

## Preparing for the Holidays: Strategies for Bereaved Students

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At some point in life, each of us will experience the death of someone important to us. Research indicates that 22-30% of undergraduate students are in the first 12 months of grieving the death of a family member or friend and 35-48% of undergraduate students are in the first 24 months of grief (Balk, 2001). As the term draws to a close and people prepare to celebrate a variety of holidays or simply have some down time, it can seem that the whole world is caught up with finishing off assignments, studying for exams and preparing for parties and fun once the work is done. Yet, at this time of year, students who grieve may be more acutely aware of the loss in their lives and feel concerned about how to navigate the impending month of December.

Here are some suggestions to help make this time of year easier to handle. Remember that grieving takes time and energy, so be realistic with your expectations about academic performance and holiday opportunities and expectations.

### PLAN:

- Set realistic goals for completing your academic work. It may take longer to complete tasks as your energy, concentration and memory might be more variable.
- Give yourself permission to take more frequent study breaks and choose activities that are meaningful to you and help you feel rested and renewed.
- Acknowledge that this school term and holiday season will be different. Planning is better than a "wait and see" approach - so take time to figure out a plan that will work for you.
- Make a decision about what you can or wish to handle and let family and friends know.
- Prepare responses to questions about how you are doing and how to answer holiday greetings.
- While talking about your experience might be difficult, it can be helpful for you and your family to decide what traditions will stay the same and what will change for this year.
- Take time for your own self-care and take time to grieve.
- Give yourself permission to cut back on holiday preparations, events and traditions.

### SUGGESTIONS:

- Spend time with people whose company you enjoy, leave an event early or send your regrets if you need time for other things.
- Make a list of things you would appreciate help with and use it when family and friends ask if you would like some help.
- If you have gifts to buy, make a shopping list ahead of time so that you can shop on a "good day".
- Make a special charitable donation or engage in an act of remembrance.
- Attend a candle light memorial service in your community.
- Place a special decoration or symbol in your living space or light a special candle in memory.
- Place a decoration at the grave site or decorate a memorial tree.
- Consider creating new traditions - even just for this year. For example, talk with your family about having dinner at an alternative location or time. It can be helpful to not try to exactly replicate past holidays as life is very different than in past years - so initiating some small changes can be beneficial.

Adapted from Grief Support Program, Calgary Health Region (2004).

Balk, D. (2001). College student bereavement, scholarship and the university: A call for university engagement. *Death Studies*, 25, 67-84.

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