

Grieving Through The Holidays



Gathering With Family After Loss Can
Still Include Joy and Celebration.

3 Tools For All Families And For Any Season

Grieving Through The Holidays

A family's guide to coming together after loss.

A special resource on grief and grieving by Brett M. Judd MSW and the Pathways Through Grief coaching program.

When my wife's aunt died in a motorcycle accident, it was a difficult year for her grandmother.

The family is a very close knit clan of 7 siblings who meet nearly monthly at mom's house and regularly have whole family gatherings at holidays.

These family gatherings are so large that they fill the gym at the church for thanksgiving and Christmas. It really is a lot of fun.

After the accident, the family gatherings had a distinct emptiness hanging over them. The younger cousins continued to play and run while the older adults sat in huddled conversations or off alone. Occasionally there was the emotional outburst to "calm down and be quiet" bellowing from one of the distraught adults. Emotions were high and diverse to say the least.

Not everything was always pleasant, but in many ways, my in laws handled the death of this favorite aunt very well.

My hope for you as you gather with your family is that you, too, can enjoy your family and the holidays and heal together.

The more you explore your Pathway Through Grief, the faster you will discover a new life after loss – a life with loss.

Brett M. Judd MSW

#1 Memorializing

Too many times families create extreme distress and conflict by trying to ignore the obvious.

At the funeral for my wife's aunt there was a beautiful display of her life. Pictures, artifacts, and stories lined numerous tables in the church entry. Visitors were able to remember, linger and even sob.

By displaying the artifacts of her life gave permission to remember and feel whatever it as that was cursing through those who came to honor her life.

That is exactly what you want to do during family gatherings after someone no longer with you.

Setting up a memorial does not need to be elaborate or extreme. Here are a few things that you can do to create a safe place to bring the deceased family member to the party.

1. Set up a display of memorabilia from family members.

Have members of the family bring whatever they want to add to the display and have a space dedicated to showing off the life of your loved one.

I would place the display to the edge and somewhat private so that everyone can slip over and have a quiet moment away from view, but not isolated. This will make it less inhibitive to grieve.

2. Set a place at the table.

A very simple and elegant way to memorialize the missing family member is to set a place for them at the table in honor of their life.

Be aware – there will be those in the family who will be conflicted by these suggestions. Depending on where they are in their own grieving pathway, will influence the way that they react to the display, the table setting, and anything that brings the deceased to the forefront. I will cover how to manage that in a minute.

3. A family picture and photoshop the family into it.

It sounds tacky, or cheesy to some, but it can be a great way to document the transition in the family.

Don't stress on this. Nothing should be so important that it creates more distress in the family. There will be some who are very distraught and others who will be resistant. It does no good to be so focused on making the new memory that it is tainted with more emotion.

#2 Family Council

Maybe I needed to start here, but this tool is a fabulous way to discuss the needs of the family and where everyone is emotionally.

The family council process is simple and can have incredible impact on the outcome of your gathering.

To start, set a time when most people can get on a conference call or “skype” call. www.Freeconferencecalling.com is a simple tool to have group conversations. Facebook and Google can also be used for group chats.

The main intent of the council is to have an open conversation about what everyone is feeling and what people need. There are no rights or wrongs in these councils. It is the ultimate “safe space” where your loved ones can express their desires. Judgement and criticisms are not allowed in a family council.

Gina and I did a Podcast on family councils. Here is the link if you want to get more in-depth.

<http://fortunesandfamilies.libsyn.com/fortunes-through-councils-brett-and-gina-judd-fortunes-and-families>

Here is a guide we made to create great family councils.

<http://www.fortunesandfamilies.com/users/myteam38691/Media143.pdf>

A word of caution.

Not everyone will be at the same place in their journey through the Pathway Through Grief. Some of your family might still be having issues of denial and bargaining, others will be trapped in the Emotional Abyss. Some will be overly emotional while others will be deeply withdrawn and reserved.

Recognizing this is one of the most important aspects of creating a powerful family council and family gathering.

The most important thing that can happen for the family is to validate their emotions and how they are moving through the loss. By acknowledging that everyone is at different places on the Pathway and that they are all grieving in their own way will help everyone in your family have an amazing holiday.

#3 Freedom To Express

“I wasn’t allowed to cry.”

One thing that I have heard from clients over the years are comments like the one above, or worse. So many times, during a time of grief, there will be someone who is unwilling, or unable to be emotional. They make it impossible for others to express their emotions.

The classic “suck it up”, “deal with it”, “Be a man” are invalidating and do more harm than good. They really serve to protect the ego and emotions of the one denying the emotional expression.

Creating safety and allowing for emotional expression as it comes makes a very safe environment to gather regardless of the emotions being felt.

Here are some things that you can do to actually encourage emotional expression.

1. Set out boxes of tissue everywhere. Just having them there will imply that it is okay to emote.
2. Make a “creation station”. If you downloaded the [Tools For 2:00a.m.](#) resource you understand that being able to draw, color, or collage is a great way to release emotions in a constructive way.

Having clean sheets of paper, crayons and markers, and a place to create can make it easy for your guests to release and express the feelings they are having inside.

Some things that can be created are images of memories with the lost family member, images of the family member, and an expression of the feelings that are being felt.

Since there is no right way to express with art, letting it freely flow can be fun and healing.

Finally,

3. Write letters to the deceased family member.

This activity can be very releasing and memorializing. Being able to openly express the feelings that you are holding in the safety of a letter can be a great way to allow your family to express their grief and express their love, and their pain.

Once the letters are written there is no real rule or process. Sometimes my clients have wanted to destroy whatever they wrote. Others have wanted to save them. It is all up to the person who wrote the letter.

In the end, Grieving Through The Holidays comes down to preparation, perspective, and permissions. The more you prepare and plan for the myriad of emotions that will arrive, the better you will be prepared for anything that might come out at the event. Someone will have an emotional moment. Someone might come emotionally unglued.

The more prepared you are the less surprised you will be other family member's perspective. When you give permission to express and emote, the fear to be emotional is gone lowering anxiety, and decreasing fear.

Whatever you do, know this – it gets better every year and the more often you memorialize and express the better off you will feel.

I wish you and your family the happiest of holidays and the happiest of Life After Loss.

Brett.

If you have not already started on your Pathway Through Grief, go to www.PathwayThroughGrief.com