

# “SURVIVING” THE HOLIDAYS A TIME OF GREAT STRESS

Bereavement Seminar



ROMAN CATHOLIC  
**DIOCESE**  
OF **CHARLESTON**



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Deacon Henry deMena

Please God, send your love and compassion upon all of us who are gathered here this day. Help us to find the strength to make it through the tough days ahead. Help us to survive the storms of life. Please Father, understand that sometimes it just seems too hard. Help us to feel your presence with us. Please Lord, help our family & friends to realize it is really healthy to express our anxiety, fears and sadness. One more thing Father, we really try to believe our deceased loved ones are with you, but Lord you know how hard it is to miss someone special, especially at this time of year. Please don't give up on us.

**AMEN!**

# Common Grieving Feelings & Misunderstandings

- ▣ Am I going crazy? Am I ok? Who cares about Thanksgiving?
- ▣ Why does it still hurt so badly, will it ever get easier?
- ▣ Is it OK to cry so much? Everyone wants me to stop!
- ▣ Are others getting tired of my sadness?
- ▣ I can handle this alone, I don't want medication
- ▣ Platitudes bother me: you need to move on, get out more, she's in a better place
- ▣ I will never enjoy the holidays again

# Bereavement is an Emotional Roller Coaster



- We can feel extremes in mood often, even many times during a given day
  - happy/sad/all together "a mess"
  - Holiday plans can trigger many mood swings
- Physically we are exhausted and in significant pain
  - Not up to hosting or shopping
- Mentally we are overwhelmed, forgetful, just tired
- Our behavior is confusing and unpredictable
  - Family gets upset that I am not myself
- Spiritually we can find peace and also find anger.
  - I believe my loved one is with God
  - But, why did God do this or let this happen?
  - I'm not in the mood for Christmas
  - For some Church is comfort for others not so much

# Bereaving Timeframe



- ▣ Typical duration 1-2 years for “normal loss”
- ▣ Normal process
  - 0-3 months: numbness
  - 3-6 months pain intensifies (support drops off)
  - 6-12 months begin to come out of the deep pain
  - 1-2 years readjusting to life without your loved one
- ▣ Extra difficult when the holidays coincide with the 6 month timeframe
  - Not to mention darkness / cold
- ▣ 6 weeks leading to important days are tough

# The World is Very Stress-filled

- ▣ Violence in our country and abroad – internet real-time
- ▣ Multiple wars going on
- ▣ Recent election has caused a lot of anxiety/tension
- ▣ Politicians are a source of anxiety and bickering
- ▣ Many people are struggling with costs of basic needs
- ▣ Internal debates/arguments in the Catholic Church
- ▣ Will this ever end? Grief is worsened by stress!

# Coping Techniques

- ▣ Negative
  - Abnormal eating
  - Excessive staying in bed (short term normal)
  - Drugs or alcohol
  - Self-harm
- ▣ Positive
  - Sharing feelings, emotions
  - Journaling / Writing Letters
  - Prayer & Meditation
  - Counseling
  - Reading
  - Exercise
  - Art & Music
  - Review how you are feeling right now

# How do you feel right now?

Admired	Depressed	Hostile	Proud
Afraid	Desperate	Humiliated	Puzzled
Alone	Disappointed	Hurt	Regretful
Amazed	Disbelieving	Inadequate	Rejected
Angry	Discouraged	Incompetent	Relief
Annoyed	Disgraced	Inferior	Sad
Anxious	Edgy	Isolated	Shocked
Apologetic	Embarrassed	Jealous	Shy
Apprehensive	Enthusiastic	Joyful	Strong
Ashamed	Excited	Lonely	Stunned
Bashful	Exhausted	Lost	Sympathetic
Bitter	Fed-Up	Loved	Tense
Brave	Frightened	Mixed-Up	Trapped
Cared-For	Frustrated	Negative	Unable
Cheated	Gloomy	Overwhelmed	Uncertain
Concerned	Guilty	Panicky	Unsupported
Confident	Happy	Patient	Unsure
Confused	Hopeful	Peaceful	Upset
Critical	Hopeless	Preoccupied	Worthless
Dejected	Horrificed	Pressured	Worried

*Circle how you feel now, place a star next to a feeling you are surprised you circled*

# Holidays are Difficult for the Grieving

- ▣ Full of prior memories (some good & bad)
- ▣ Full of “1sts” (especially New Year’s Day)
- ▣ Constant reminders everywhere
  - Try to escape Christmas decorations, good luck!
- ▣ Exaggerate family complexities/stressors
  - In a sense, pre-existing issues in a family are triggers
- ▣ Winter months enhance depression
  - Darkness, cold, isolation

# How to handle the Holidays in General



- ❑ Plan ahead, minimize surprises, communicate
- ❑ Try to find a comfortable compromise between what you always did and doing nothing at all
  - Feel free to change some traditions
- ❑ Remember the deceased; incorporate their memory into your gathering
  - Communicate your plans ahead of time
- ❑ Reduce the effort and stress of the season
  - Don't get trapped, being trapped creates anxiety
- ❑ Do something for others in memory of your loved one

