A WITH LOVE, ALWAYS RESOURCE

Grief and the Holidays

You are allowed to do this season differently

A longer, gentler guide for the season that asks the most of a grieving heart: why it hurts, how to decide what this year looks like, ways to keep your loved one close, and words you can borrow when your own will not come.

BEFORE WE BEGIN

A Letter From With Love, Always

Dear friend,

I lost my mom when I was twenty-nine and my dad when I was thirty-five, and I can still remember standing in a grocery store the December after my mom died, crying in front of a display of her favorite cookies while a cheerful song played overhead. Nothing was wrong with me in that moment. The holidays had simply gone on as if nothing had happened, in a world where everything had.

That is what this guide is for. Not to fix the season, because some seasons cannot be fixed, and not to rush you through it, but to help you walk through it on purpose instead of being carried along by everyone else's plans. Inside you will find an honest explanation of why this time of year can hurt so much, a simple way to decide what you will keep, change, or skip this year, small rituals for keeping your loved one close, a plan for getting through gatherings, and actual sentences you can say out loud when you need them. There is even a page written for the people around you, in case it is easier to hand them this guide than to explain.

With Love, Always offers peer support shaped by lived experience. This is companionship, not clinical counseling, and nothing here is a rule. Take what helps, leave what does not, and know that a stranger who has stood in that grocery store aisle is rooting for you.

PART ONE

Why the Holidays Can Hurt So Much

The Waiting Is Often Worse Than the Day

Many people find that the weeks leading up to a holiday are harder than the day itself. The day, when it comes, is a few hours long. The dread of it can stretch for a month. Every advertisement, every card in the mailbox, every question about your plans is a small reminder, and reminders stack up. If you feel worse in early December than you expect to feel on the day itself, you are not imagining it, and you are not doing anything wrong. Anticipation is its own kind of grief, and it deserves the same gentleness as the day it points toward.

Traditions Carry the Person

A tradition is never just an activity. The big dinner is also the person who carved, the person who made the one dish nobody else can get right, the person who always arrived early and stayed late. Decorating is the hands that hung the same ornaments in the same places. When the season asks you to repeat the ritual without the person, it is not really asking you to cook or decorate. It is asking you to feel their absence in high definition, on schedule, in front of other people. No wonder it hurts. The pain is not a sign that the tradition is ruined. It is a sign that the tradition mattered, because they were in it.

Other People's Joy Can Feel Like a Different Planet

The holidays are loud about happiness. Music, movies, and storefronts all insist this is the most wonderful time of the year, and when your year has been the hardest of your life, the gap between their season and yours can feel enormous. You may feel envy, irritation, or a strange loneliness in a crowded room. None of that makes you bitter or ungrateful. It makes you a person whose life changed while the calendar kept its old plans. Their joy is not your failure, and your grief is not a judgment on their joy. Both are simply true at the same time.

The Pressure to Perform Normal

On top of the grief itself, there is often a second job: managing everyone else's comfort. Smiling through dinner so the day is not ruined. Answering "I am fine" because the honest answer feels too heavy for the table. Hosting, cooking, and showing up at full strength because that is what you have always done. Performing normal is exhausting in a way that plain sadness is not, and it is one of the main reasons grieving people end the season more depleted than they began it. Much of this guide is about quietly handing that second job back. You are allowed to be a grieving person at the holidays, out loud, without apologizing for it.

It Is Rarely Just One Loss

A death rearranges more than a guest list. There is the person, and then there are the smaller losses folded inside the big one: the phone call you made every year on the drive over, the recipe in their handwriting, the stocking with their name on it, the version of the holiday that existed when they were in it. The season touches all of these at once, which is why a song in a store or a smell from someone else's kitchen can undo you without warning. When that happens, nothing has gone wrong. A smaller loss inside the larger one has simply been touched, and it will settle again.

PART TWO

Deciding What This Year Looks Like

Three Honest Options: Keep, Change, or Skip

Here is the simplest planning tool in this guide, and the one grieving people tell us they use most. Take every piece of the season, one at a time, and sort it into one of three piles. **Keep** means it still feels like yours, and doing it will feel more like love than labor. **Change** means the heart of it matters to you, but the old form of it is too heavy this year, so it gets a smaller, softer, or different shape. **Skip** means it does not happen this year, and that is the whole decision. Not forever. This year.

The reason this works is that it replaces one enormous question, "How will I get through the holidays?", with a row of small ones you can actually answer. It also gives you language. "We are changing it this year" and "We are skipping that this year" are complete, respectable sentences. Nobody is owed a five-year plan for your traditions. A tradition you skip this year is not gone. It is resting, and it can be picked back up in a year when you have more to give it.

