



Holiday Planner

Way For Hope



Welcome



The suggestions here are intended to guide you through the holiday season and beyond, as special days that are more difficult to endure come along. Each week, try one or two of these toward the end of the year. Think about how you felt when you did, perhaps writing in your journal. What helped? What didn't? Did you think of other things to add that will help you focus on healing?

“In the sea of grief, there were islands of grace, moments in time when one could remember what was left rather than all that had been lost.”

— Kristin Hannah, *Night Road*



Gathering

Holidays often mean getting together with family and friends for traditional activities and meals, but just the thought of these can cause fear and pain for survivors of traumatic loss. It can help to know it is okay to decline invitations or to let the host know you may need to leave early. Plan for your own transportation, and honor what you need to do. Other ideas include withdrawing to a private area if you need a few minutes to compose yourself during an event (a bathroom, one of the unused bedrooms, or even a short walk outside) or asking others to bring their favorite photos of your loved one to share or include in a memory scrapbook.

It may seem impossible to avoid holiday music, decorations, commercials and sales, but follow your heart on how much you are able to do this year and for the next few seasons and minimize or create new traditions. Surviving and healing is your top priority. Gifts can be ordered, wrapped and shipped from online retailers, for example, and keeping in contact with your survivors group can give you strength throughout the long nights and days. If you have no support group, check the international nonprofit organization, the *Alliance of Hope for suicide loss survivors*, at www.allianceofhope.org, and connect with the community forum there. They understand broken hearts. Above all, know you are not alone.





Journal



A simple notebook and pen can give you a private place to plan and to let out your thoughts and emotions. Writing is therapeutic. One thing you could work on is a short answer to questions that are bound to come at those holiday gatherings and in other places: What happened? Why did _____ end his life? You do not owe explanations to anyone, and it's always okay to say something like "I prefer not to talk about this." But if you want to say something, planning ahead is a good idea. Here is an example of what I have said. "My husband struggled valiantly with depression as long as he could. In his later years, his illness overtook him and led to his tragic suicide."

Some people will want more, but clear answers are almost impossible to be sure about. Each person who ends his or her life may follow a different path to that place. Most, though not all, are fighting mental illness, even if it has not been diagnosed. Others face complicated issues, terminal diagnoses, or situations they are ill-equipped to handle. Many times, addictions and mind-altering substances are involved. Suicide is complex. What happens in the moments before most often does not reveal a complete picture. My understanding has been helped by the comparison to cancer or heart disease. The brain is an organ of the human body. When it is unwell, for whatever reason, a person's thinking may become distorted. Suicide is not selfish. If family and friends are thought of during this tragic time, most thoughts seem to be of relieving loved ones of a perceived burden. We would not agree with that line of thought, but that is a logic thought process, something that may be eluding the person in suicidal crisis.



Do's and Don'ts

When other people make thoughtless or heartbreaking comments or judgements about your loved one who has left this life by suicide, remember their words may reflect their own pain or the guilt they are feeling. They may be uninformed or clinging to old and outdated beliefs. Don't accept everything you hear as the truth. Do educate yourself when you are able to do some research about suicide, but don't feel that you must respond or educate others unless you feel up to it. Do put your own healing first.

Sometimes others want to help but don't know how. Do ask for specific things you need help with. For example, if out-of-town relatives are flying in for the funeral, ask if a neighbor can pick them up at the airport. Ordinary errands and chores are often difficult later. Could a friend mow your lawn or pick up bread and milk for you at the store? There will be those who will help and those who will turn away. You will know who to call on.





Rest



Napping when you can might be the only way to find rest at first. Try a calming bedtime routine that is the same each evening. Reading or listening to music could become a way to calm a mind that finds sleep elusive. A warm bath or hot cup of tea ends the day with a priority on self-care, setting the stage for healing moments.

