmas

After your child has died, the arrival of the Christmas season can feel most unwelcome. The whole world seems to be celebrating. Everybody appears to be obsessed with preparations that go on for many weeks. There is no escape – Christmas is all over the shops and streets, on TV, radio, in magazines, and on the web and social media. This can leave you, the bereaved parent, feeling alienated and isolated by your grief.

As you contemplate Christmas – especially in the early years of your bereavement – you might wonder how you will survive. All of the talk about family reunions can make your heart sink, as you know that your child will not be with you during these days. The enormous gap left by their death is intensified. Bereaved parents often feel they just want to 'cancel' Christmas. Christmas cannot be the same as it was because the family unit is not the same. It is not complete.

If this is the first year, it will be painfully different from previous years. You may find the anticipation and stress of what you 'should' be doing very hard to deal with. Do you decorate the tree, send cards, give presents, attend a place of worship, join in the festive meal, go to a family party? If you have younger children or grandchildren, do you continue with important traditions of trips to the shops, the decorations, a pantomime, and a visit to see Father Christmas? If you are a lone parent, you may now find yourselves literally alone in your home.

Many bereaved parents find the run up to Christmas – with all the accompanying anticipation – can be more difficult to cope with than the actual day itself. The New Year celebrations looming in the background may be equally unwelcome.

We hope that some of the ideas below might help and support you as you prepare for the holiday season...

- **Do what feels right to you.** Don't allow other people to dictate how you should get through this extremely difficult time of year. Don't feel you have to go to the office party or festivities with friends/extended family if you can't cope with them.
- **Sometimes you don't know what you will feel like doing until the last minute.** Don't feel you have to give others advance notice. Tell people you will decide on the day and you will come if you feel up to it, but may well not be able to.
- **You might like to develop a Christmas ritual involving your child** – attend a candle-lighting service with other bereaved parents; spend time at a special memorial place on your own or with others; make or buy a special card or decoration for your child.

- **You may want to tell people that you need to have your child acknowledged by others at Christmas** – to see their name in a Christmas card or to remember them with a toast during a festive meal means so much. Some people would be scared of doing this unless you tell them.
- **Some parents don't send cards at Christmas any more.** Others like to include their child's name – for example - "Love from X x and x and always remembering xx". You can also ask others to include a similar sentiment on any cards they send you. This small gesture can really lift a parent's heart.
- **Let close friends or family know that you are struggling** and need to be able to talk about your child at this important family time.
- **With family members or others you are close to, try to talk together about how you are feeling,** or what you all might want to do. Thinking and talking together can help you to prepare yourselves for Christmas, and sometimes when these plans do go right, the day can bring surprising comfort.
- **If you have young children, be aware that they might wish for Christmas to carry on as before.** Although this can be enormously painful for you, for surviving children the normality of Christmas celebrations can be important. Watching them enjoy themselves may be satisfying, although still painful.
- **Don't put too much stress on yourself.** If there are difficult relations who expect to visit or for you to visit them, just say you can't do it this year if it's going to make you feel worse. Alternatively, introduce a time limit - "We'll come over for a quick drink but will only stay an hour."
- **Spend time with people who understand.** Where possible, avoid those who don't.
- **On the day itself, make time for yourself to escape** if things are too much. A walk outside can really help ease tensions. Or take yourself off for a long warm bath.
- **Some parents find that volunteering for a charity** helping the homeless or elderly over Christmas is a positive distraction. You are helping yourself and doing good too.
- **Try to take some gentle exercise every day.** This helps boost those much-needed endorphins.
- **If you can't cope with the idea of Christmas at all, go away and do something completely different.** (Be aware, though, that sometimes being away from supportive friends or family can be more difficult and the jollity of strangers may be painful.)

- **It is not being disloyal to your child to feel happy at times.** You might find yourself enjoying a special meal, a drink, the good company of friends, songs and music, or even Christmas services. Adjusting to life without your child means that hopefully, in time, you will find more joy in living than you do at present.
- **Be aware that the New Year celebrations can also be difficult.** The coming of a new year can feel like you are moving 'further away' from your child. The celebrations of others, wishing you a 'Happy New Year', can intensify your yearning and grief. You can feel isolated from the happiness of others. Acknowledge these feelings to yourself and others close to you. It might help to have a plan for the evening of December 31st – whether that is to be alone, or with close, understanding friends who will allow you to be yourself and remember your child at this poignant time of year.

After the death of your child, the Christmas holidays will have shadow, a yearning for what might have been, an added poignancy. However, we bereaved parents do survive these days, difficult as they are. What matters is that, as far as possible, you are able to do whatever feels right for you, and eventually be able to carry the loving memory of your child with you into future Christmas-times..

Note: The above could also apply to other publicly celebrated occasions within your own culture and community, such as Diwali, Chanukah and Eid.

The Compassionate Friends National Helpline will be open during the Christmas period:

UK Helpline

0345 123 2304

(10am – 4pm, 7pm- 10pm every day)

The following Helplines are open too:

Child Death Helpline **0800 282 986**

Child Bereavement UK Support and Information Line **0800 02 888 40**

Samaritans **116 123** (free to call)

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