The Big Dinner

The main meal is usually the heaviest piece, because it gathers every tender thing into one room: the food, the table, the empty chair, the people who are also grieving and handling it differently than you. Keeping it might mean hosting exactly as always, because the rhythm of cooking all day is the thing that steadies you. Changing it might mean a smaller table, a different house, a restaurant meal, or the same menu with the hardest dish handed to someone else or quietly dropped. Skipping it might mean a simple meal at home and a phone call instead. Notice what your body does as you imagine each version. The one that lets you breathe is usually the honest answer.

Decorating, Cards, and the Small Machinery of the Season

The smaller pieces deserve the same honest sorting, because they are where grief ambushes people. Decorating can be kept whole, changed to a single wreath or one box instead of five, or skipped without explanation; a dark house in December is not a statement anyone is owed commentary on. Holiday cards are a classic change candidate: send them late, send fewer, send a simple printed note, or let this be the year they do not go out. The people who love you will survive a missing card. Gift exchanges can be shrunk, drawn by name instead of bought for everyone, or replaced with a donation. Travel can be shortened, moved to your own lodging so you control your nights, or declined. Each of these is a small decision, and small decisions are merciful, because you can make them one at a time.

The Empty Chair

Few questions carry more weight than this one: at the table, do you set their place or not? There is no correct answer, only an honest one, and it can be different from one year to the next. Some families find that an empty chair with a candle or a flower on it says the true thing out loud: someone is missing, and we are not pretending otherwise. Others find that the empty chair turns the whole meal into a vigil, and they would rather hold the person in a toast, a story, or a photograph on a side table instead. If the people at the table disagree, the person who was closest to the one who died, and the person hosting the meal, should get the gentlest hearing. Whatever is decided, it helps to decide it before the day, not in the doorway as guests arrive. The words in the next section can help with that conversation too.

Words You Can Borrow: Telling People

Most grieving people know what they want long before they know how to say it. Below are sentences written to be used exactly as they are, by text, by phone, or in person. You do not need to improve them, soften them further, or add an apology to the end. If someone pushes back, you are allowed to repeat the same sentence once, kindly, and then stop explaining. A decision about your own grief does not require a winning argument.

Declining an invitation:

> *"Thank you for including me. I am going to sit this year out. It is not about wanting to be away from you. This season is tender, and a quiet one is what I can honestly do. Please eat something wonderful for me, and let's get together in the new year."*

Saying you may leave early, before you arrive:

> *"I want to come, and I want to be honest that I may not last the whole evening. If I slip out early, please do not worry and please do not follow me. It will mean I hit my limit, not that anything went wrong. I would rather come for a little while than not come at all."*

Changing a tradition you usually lead:

> *"I have been thinking about this year's dinner, and I need to change the shape of it. I cannot do the full production this year. Here is what I can do, and here is the part I need someone else to carry. This is about this year only, and it is how I get to still be at the table with you."*

Asking for their place to be kept at the table:

> *"This might sound small, and it matters a lot to me. Would you set a place for them this year, the way we always did? Seeing their chair filled by someone else, or not there at all, would be the hardest part of the day for me. Having it set helps me feel like we are remembering together."*

Asking for their place not to be set:

> *"I have thought about this a lot, and I need to ask something that might be surprising. Please do not set a place for them this year. Staring at that empty chair through the whole meal would undo me. I would love for us to raise a glass to them instead, and say their name out loud. That is the remembering I can carry this year."*

Keeping Them Close

Why Ritual Helps

A ritual is a small, deliberate act that says: you are gone, and you are still mine. Grief is mostly formless; it shows up at random and refuses to be scheduled. A ritual gives it one small appointment, one place where it is expected and welcomed, and many people find that the rest of the day gets easier when grief has been given its moment on purpose. The rituals below are starting points. Shrink them, combine them, or let them spark your own. The only requirement is that it be honest, and that it be sized to the energy you actually have.

A Candle With Their Name on It

Choose one candle, any candle, and let it be theirs for the season. Light it at the start of the hardest day, or at dinner, or on the evening you decorate, and say their name as you light it, out loud if you can. Some people say one sentence: what they miss, or thank you, or simply, "You should be here." Then let the candle burn while life goes on around it: cooking, talking, laughing, all of it in the same room as the flame. When you blow it out, that can be a moment too. This takes ninety seconds and almost no money, and families tell us it becomes the part of the day they would not give up, because for that moment, nobody had to pretend.

