

As we approach Christmas it puts me in mind of a poem written in 1833 by Alfred lord Tennyson.

*'The Yule-log sparkled keen with frost
No wing of wind the region swept
But over all things brooding slept
The quiet sense of something lost.'*

Of course our sense of loss is often far from quiet and is with us every day. However some days are definitely harder than others and Christmas is right up there at the top end of the list, not helped by our tendency in this country to stretch it out to cover about a third of the year! We have some books in the library on the subject of coping with special occasions, including Christmas, but, rather than talking about one or two of them, I've looked at them all and tried to extract their best advice. This advice comes under four general headings starting with:-

1) Look after yourself

This covers pretty sensible things like eating and drinking sensibly and getting enough sleep. Grief is so exhausting, and our sleep pattern is in tatters, so go with what your body tells you to do. There's nothing wrong with a nap in the afternoon or getting up at 3am for a hot chocolate and a re-run of Del boy falling through the bar flap. Also it's good to get out in the fresh air if possible for a walk, even just for five minutes or so. This is good advice for any time but it can easily be overlooked at Christmas.

2) Be gentle with yourself

If you can't face the shops use catalogues or the internet or ask a friend. Don't be afraid to say NO. If you can't face parties or extended family invitations don't go. If you do go, and want to come home early, do just that. Accept any help that's offered. If a friend asks what they can do to help, tell them; they'll probably be pleased to be able to do something, maybe some of the shopping or just being with you for a walk or a coffee somewhere. Have some ME time. Make yourself a quiet space to retreat to when you need to. A nice hot bath full of bubbles sounds good and jigsaws or the new 'adult colouring books' can be a therapeutic and relaxing way to spend an hour or two. Realise you're going to feel pain and express your feelings in words, writing (poems or a journal), in painting or music or whatever else you like to do.

3) Make changes in your traditions

Maybe go right away from home and have a holiday

Maybe volunteer for a good cause

Change the way you do things at home. Don't decorate if you don't want to, eat out or at a different time and there's no law that says you must eat turkey on Christmas day. Don't go to relatives, or have the family come to you, if you don't want to.

All the books recommend planning ahead, so you've got an idea of the shape of the day, while remaining flexible in case you find you just can't cope with what you'd planned.

4) Above all honour your child at Christmas

Say their name, talk about them and don't allow others to act as though they never existed.

Buy a special ornament, something you feel makes a connection with them.

Light a candle for them and have it flickering away during Christmas.

Take decorations and/or flowers to the cemetery or to a place that was special to you both. If you're going away you can do that before you go or after you get home.

Buy them a present, something they would like and which you can keep in their room or their special place in your home.

Donate to a charity in their name or maybe buy a present for someone who has very little at Christmas. Also homeless shelters are always grateful for gifts of food.

I hope this is a little bit helpful at this very difficult time of year. TCF also has a leaflet about dealing with special occasions which is available from head-office or your contact. I wish everyone a peaceful Christmas.

With best wishes

from Mary Hartley, TCF Librarian

For more information on The Compassionate Friends Postal Library based in Deptford, London contact Mary at library@tcf.org.uk. Mary is usually in the library most Tuesdays and she would be happy to show you round and recommend books, DVDs and other resources to suit your circumstances. Please contact her by email or on 0345 1203785 to let her know you would like to visit.