Don't worry if these steps are not very effective at first. Keep trying, but do not push yourself. You have been wounded deeply. Losing a loved one, especially in a traumatic way, is extremely debilitating. Holidays can heighten the awareness of loss contrasted with past years. This year is very different. Someone you love is not with you. Each moment of rest or peaceful contemplation helps in the healing process.

Virtual fireplace – Visit <http://freefireplaces.com/> to occupy your mind and stop thoughts from racing. This is a site that provides a cozy fire, complete with peaceful sounds, to watch without the work and cleanup necessary for a real fireplace. Watching on a monitor from your couch or easy chair or even while drifting off to sleep is one way to invite moments into your life in which you can think of nothing, where you can just “be.”

Similar sites offer calming music and nature scenes. Of course, the real things help, too. Walking in natural surroundings or sitting on the porch looking out over the yard and trees around you can soothe your broken heart and bring hope back to you. A garden, visiting birds, and pets will aid in your healing as well. Keep your body moving.





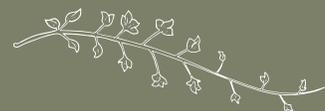
Donations



Consider making a donation of toys or animal needs to local organizations in the name of your loved one. Volunteering can be helpful to you as well as to those you are helping. Doing something you know would honor the one you lost is one way to remember the love shared. This is a good way to mark special days, which can be painful. Holidays, birthdays, anniversary of the death and other times will go by much quicker if you feel you are doing something that matters, both to you and your loved one. There is no rush. One small things can turn into a tradition, or you might want to save these and try something different next year.



Keepsake Box



Purchase a shadow box frame. Many of these come with glass fronts that will protect the contents from dust. Line the back with fabric or keep the felt liner as your background. You can also use letters, post cards or scrapbook paper. Glue your background into place. Arrange smaller items that belonged to your loved one or that remind you of this special one until you have a design that you like. Then glue each item in place.

You can also make a shadow box or use a deep picture frame. Instructions and videos that show you how are available online. Once you have finished with your keepsake box, choose a wall or shelf for display. Each time you pass by, you will be reminded of happy times and of your precious loved one.



Life Bracelet



Use semi-precious gemstone or other types of beads (8 mm work best), and select a type or color to match each life event you want to remember. Plan how you will fill in between your most important stones. Use colors and types of stones that mean something to you or just because they are pleasing. Silver spacer beads also add beauty. You will also need a roll of memory wire. Each bracelet will be unique.

Use cutting tool (needle-nose pliers usually have a wire cutter niche) carefully to cut several loops of connected lengths of memory wire. Pliers will help you turn one end of the coils into a small loop. Start threading beads onto the other end of the coil. Follow your pattern. Leave enough wire to bend the same way you did on the other end. These loops will hold your beads onto the wire. Enjoy wearing your life bracelet and thinking about the blessings it represents. Even the hard times will be included, and you can remember how God helped you then, too.

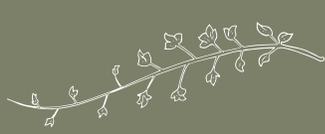


Resolutions

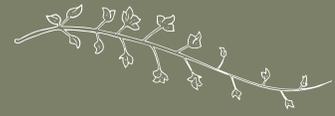


Make a resolution (or several) today. There's no need to wait for the "new" year. Like other "holidays," January 1 is just a day. On second thought, forget the year...maybe we all need to make a resolution every day, something to help us get through just one more day.

Why do resolutions help? With each new day, we have hope. We have another chance to be who we want to be, live like we want to live, accomplish what we need to accomplish. All that can be overwhelming, especially when you consider the loss endured (how can we do anything when the one thing we want cannot happen?), but making a concentrated effort to do something specific – to work toward something positive – can give structure to lives that have crumbled into disarray. Finding order in chaos is not an illusion. There are things we can control, decisions we can make, lives we can create – even now after such destruction. Counter thoughts of what you have lost with what you still have in your life and what your life can one day become.