Their Recipe, Made on Purpose

If there is a dish that was theirs, making it is one of the most physical ways to remember: your hands doing what their hands did, their handwriting on the card, the smell filling the kitchen the way it used to. Cook it exactly as written the first year, even the parts that seem odd, because the odd parts are where the person lives. If it does not turn out, that is almost traditional too, and it is a story, not a failure. If cooking it yourself is too much, ask the person most likely to be honored by the job, and tell them why you are asking. People are often waiting to be given a way to help, and this is a real one.

A Place at the Table, or a Place Nearby

Part Two talked about the empty chair as a decision. Here it is as a ritual: if you keep their place, make it intentional. A flower where their plate would be. Their photograph standing at their seat. Their favorite drink poured and left untouched, or raised first. If a set place is too much, a place nearby can carry the same love at a gentler distance: a small framed photo on a side table with the candle beside it, their stocking hung with the others, their name written on the list of gratitudes before the meal. The form matters far less than the intention, which is simply this: in this house, on this day, they were named and included on purpose.

One Story, Told on Purpose

Left alone, tables full of grieving people often do a strange dance: everyone avoids the name for fear of upsetting everyone else, and the person is absent twice. Break the dance on purpose. At some point in the gathering, tell one story about them. A funny one is a gift; laughter at a grieving table is not betrayal, it is medicine. If you are not the one who can tell it, appoint someone ahead of time: "At dinner, would you tell the story about the year the tree fell over? I want to hear it, and I do not think I can be the one to start." You can also make it an open door rather than a performance: a question on the table like, "What is one thing they would have said about this meal?" Then let whoever wants to answer, and let silence be an answer too.

A Memory Ornament and Other Small Anchors

Some people buy or make one ornament each year that holds the memory: their name and the year, a tiny version of something they loved, a photo inside a clear ball, a tag with one line of their handwriting copied onto it. It goes on the tree with everything else, which is the point: they are part of the season, not a separate sad event inside it. The same idea works off the tree. A playlist of their favorite songs for the drive or the kitchen. Their scarf on the back of a chair. A small donation in their name to a cause they cared about, which turns some of the season's spending into remembrance. Choose one anchor, not five. Small and done beats grand and abandoned.

Joy and Grief in the Same Hour

At some point this season, probably in the middle of an ordinary moment, you may catch yourself laughing, and then feel a rush of guilt right behind it. Please hear this from someone who knows: the laugh is not a betrayal, and the guilt is not the truth. Joy and grief are not opponents taking turns. They live in the same house now, and they will keep interrupting each other for a long time. Laughing at the table does not mean you loved them less. Crying in the kitchen an hour later does not mean you are failing at the holiday. A heart that can hold both in one hour is not broken. It is doing exactly what love does after loss.

PART FOUR

Getting Through Gatherings

Decide Your Exit Before You Arrive

The single most comforting thing you can give yourself at a gathering is a way out of it. Drive yourself, or go with someone who has agreed in advance to leave when you say the word, so that your evening is never held hostage by someone else's ride. If driving yourself is not possible, keep a rideshare app ready and money set aside for it, and treat that money as already spent. An exit you do not use still does its work: people who know they can leave can almost always stay longer, and stay more honestly, than people who feel trapped. Trapped is what turns a hard evening into a breaking point.

Set Your Time Limit in Advance

Before the event, choose your number: two hours, until dessert, until nine o'clock, whatever is honest. Tell the host when you arrive, lightly, so your leaving is old news by the time it happens: "I am so glad to be here. I am pacing myself this year, so I will head out around nine." Then keep your own appointment with yourself. Leaving while you are still holding together is not weakness; it is strategy, and it is how you will still have something left for the rest of the season. If you are surprised to find yourself having a genuinely good time, you are allowed to stay. The limit is a floor of protection, not a curfew.

Find Your Quiet Place Early

When you arrive, quietly locate your refuge: a porch, a bathroom with a locking door, your car, a short loop around the block. Visit it before you need it, so it feels like yours. Then use it without ceremony whenever the wave comes. Step out, breathe cold air, cry if crying is what is happening, text your person, and return when you are ready, or not at all. Nobody needs an announcement or an apology for a ten-minute absence. Most people will not even register it, and the ones who love you will understand exactly where you went.

Have One Person Who Knows

Choose one person at the gathering, or one person a text away, who knows the real situation: that this is your first holiday without them, that the toasts are the hard part, that you may need rescuing from a long conversation. Give that person a job in advance: check on me once, sit beside me at dinner, be the one who walks me to my car. People rise to a specific request far better than to a general hope that someone will notice. And if the moment comes when you need to say "get me out of this conversation," a prearranged word or a simple squeeze of the arm can do what manners cannot.

A Job Can Help. So Can Refusing One.