# Holiday Bereavement - Children/Teens



- ❑ Parents, you can't always be there like you would like to.
- ❑ Children need adults to be authentic
  - Holidays will raise many painful questions
  - Yes, it hurts, but we will be ok, we are safe, explain your tears
  - Avoid the “sleeping” analogy for death
  - Answer questions with questions followed by age-appropriate answers
- ❑ Old rituals provide safety & security
  - discuss ahead with children, tree, stockings, etc.
- ❑ Allow teens to have more time with friends
  - They are hurting, but won't discuss it
  - They, like adults, need “escape routes”
  - Often they take a full year to open up and share
- ❑ Try not take your child's attitude/behavior too personally. It is not you! It's their grief.

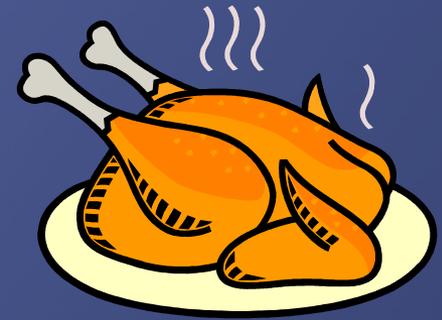
# Rely on God for Comfort & Hope

- ❑ Jesus will transform our suffering into hope, God wants to share his love, comfort & peace with us
- ❑ Out of our suffering we develop empathy, understanding and love for others who are suffering
- ❑ As Christ's suffering saved us, our suffering will help others, but this all takes time, faith and prayer
- ❑ As humans though, we might feel God has abandoned us, is that ok? Yes! Jesus too, felt this way.
  - Mk 15:34 "My God, my God why have you forsaken me"
- ❑ Read/Memorize a Scripture that is meaningful to you
  - See next slide, draw upon when it tough
- ❑ Pray the rosary- sometimes we need the love of a Mom
- ❑ Many good spiritual books & videos
  - My YouTube channel - [www.youtube.com/@hdemena](http://www.youtube.com/@hdemena)
  - Resources listed below

# Bible Verses (examples)

- ▣ Mt 5:4 Blessed are they who mourn, they will be comforted
- ▣ Is 41:10 So do not fear, for I am with you.
- ▣ Rev 21:4 He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or pain.
- ▣ Psalm 23:4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil for you are with me
- ▣ Mt 11:28 Come to me all you who are weary and I will give you rest
- ▣ Jn 14:1 Do not let your hearts be troubled

# Thanksgiving



- This day is about thanks, but what if you can't find anything to be thankful for (you can & you will); don't forget to pray
- The “elephant in the room” for invited guests is how to handle bringing up the deceased
  - Be explicit, it is ok/encouraged to do so
- Do something specific to remember the deceased
  - Candle by empty chair, youngest gets grandpa's chair, everyone shares a funny story (or at least the children)
- Traditions can change – its not forever
  - Go out, different location, different menu, volunteer, etc
- Plan the day, share your plans ahead of time, avoid surprises
  - Most people report the lead up was harder than the day itself
- Understand that it is sad and it is ok to express these feelings
  - Pretending everything is the same or fine is actually more painful



# Christmas

- Like Thanksgiving change is ok- **but children need stability**
- Try to get to Mass, pray for His comfort and peace
- Can I just skip Christmas altogether? – **probably not**
- What should I do about decorations? I just don't feel like it. They all are so meaningful!
  - **That's normal, a holiday doesn't take the pain away. Cut yourself some slack, reduce the number. Keep one up as a cherished reminder in bedroom.**
- Should I hang his/her stocking? – **Yes, especially if children are involved**
- I really don't feel like sending Christmas cards – **Don't, reduce stress**
- Can my child buy grandma a gift this Christmas?
  - **Yes, it is good to have kids buy a gift for the deceased and present it to a charity on their behalf**
- Be open and honest with children and ask for some suggestions on what to change and what to keep the same

# Any questions, comments???

Please find time for prayer and quiet time throughout the holidays. It's all about reducing stress!



May God bless you.  
You are in our prayers.  
Deacon Henry

# Resources

- Google: "Grief books Catholic", "grief websites"
- "Praying our goodbyes" - Sr Joyce Rupp
- "A grief observed" - CS Lewis
- Grief.com, many grief sites
- Paul Alexander - griefsong.com
- Henri Nouwen Books
- "Searching for and Maintaining Peace" - Fr Jacques Phillipe
- "God knows you're grieving" Joan Guntzelman
- "Where is God when it hurts" & "The question that never goes away" Philip Yancey
- "When bad things happen to good people" Rabbi Harold Kushner
- Chicken Soup for the Grieving Soul
- "Healing After Loss" - Hickman