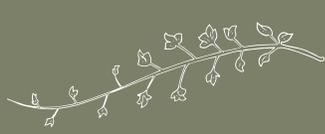
Remembrances



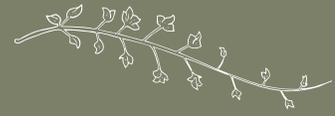
Remembrance #1 – “Small Steps,” a memorial – It doesn't matter how long it has been since your loved one died or who you want to include in a memorial ceremony. Remembering is important. There is so much to remember and to sort through. But it can all be done in small steps. Preparation: Think about what you want to include. A memory book? Photographs? Music or candles? Poetry? Will you go to a place he loved or choose a spot in the home that she treasured? If you invite family members and friends, ask them to bring photos or their own memories. Even children can contribute drawings or handmade cards or share verbally how much this person meant to them. Write all of these plans down, but also be prepared to be flexible and to take a break when needed. Allow at least an hour for gathering, supporting each other, and reading through the ceremony. You might want to work on a memory book together or make this a special time in the form of an outdoor barbecue, if that was something your loved one enjoyed. Favorite dishes or simple snacks can bring comfort and can be reminders of the good things in life you want to remember and continue.

Remember Me By Jan McDaniel

Begin the ceremony with words something like this (change to fit your circumstances): Today, as every day, thoughts of you are close by. I miss you. And I love you. You meant a lot to me and to others while you were in this life, and that is something that will never change. Your life mattered. You mattered. [Share some of your favorite memories and/or invite others to do so.] It isn't easy to continue without you. I'm sorry it was so difficult for you and that I didn't get a chance to say goodbye. I wish I could have helped you more. There would never have been a good time to lose you, however. I would never have wanted to let you go. I'm trying to live in the best way I can, in a way that honors what we meant to each other. It is a work in progress. I am grateful for the time we had together. I have experienced many different kinds of emotions, most of all just love for you. If I think about what you would say when something comes up, whether it is a broken lawnmower or a broken heart, I can find a way through the sadness. It helps to still carry you in my heart, who you were, what you would be doing now, what you may be doing wherever you are.



Remembrances



Remembrance #2 –“Healing Touch,” a remembering – At any time you wish to remember your loved one, this is one way to bring your mind into a peaceful state. Gather a candle, matches, and a few things that comfort you – a cup of hot tea, a photograph of your loved one, a soft lap blanket. Add a box of tissues, and turn on some peaceful, instrumental music. Invite family or friends to join you, if you wish ... or let these moments be just for you. Light the candle. As you read the following words, which I wrote at a time when I felt like you must be feeling now, reflect on the times when you touched this one you loved and still love so much.

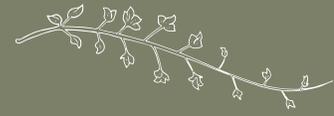
Just Today by Jan McDaniel

Just today, I will light a candle that smells like lotus blossoms. As I watch the tiny flame, I imagine it fighting back the darkness of great sorrow. That’s power. I will remember your touch. A gentle hug, the way your hand reached out to me in times of sorrow. I will listen to soft music and practice my original blend of Qigong, gentle yoga, and Pilates. I’m not good at any of those, but that’s okay. I have to move or I won’t be able to move. That makes me feel good. I’ll try to eat color. I may have to pretend I’m a squirrel or deer or an ancient human scavenging for what’s available. Especially with the green vegetables. But nourishing my body is a need, and I will make it pleasant, just today. I wake up too early, but I’m finding that not trying so hard helps. Just for today, I’m giving in.

And I’ll cry, probably, at some stray thought or when something reminds me of the life I used to have. I will share heartbreak, be inspired, and draw a measure of strength from the words of others. It is overwhelming to think of all the fresh, new grief and how many people have experienced what we have, but just today, I will try to love myself and my new life. I will forgive myself today. Just a little. And I will tell myself that I will find something within me and in the world that is worthwhile. There may be “bigger” things I must do, but no matter what they are, I will focus on the things here. Before I go to bed, I will listen to a guided meditation about a garden and imagine myself there, stepping down five steps – slowly – into the arms of my love. That’s power. That’s love. That makes me feel good. Just today, I will light a candle that smells like lotus blossoms.



