

# The holidays remind us that grief cannot be wished away

18 December 2019, by Heather Servaty-Seib



Experiencing grief during the holidays can be an isolating and difficult experience. Credit: [Tommaso79/Shutterstock.com](https://www.shutterstock.com/user/Tommaso79)

The year-end holidays are a time of social gatherings, traditions and celebrations. They can also be a time of revisiting and reflection.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [2.8 million people die each year](#) in the U.S. If we conservatively estimate four or five grievors per death, there are 11 to 14 million people who are experiencing their first holiday season without the presence of an important person who has died.

No matter how long it has been since a family member or friend has died, the holiday season can understandably bring [grief](#) to the forefront of our minds. Lost loved ones are no longer physically present, and our rituals can remind us of their absence in poignant ways. And it can be challenging for others to know how best to comfort and offer support.

As a licensed psychologist and [professor of counseling psychology](#), my clinical and research

interests for the past 25 years have focused on death, dying, grief and loss. A primary goal of my work has been to "make death talkable."

## How do you speak of death at a time like this?

But how, you might ask, can death be talkable during the holidays? The general tendency within U.S. society is to [avoid the topic](#). In the process, Americans tend to avoid not only our own grief, but also the grief of others.

My sense is that a good bit of this avoidance is connected to misunderstandings about the grieving process and problems with what society views as necessary, critical and "normal" for grief expression.

Psychiatrist [Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's](#) work with dying people, beginning in the mid-60s, was groundbreaking and facilitated increased conversations about death among health professionals, dying patients and their [family members](#).

And yet the five stages that she observed in dying patients—denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance—have taken on a life of their own. They have been applied well beyond the dying process, and have become a kind of prescription for grief—an unfolding that Kübler-Ross specifically warned against in her 1969 book.

When people focus on grief as a linear process with distinct stages and a clear endpoint, they are seeking to control and contain an aspect of life that is overwhelming, unpredictable and confusing. Although quite understandable, the attempt to put grief in a nice neat box has its costs. Most specifically, grieving individuals can begin to judge their own experiences, which can lead to [just as much, if not more, pain](#) than the grief itself.

## A distinct experience

There are a few key points about grief that can make a tremendous difference for people during the holidays and beyond.

First, [grief does not end](#). It is a reflection of attachment and love, and our connection with loved ones does not end when they die. Therefore, our grief will not and does not end. Grief is not a sickness to recover from, but rather an unfolding to experience.

Second, grief is not equal to sadness. In fact, [it is not the same as emotions](#). Grief is multi-dimensional, and often incorporates emotional, cognitive, physiological, social and spiritual reactions. There is no indication in the literature that griever must cry. Some griever may be more emotional and social in their grief expression, while others may be [more cognitive and physical](#).

Last, grief is [unique to each person](#) within their distinct familial, community and cultural contexts. Individuals will grieve based on who they are as people and based on the unique relationship they had with the person who died.

Those relationships can be quite dynamic and complex, and grief will reflect that complexity. It can often be challenging for family members and friends [when they are grieving differently](#) from one another. However, they are grieving different relationships with the loved one who died and their grief will then also be distinct.

### Ways to bring comfort, if not actually joy

Contemporary theories [expand far beyond stages](#) to acknowledge the tasks of grief and the central nature of [sense-making in the grieving process](#). For example: How do I integrate this death into my life story? Grief is not just about missing the person who died, but also about learning to live in a world where they are [no longer physically present](#).

Developing a more nuanced understanding of the variability, adaptability, and unfolding nature of grief has encouraging implications for griever and for those who seek to support them.

For griever:

- Resist societal messages that limit, compartmentalize and minimize your grief.
- Observe your thoughts, feelings and actions, and honor the unique ways that you are expressing your grief.
- Remember that rituals related to grief go beyond formal services, and that post-funeral rituals can take many forms. Allow for recognition of both separation and connection. Annual rituals, such as those that may be incorporated into the holidays, can become new traditions and opportunities for meaningful reflection.

For those who seek to offer support:

- Acknowledge that grief does not end. Even brief messages of recognition and remembrance of their loss, regardless of the time since death, can be quite meaningful at the holidays and during other significant times.
- Keep in mind your level of closeness. If you know the griever well, then you will have more sense of what they will view as helpful. Consider offering tangible assistance in terms of errands, tasks, or responsibilities that you know will be difficult for them. If you do not know them well, keep your responses more inline with that level of relationship, such as sending emails and cards, or donating to a cause.
- Reflect on your own death anxiety and apprehension. Own it and then use it. Push through the common tendency to avoid those who are grieving and act on your thoughts of concern for them.

Remember that there is no set of words or phrases that will "fix" grief. It just does not work that way. What will make the difference is your presence and your willingness to reach out.

If it would help to consider specific statements, [phrases that communicate presence and care](#), such as "I am here for you," or "I care about what happens to you," are more likely to be viewed as helpful than those focused on advice and forced cheerfulness, such as "You should keep busy," or "Do not take it so hard."

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