For some grieving people, a task is a lifeline at a gathering: washing dishes, watching the kids, running the music, being in charge of the fire. A job gives your hands something to do, gives people a natural way to talk to you in small doses, and gives you a reason to be in the kitchen instead of the circle. For others, this year, the old job is the wound itself: carving the bird they carved, hosting the meal they hosted, being the one who makes it all happen. If that is you, hand the job over out loud, ahead of time, and let your only job be showing up. Both choices are legitimate. The mistake is letting the job choose you by default.

Leaving Without a Speech

When it is time to go, go simply. Find the host, say thank you and one true sentence, and walk out. You do not owe the room an announcement, an explanation, or a round of individual goodbyes that will take twenty minutes and three hugs too many. If the words will not come, use these:

> *"Thank you for tonight. I am glad I came, and I am at my limit, so I am going to head home while I am still glad. Please do not worry about me. This is me taking care of myself, and it is working."*

Then go, even if your voice shakes, even if someone looks disappointed. The people who matter will still be there in January, and so will you, in better shape for having left when you said you would.

PART FIVE

A Page to Share With the People Around You

This page is written to your family and friends. Hand them the guide open to here, or read it and borrow its words. You have permission to let this page do the explaining.

What Is True at Our Table This Year

Someone we love is missing, and we are not going to pretend otherwise, and we are not going to let it swallow the day either. Both of those can be held at once. The person you are reading this for may be quiet at times, may tear up, may step out, may laugh loudly at a story and then go silent. All of that is normal, and none of it needs fixing. What they need most is a table where their grief is allowed to be in the room without becoming the whole room.

Things That Help

Say the name of the person who died, naturally, the way you always did. Tell a story about them. Ask, "How are you doing with all of this, really?" and then let the answer be as long or as short as it is. Make specific room: save them a seat near someone kind, hand them the easy job or no job, walk them to their car without making it a moment. Keep inviting them in the years ahead, including the years when everyone else has stopped. And if they leave early or do not come at all, believe them when they say it is about their capacity, not their love for you.

Things That Hurt, Even When Meant Kindly

Please skip the sentences that explain the death or rush the healing: that they are in a better place, that everything happens for a reason, that it is time to be strong, that the first year is the hardest, as if a finish line is coming. Do not compare losses at the table, and do not report on how well or how badly you think they are doing. If you do not know what to say, say exactly that, followed by the truest simple thing available:

> *"I do not know the right words, and I am not going anywhere. I miss them too, and I am really glad you are here."*

That sentence has never once made a grieving person's day worse. It works every single time.

PART SIX

After the Holidays

The January Letdown Is Normal

When the season ends, many grieving people are surprised by a second wave: the decorations come down, the visitors leave, the world returns to normal at full speed, and the quiet house gets very quiet. Some of what you feel in January is grief. Some of it is simple exhaustion, the bill for a month of anticipation, performance, and holding yourself together. Treat the first weeks of the new year the way you would treat recovery from anything enormous: rest more than seems reasonable, lower every bar, and do not make big decisions about your life, your home, or your traditions while you are this tired. January is for soup, sleep, and small walks, not for verdicts.

One Gentle Look Back

When you have a little distance, maybe with a cup of something warm and this guide open to the last page, spend ten minutes on one question: what actually helped? Not what was supposed to help, and not what helped other people. What helped you. The candle. Leaving at nine. The sister who told the story. The tradition you skipped and did not miss for a second. Write it down on the worksheet page that follows, even if the season is over, because next year you will not remember, and next year's version of you deserves to start from what you learned instead of from scratch. That small act, turning one hard season into guidance for the next, is how traditions get rebuilt: slowly, honestly, and in your own handwriting.

YOUR TURN

My Plan for This Season

Fill this in on a quiet day, before the season is loud. Short answers count. This page is a plan, not a promise, and you are allowed to change any line of it at any time.

The day I dread most this season is (and what makes it the hard one)

One tradition I will keep (because it still feels like love)

One tradition I will change (and the smaller or softer shape it will take)

One tradition I will skip this year (this year only; it can rest)

My anchor for the hardest day (one small thing I can count on)

My exit plan (my ride, my time limit, my quiet place)

One way I will include them (a candle, a recipe, a story, a place)

The person I can call (and the words I will say when I need them)

For next year (what helped this time, written while I still remember)

If you are ever in crisis, please reach out right away. You can call or text the **988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline** at **988** anywhere in the United States, or reach the **Crisis Text Line** by texting **HOME** to **741741**. Both are free, confidential, and answered by people who are there to listen, day or night.

However this season goes, whether you kept every tradition or skipped the whole thing, whether you laughed at the table or cried in the car, you did it while missing someone you love. That is not a small thing, and neither are you. Be patient with yourself in December, and in January too. We will be here for both.

With love, always