Extra Days



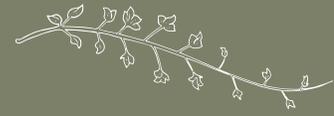
Valentine's Day – No matter your age, valentines bring sweet memories of love given and received. From the earliest school days of homemade paper and cookie hearts to the boxes and bouquets of candy and flowers exchanged between soul mates, this holiday reminds survivors of love ... and love lost. It's only one day, but commercial retailers try to stretch it out, beginning shortly after Christmas. The first few Valentine's Days after loss are bound to be painful, but this can also be a special time. Remember your love with handwritten letters or by cooking his or her favorite meal and eating it by candlelight. Share with others. Or just take a long nap and go to bed early. The same things that help on any day will help you get through holidays, but look for positive ways to remember someone who was so precious.

Easter – Sometimes, it can be difficult to carry on traditions, even for the sake of the smallest members of your family. Breakfast with the Easter Bunny, Easter Egg Hunts and baskets, family services at church, and other traditions you enjoyed in the past can still bring love into your heart. It's okay if you take a break or do things differently. This can also be a season of exploring deep spiritual needs and finding ways to fill them. Anger at God may be just another emotion to work through, and those who love you will help. If you are alone, find companionship and spiritual healing through contact with local congregations and prayer.

Mother's Day – Tender is a mother's heart, and when the loss involves your child, the pain can feel unbearable. Let yourself grieve. Be gentle with yourself and others. Mourning takes time. Take that time to be alone when you need to be, but do not be afraid to step out into the world again. If you have other children, they are grieving, too, perhaps in different ways. Siblings are so important, and losing one is devastating. If it is your mom you have lost, the pain is real, and these suggestions also apply. Taking time to remember, to do something in honor of your loved one is one of the best ways.



Extra Days



Father's Day – Loss is with us every day, but if you are a dad who has lost a child, you know who will be on your mind on this day. Honor what your heart feels. Cry, laugh, share your emotions and memories with those still in your life. Find support. If you lost your dad, this day will not be like the ones that came before. No matter what your relationship with your dad (or child) was like before, you did not cause his or her death. The complexities of suicide are not fully understood even by professionals in the field. Take heart and hope in the fact that you shared a special love and still have that. What did your love one like to do? What meant a lot in that person's life? Can you find ways to carry on what your life together meant to you? I think you can.

Wedding Anniversaries – Days meant to celebrate the joy of one becoming two are not easy to face alone. As time goes by, however, this does get easier. Survivors become stronger and learn to live in a duality that includes both sadness and joy. My husband loved trees and planted rose bushes for me wherever we lived. On the first few anniversaries, I did the same for him. I was going through the motions at first, but even these helped. Plan something. Do something special. Talk or write a letter to the one you lost. List the reasons why you loved him or her, and also list what you know they loved about you. Carry that love forward.

Halloween – Other people probably don't realize how painful some of their Halloween decorations can be. Neither do stores. Focusing on Autumn instead of the traditional gore often brings comfort, especially if you have young ones in your life. Love them. Give them candy. Toast marshmallows around the fire. Tell them stories of that special person in your life. Alone on Halloween? That's the best time. Light your virtual (or real) fireplace, and make some hot chocolate. Snuggle under a soft throw and relax, knowing you loved and are loved. Read, watch some mindless television, or write in your journal.

Other Special Days – There are many other holidays. Around the world, wherever you are, think of ways you can rest, relax and remember the love you shared with your loved one. Maybe he or she is no longer in your life in the way you were together before, but they were real. Their lives mattered. And the impact they made on your life is still there. Honor that fact when you "celebrate" a holiday and every day. Love outlasts pain, and love never dies.